

The Politics of International Volunteerism: The Peace Corps and Volunteers to America in the 1960s

What would happen if the United States reversed the flow of Peace Corps volunteers? Instead of sending Americans abroad, the United States would be on the receiving end of well-meaning foreign nationals who would work in low-income communities, serve as teacher aids, and help implement community development projects. What would these volunteers think of the United States? And how might their very presence recast the role of the United States in the world? In the mid-1960s, former Peace Corps volunteers and staff members proposed such an idea. They believed that the reverse flow of volunteers was vital to fulfilling the Peace Corps' mission to challenge perceived notions of superiority embedded in post-war ideas of development. Policymakers in Washington, DC were not receptive. "We need an international Peace Corps in our cities," explained Representative John Rooney, "like we need a hole in our head." Congressman Bob Casey, in a letter to Dean Rusk, expressed similar sentiment about the proposal. "This is the most ridiculous proposal to come to my attention in nine years in Congress, and I've seen some lulu's." Yet, despite congressional pushback, a little-known program called Volunteers to America (VTA) began operation under the Bureau of Cultural and Education Affairs in 1967. Often referred to as the "reverse Peace Corps," the program brought 120 volunteers from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. They worked alongside their American counterparts in the fields of education, social work, and other "War on Poverty" programs.¹

This article examines the roots of the VTA and the transnational encounters of its participants in the United States as a way of rethinking the Peace Corps and the relationship between international volunteerism and post-war development ideas. By bringing volunteers from the decolonized world to work on poverty programs in the United States, the VTA illustrates how the Peace Corps in the 1960s attempted to reconsider American ideas of development. But, at the same time that the Peace Corps created a reciprocal program in the VTA to

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1. "Death by Congressional Fiat," Neil Boyer, November 1969, Neil Boyer Private Collection.

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challenge prevailing notions of development, VTA participants experienced the limitations of volunteerism in addressing poverty and inequality. This tension between the possibilities of international volunteerism to rethink development ideas and the inherent limitations of short-term volunteer work defined the VTA and other international volunteer programs in the 1960s.

Historical scholarship on post-war international development has identified two rival impulses in development thinking: modernization theory and community development. As historian Daniel Immerwahr has noted, “the urge to modernize and the quest for community were not doctrines of warring camps,” but were often “coiled tightly around each other, often tangled together.” The history of the VTA offers a unique perspective on the interaction between modernization theory and community development in 1960s international volunteerism. The Peace Corps reflected cultural elements of modernization theory, especially in its public image and advertising campaign that rested on notions of American exceptionalism. But, the agency also emphasized the value of exchanging ideas, cultural traditions, and skills through community development. Sargent Shriver, the first Peace Corps director, believed that the aim of the Peace Corps “must be to learn as much as we teach” and to create more globally aware American citizens.²

By drawing on both development visions, the Peace Corps attempted to realize a cosmopolitan conception of American identity that accommodated competing ideals of universalism and national exceptionalism. Scholars who have examined the impact of the Peace Corps volunteer experience have brought to light the varied ways in which service abroad affected volunteers’ roles and their ideas about United States. While some volunteers maintained American-centric ideas about the world, other volunteers quickly became disillusioned with post-war visions of development in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Confronted by the vestiges of colonialism, American Cold War interests, and different cultural perspectives, Peace Corps volunteers experienced the contradictions of the agency’s conception of American benevolence and came to recognize the limitations of nation-based volunteer programs.³

2. Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge, MA, 2014), 8; Sargent Shriver, “Report to the President on the Peace Corps,” February 22, 1961, p. 16, Papers of John F. Kennedy, Presidential Files, John F. Kennedy Digital Library, accessed February 20, 2017, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKPOF-085-014.aspx>. For more on modernization theory, see Michael Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and “Nation Building” in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000); Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore, MD, 2003); David Elkbath, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton, NJ, 2010); Gilbert Rist, *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith* (New York, 1996); Larry Grubbs, *Secular Missionaries: Americans and African Development in the 1960s* (Amherst, MA, 2009); and Molly Geidel, *Peace Corps Fantasies: How Development Shaped the Global Sixties* (Minneapolis, MN, 2015).

3. On the disillusionment of Peace Corps volunteers abroad, see Jonathan Zimmerman, “Beyond Double Consciousness: Black Peace Corps Volunteers in Africa, 1961–1971,” *Journal*

The VTA was the most daring effort to fully realize the Peace Corps' cosmopolitan alternative to standard development policy. The program's multifocal perspective—local, national, and foreign—imagined the “community” in community development not as a set boundary of local particularities, but as a nexus of relations that transcended national borders. VTA volunteers connected Bogotá with East Harlem, Seoul with the Cherokee Reservation in North Carolina, and Accra with Watts. The goal of the VTA was to forge a transnational dialogue across local politics and traditions, combat notions of superiority embedded in American post-war development thinking, and encourage cross-cultural exchange in American communities.

Placed in Community Action Projects (CAPs) and other War on Poverty initiatives, volunteers faced a nuanced social reality defined by complex racial and class dynamics that influenced their work and relationship to American communities. Some struggled with their own class backgrounds as they confronted poverty firsthand in a country that they initially believed was the model of the “developed” world. For others, it was race that complicated expectations of the United States. Some volunteers found that being racially foreign ostracized them from the communities they were supposed to serve. But others found their racial identities allowed them to identify more closely with communities of color. Similar to other activists and diplomats that visited the United States from the decolonized world, VTAs experienced American racism first-hand. The one to two-year commitment of the program forced the volunteers to grapple with the effects of American racism and poverty on a daily basis.⁴

The contentious and often surprising nature of the VTA experiences expanded the politics of many volunteers. The volunteers' unique position as foreign outsiders enabled them to see the problems of the community not as a result of attitudes and culture—a view that shaped the discourse of domestic poverty programs—but rather as a result of specific racial, historical, and economic conditions. Many volunteers had to find ways to reconcile preconceived beliefs about the United States with the issues and problems that affected them and their host communities. In their monthly reports and articles, VTA volunteers used their confrontations with American parochialism, racism, and poverty to challenge existing ideas and institutions in the United States. By the end of the program, many volunteers came to question the United States' role in the world, its model of development, and its commitment to universal values. VTA volunteers came away with a view that the purported cosmopolitan values of the

of American History 82, no. 3 (December 1995): 999–1028; Fritz Fischer, *Making Them Like Us: Peace Corps Volunteers in the 1960s* (Washington, DC, 1998). Geidel's *Peace Corps Fantasies* also looks at how the volunteer experience unsettled development ideas. For more on the Peace Corps and its articulation of American cosmopolitanism, see Rebecca H. Schein, “Landscape for a Good Citizen: The Peace Corps and the Cultural Logics of American Cosmopolitanism” (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Cruz, 2008).

4. For more on the experiences of foreign activists and diplomats in the United States, see Nico Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India* (Cambridge, MA, 2012).

Peace Corps were actually middle-class values imbued with American exceptionalism.⁵

The history of the VTA brings to light the unintended consequences of international volunteer programs in the 1960s. The VTA enabled those often excluded from post-war development schemes to challenge prevailing models of development. VTA volunteers were not ready-made critics of the United States. Rather, they evolved into their views through their service experiences in the United States. Their conclusions about the United States and its role in the world often paralleled the criticisms made by many New Left internationalists in the late 1960s. When the Peace Corps sought to renew and expand the VTA program in 1971, Congress took it as an opportunity to fully defund the program. Congressional leaders also added an amendment to the Peace Corps that prevented the agency from operating anything similar in the future. The idea of placing foreign volunteers in poor American communities ran against the American triumphalism common among U.S. policymakers in the mid-1960s. U.S. policymakers could accept ideas of shared humanity broadly speaking, but could not accept a program that enabled foreign volunteers to reveal the shortcomings of the United States.⁶

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, EDUCATION, AND THE PEACE CORPS

The idea of a “reverse Peace Corps” inverted the prevailing paradigm of American development. When the idea was first proposed, many commentators could not understand how a foreign volunteer could have any impact in the United States. One professor remarked during a discussion among returned Peace Corps volunteers that the overseas experience simply “can’t be made a two-way process.” He believed that it was not possible “because two-thirds of the world is desperately trying to catch up with the modernized one-third,” and told the volunteers not to “carry this cultural relativism too far.”⁷

These concerns became especially apparent in the Congressional debates to fund the expansion of the initial pilot project. During the hearings of the House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC) in 1966, Ohio Republican Congresswomen Frances Bolton expressed to Peace Corps director Jack Vaughn that she did not particularly like the idea of an Exchange Peace Corps. She felt that the “Peace

5. For scholarship on the “culture of deficiency,” see Alyosha Goldstein, *Poverty in Common: The Politics of Community Action during the American Century* (Durham, NC, 2012).

6. For scholarship that notes VTA’s existence, see Lipung Bu, *Making the World Like Us: Education, Cultural Expansion, and the American Century* (Westport, CT, 2003); and Sheyda Jahanbani, “The Poverty of the World”: *Discovering the Poor at Home and Abroad, 1935–1973* (Oxford, forthcoming). On travel and new left internationalism, see Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, *Radicals on the Road: Internationalism, Orientalism, and Feminism during the Vietnam Era* (Ithaca, NY, 2013). For connections between foreign students and New Left activism, see Quinn Slobodian, *Foreign Front: Third World Politics in Sixties West Germany* (Durham, NC, 2012).

7. A Discussion of RPCVs, March 8, 1965, box 5, Personal Papers of Gerald Bush, John F. Kennedy Library (hereafter JFKL).

Corps [was] a unique institution, an American institution, that can't possibly be duplicated by other nations." She told Vaughn that these countries that would send volunteers "don't think the way we do. They don't live the way we do" and would not be able to offer the United States anything in the form of aid.⁸

Other Congressional representatives were also adamantly against the VTA. Democratic Congressman Wayne Hays believed that many of the teachers that would be brought from emerging nations were needed in those countries. "I don't really think this is a needed program," Hays told Vaughn: "I have been to Africa, I have been to Latin America and they need every teacher they have down there." Hays was also concerned with foreign influence in the United States, telling Vaughn that there were "too many people from other countries involved in too many things they oughtn't to be involved in in this country." Hays believed that an exchange Peace Corps would "tarnish the image of one of the better international organizations." Republican Peter Frelinghuysen was equally opposed to the program. Although he could "understand how a volunteer going from this country to work in a Colombian slum stands both to benefit individually and to improve the image of the United States, because this is a practical demonstration of our idealism," he could not understand what a volunteer from Colombia could do or "what would be accomplished by bringing . . . a Colombian into this country." Democrat Leonard Farbstein agreed. At the same time that some policymakers did believe the "reverse Peace Corps" idea had value for the foreign volunteers, they still could not fathom those volunteers teaching Americans anything new. "I can understand the concept of these individuals being sent here for the purposes of learning," Democrat Leonard Farbstein told Jack Vaughn, but he "found it difficult to envision these technicians coming here and teaching the social workers and coming here and teaching the teachers."⁹

The responses by Congress and other outside commentators illuminated the problem that Peace Corps volunteers and staff saw in American development practices. The most prominent was the view that only Americans could "aid" those abroad. "I would describe one of our main problems in foreign relations," Jack Vaughn argued, "to be the disbelief of many of our people that anybody can come here and teach us anything. I think they can." Vaughn's response to Congressional debates about the VTA brings to light the more varied roots of the Peace Corps and its goals abroad. The Peace Corps began as an attempt to rethink post-war American development policy. In early 1960, Wisconsin Congressman Henry Reuss proposed a "Point Four Youth Corps" after a trip to Cambodia, where he saw a U.S.-sponsored thirty-million-dollar highway barely used by local Cambodians. He believed a youth corps program would cultivate an

8. U.S. Congress, Senate, House Foreign Affairs Committee, *Peace Corps Act Amendments of 1966*, 89th Cong., 2nd Sess. (Washington, DC, 1966), 49.

9. *Ibid.*, 18, 116, 29.

“attitude of fellowship with the local people rather than an attitude of superior-inferior paternalism.” Reuss’s proposal was inspired by teachers from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). But the Peace Corps idea also had deeper roots, ranging from social work practices and New Deal youth programs in the United States to Gandhi’s proposal of a “Peace Army” in India. When Sargent Shriver and Harris Wofford met Jawaharlal Nehru in India in early 1961, Ashadevi Aryanyakan, a leading figure at Gandhi’s ashram, told them “Gandhi was the first Peace Corps volunteer.”¹⁰

The Peace Corps’ emphasis on community development and people-to-people interaction further reveals the agency’s attempt to move beyond the accepted patterns of post-war development. Throughout the 1960s, thirty percent of all Peace Corps programs were defined as community development (CD). Volunteers in the fields of education and healthcare were also expected to use community development techniques as part of their work. Community development work, in other words, was at the core of the Peace Corps in the 1960s. The aim of community development was to improve local conditions, but unlike advocates of modernization theory, practitioners of community development did not envision the imposition of a monolithic culture onto the decolonized world. Instead, community development drew on local knowledge, encouraged plurality, and sought to enable village-level democracy. The distinctive element of community development was participation by the people. Sargent Shriver often noted that the Peace Corps dealt “in people, not materials.” Community development practices depended upon the local culture of each community and emphasized the importance of exchanging ideas and traditions. The American anthropologist and intellectual grandfather of community development, Robert Redfield, believed that the community development process was a dialogue between civilizations and would translate local traditions into universal values.¹¹

Frank Mankiewicz, the Peace Corps director in Latin America and most prominent advocate of community development within the agency, considered the willingness to first learn and understand the community to be the most important characteristic of a community development volunteer. A volunteer, he explained in his 1965 discussion paper, needed “to observe, to notice, to write

10. Ibid., 29; Henry S. Reuss, “Youth for Peace,” *Progressive* XXV (February 1961): 61. For a discussion on the diverse roots of the Peace Corps, see Brenda Plummer, *In Search of Power: African Americans in the Era of Decolonization, 1956–1974* (Cambridge, MA, 2012); Harris Wofford, *Of Kennedy and Kings* (Pittsburgh, PA, 1980), 272.

11. Shriver quoted in Gerard T. Rice, *The Bold Experiment* (Notre Dame, IN, 1985), 217. On Peace Corps community development programs, see Elizabeth Cobbs-Hoffman, *All You Need is Love: The Peace Corps and the Spirit of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA, 1998). For a broader discussion on community development, see Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small*. On Redfield and cosmopolitanism, see Nicole Sackley, “Cosmopolitanism and the Uses of Tradition: Robert Redfield and Alternative Visions of Modernization During the Cold War,” *Modern Intellectual History* 9, no. 2 (2012): 565–95. On Redfield, cosmopolitanism, and community development, see Andrew Jewett, *Science, Democracy, and the American University: From the Civil War to the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA, 2014).

down what they see” and learn about “where they are and who their neighbors are and what is going on.” Mankiewicz’s views were reflected in Peace Corps training programs. Peace Corps community development training taught volunteers that the first step was “learning the community,” including the area, the local culture, and “the power structure.” The “exchange of ideas,” a Peace Corps pamphlet explained, “is 50 percent of any volunteer’s job.” Not only would the volunteers learn from the community first, Mankiewicz also believed that volunteers in community development projects would draw attention to injustices around the world. Mankiewicz drew on the community organizing ideas of James Forman, the executive secretary of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). He believed that Forman’s ideal of closely identifying and living with poor people applied to the work of Peace Corps volunteers. “Community development effort in Latin America is an international sit-in,” he explained, because “we’re calling attention to situations by being in a place where, obviously, in class terms, we do not belong.”¹²

The Peace Corps’ community development practices were related to its educational goals. Like other exchange programs such as Eisenhower’s People-to-People program and the Fulbright-Hays Program, advocates of the Peace Corps envisioned the program as a means of producing more democratic and globally aware citizens at home and abroad. The various reports that influenced the Peace Corps’ overseas programming underscored the agency’s educational mission. Samuel Hayes, a University of Michigan professor and foreign policy advisor to John F. Kennedy, envisioned the program as the “capstone of [students’] education” and a program that had “tremendous educational and cross-cultural value.” Warren Wiggins, whose report “A Towering Task” structured the overall program, also emphasized the educational value of the program. “More important,” Wiggins wrote in his proposal for the Philippines, “would be the fact that 17,000 Americans would learn, first-hand, about the rest of the world, and some millions of Philippine citizens would come to regard Americans with a new perspective.” Similarly, the federally-funded study led by Maurice Albertson and Pauline Birky at Colorado State University saw the program as a new way of educating young Americans. “They will learn,” Albertson and Birky wrote, “what other cultures have to teach—philosophies, ways of self-expression, ethical systems, patterns of social behavior.” It proposed that the training program should “challenge the basic ideals and values of the

12. Frank Mankiewicz, “The Peace Corps: A Revolutionary Force,” Peace Corps Discussion Paper (Washington, DC, 1965), 10–11; “Community Effectiveness,” folder 31, box 5, UW-Milwaukee Peace Corps Training Center Records, 1960–1970, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries-Archives (hereafter UWMLA); *What Can I Do in the Peace Corps?: The Era of the Generalist* (Washington, DC, 1968), 3. For more on parallels between SNCC and the Peace Corps, see Plummer, *In Search of Power*, and Julia Erin Wood, “Freedom is Indivisible: The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Cold War Politics, and International Liberation Movements” (PhD diss., Yale University, 2011).

volunteers” and enable them to rethink and re-evaluate commonly held assumptions.¹³

For Sargent Shriver, the first Peace Corps director, these appeals to education reflected his experiences as a student and staff member in the student exchange program Experiment in International Living. In his final report to Kennedy, Shriver underscored the educational goals of the Peace Corps. Sargent Shriver explained to Kennedy that one of the main purposes of the program was to “contribute to the education of America and to more intelligent American participation in the world.” The associate director of the Peace Corps, Harris Wofford, also believed that the Peace Corps represented a new way of learning about and from the world. Throughout the 1960s, he often described the Peace Corps as a “university in dispersion” and a “Socratic seminar writ large.” At the University of New Mexico’s Peace Corps training in 1962, Wofford explained to prospective volunteers that “everywhere you go in the world you meet American education coming back,” and they will have to learn “whether we of the West, the true minority of the world, can become integrated with the new world, whether we can join the human race.” Even Kennedy, who often saw the program through the lens of Cold War geopolitics, emphasized the educational purposes of the Peace Corps. When Kennedy signed the executive order to establish the Peace Corps, he wrote that the “benefits of the Peace Corps will not be limited to the countries in which it serves” and that many of the volunteers would be able “to assume the responsibilities of American citizenship” with greater understanding of global responsibilities. The Peace Corps Act, signed into law on September 22, 1961, further underscored the program’s educational mission in its three goals. President Kennedy highlighted this component when he addressed the nature of the program on NBC News. Peace Corps volunteers, Kennedy told his American audience, “will learn just as much as they will teach.”¹⁴

13. Samuel P. Hayes, “A Proposal for An International Youth Service,” September 30, 1960, pp. 2–3, Papers of John F. Kennedy, Presidential Campaign Files, 1960, John F. Kennedy Digital Collections, accessed February 23, 2017, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKCAMP1960-0993-003.aspx>; Warren Wiggins, “A Towering Task: The National Peace Corps,” February 1, 1961, Microfilmed Records, 1960–1966, MF06, United States Peace Corps Records, RG 490, JFKL; Maurice L. Albertson, Andrew E. Rice, and Pauline E. Birky, *New Frontiers for American Youth: Perspectives on the Peace Corps* (Washington, DC, 1961), 19. For more on post-war cross-cultural exchange programs, see Richard Garlitz and Lisa Jarvinen, *Teaching America to the World and the World to America: Education and Foreign Relations Since 1870* (New York, 2012); Christopher P. Loss, *Between Citizens and the State: The Politics of American Higher Education in the 20th Century* (Princeton, NJ, 2014); Liping Bu, *Making the World Like Us: Education, Cultural Expansion, and the American Century* (Westport, CT, 2003); and Whitney Walton, “Internationalism and the Junior Year Abroad: American Students in France in the 1920s and 1930s,” *Diplomatic History* 29, no. 2 (April 2005): 255–78.

14. Sargent Shriver, “Report to the President on the Peace Corps,” February 22, 1961, p. 18, Papers of John F. Kennedy, Presidential Files, John F. Kennedy Digital Library, accessed February 24, 2017, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKPOF-085-014.aspx>; Harris Wofford, “Training: Ideas Wanted,” *The Volunteer* 3, no. 6 (May 1965); Pauline Madow, ed., *The Peace Corps*, Reference Shelf vol. 36, no. 2 (New York, 1964), 20–21, 86. “US President John F. Kennedy speaks from the White House about the goals of the Peace Corps,” NBC News, Washington, DC, 1961, NBC News Video Archives, accessed February 24, 2017,

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By linking community development with cross-cultural exchange, the Peace Corps envisioned a more cosmopolitan ideal of development and encouraged its volunteers to embrace alternative perspectives. Yet, the program was still influenced by modernization paradigms, in which the Peace Corps volunteer was seen as “mid-level manpower” in the emerging world and would serve as the missing link in the “take off” of emerging countries. These modernizing ideas became most prevalent in the Peace Corps’ recruiting campaign that drew on notions of the American “frontier.” The two competing missions of the Peace Corps were written into the three goals of the agency: the first goal emphasized how the program would help countries meet the need for “trained” manpower while the second and third goals underscored how the program would help promote better understanding between Americans and countries around the world.¹⁵

The tension between the Peace Corps’ cosmopolitan urges and American exceptionalism became especially apparent to the volunteers and staff working abroad. Peace Corp volunteers’ transnational encounters placed them in complex social situations where they had to negotiate between the paternalism of technical aid and the cosmopolitan ideal of cross-cultural exchange. Working as community developers and teachers abroad, Peace Corps volunteers and staff discovered the contingent, temporal, and socially situated character of beliefs and values, institutions, and practices. Many volunteers returned home with more complex views of development and came to see the United States’ role in the world in a different light. “When I went to Liberia, I wasn’t critical of my country,” Peace Corps volunteer Marilyn Dalsimer wrote, “but over the two years the Peace Corps provided me with the opportunity to see imperialism, racism, the effects of domination, and terrible poverty. I came back with a much more sophisticated view of the world and the United States’ complicity in all this stuff.” Mike Simonds, a Peace Corps volunteer in India, also became more critical of American development abroad. He believed that Americans have a “grocer’s scale for a heart” in which “a thing’s value is what it costs” and too often this leads to a confusion that the “good life” is associated with “heavy industry, stereo records, shopping centers.” India defied this American value, he argued, and called on his fellow volunteers to seek “alternatives to the American way.”¹⁶

<http://www.nbcuniversalarchives.com>. For more on Shriver and the Experiment in International Living, see Elizabeth Cobbs-Hoffman, *All You Need Is Love*.

15. For more on modernization theory and the Peace Corps, see Michael Latham, *Modernization as Ideology*. On the goals of the Peace Corps, see Gerald Rice, *The Bold Experiment: JFK’s Peace Corps* (Notre Dame, IN, 1985) and Cobbs-Hoffman, *All You Need Is Love*.

16. Karen Schwartz, *What Can You Do for Your Country: An Oral History of the Peace Corps* (New York, 1993), 127; Mike Simonds, “On being honest,” *Service*, May 1, 1967, folder 41,

By 1966, returned Peace Corps volunteers formed the Committee of Returned Volunteers (CRV), an organization whose purpose was to rethink U.S. foreign policy and development. The organization's membership reached two thousand in 1968. While most of the members were former Peace Corps volunteers, others were volunteers that had served with private organizations such as Crossroads Africa and American Friends Service Committee. The CRV's statement of purpose explained that the volunteer experience abroad had exposed young Americans "to the realities of poverty" and placed them "in the tension between modernization and tradition." The volunteers "learned to understand the societies different from us" and were "able to view our own society from the perspective of others." Drawing on their experiences, the organization sought a new model of development centered on social and economic justice. At the peak of its membership in 1968, the organization sponsored a trip to Cuba in order "to experience an alternative model of development and evaluate its effects." Concerned that nationally sponsored programs such as the Peace Corps were "instruments of U.S. foreign policy," the members of the CRV believed the Cuba trip would enable the volunteers to strengthen their "efforts to truly internationalize volunteer service."¹⁷

While CRV members traveled outside the United States to explore alternatives to American ideas of development, another group of former Peace Corps volunteers and staff attempted to fully realize the Peace Corps' cosmopolitan ideals by bringing volunteers to the United States. Peace Corps Volunteer Roger Landrum believed that most volunteers "object to the image the Peace Corps has created because it is essentially Americans moving into darkness with light." Landrum went on to explain that this implies that "there is no reverse that can take place." Unless the United States develops "a vehicle by which [Nigerians] can contribute to our society," he expected Nigeria and other nations to cut off the Peace Corps as an "affront to their pride." David Schickele, a pioneering Peace Corps volunteer in Nigeria, agreed with Landrum. He argued there was value in bringing outside perspectives to bear on problems in the United States. "We talk about what we want our country to become and yet ignore a whole substructure of despair in this country," Schickele explained, "Any viable society needs to search—perhaps outside of itself—for revitalization." At the 1965 Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Conference, Warren Kinsman, a returned Peace Corps volunteer from Turkey, proposed reversing the flow of volunteers. Think about the possibilities, Kinsman argued, when Israeli social workers and "experienced colleagues of Mahatma Gandhi and organizers of community development projects from

box 5, UW-Milwaukee Peace Corps Training Center Records, 1960–1970, UWMLA. For more on Peace Corps volunteers, see Fritz Fischer, *Making Them Like Us: Peace Corps Volunteers in the 1960s* (Washington, DC, 1998).

17. CRV Statement of Purpose, box 1, Alice Hageman Papers, MSS 852, Wisconsin Historical Society (hereafter WHS); "Why We Are Going to Cuba," box 1, Alice Hageman Papers, MSS 852, WHS.

other countries” worked in the community action projects in the United States. “The benefits would be mutual,” Kinsman stressed, “For the experience of actually working here, on American social problems, educating and helping Americans, should have a profound impact on these young leaders from developing nations.”¹⁸

As early as 1961, supporters of the Peace Corps had suggested a reciprocal volunteer program. Samuel Hayes, the foreign policy advisor to Kennedy’s 1960 campaign, explained that the “only successful program, and the only one which might grow in respectable size, would be a fully reciprocal one, involving projects by youths from other countries within the U.S.” Hays believed that countries in the emerging world were tired of the “big brother” approach taken by the United States. Even Max Millikan, often considered a key modernization theorist, suggested reciprocal exchange. “The International Youth Service Agency should give serious study a variety of possible ways of giving the program a two-way character,” he wrote, “by exploring possible service to be performed in the United States by young people sent here.” Peace Corps receiving countries had also suggested reversing the flow of volunteers. When Shriver met with President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana in 1961, Nkrumah offered to send Ghanaian volunteers to work in the United States. Two years later, in response to the racial violence in the American south, the *Ghanaian Times* echoed Nkrumah’s original proposal and called on the Ghanaian government to send a “Civilising (Peace) Corps from Africa to America to help that country resolve the racial crisis facing it today.” Hearing about the editorial, SNCC activists responded by sending in a letter to the paper in support of the idea and asked: “Africa, Help Us Civilise Barbaric Racists Here.”¹⁹

While Hayes and Millikan believed the exchange should be limited to educational institutions at the primary and secondary level, the volunteers’ proposal went a step further along the lines of what the SNCC demanded in 1963. The volunteers argued that a reciprocal volunteer program should engage foreign volunteers directly in domestic problems in the United States. Peace Corps staff was receptive to the idea and saw it as an extension of the Peace Corps mission. The new Peace Corps director in 1965, Jack Vaughn, believed an “Exchange Peace Corps” was a “natural continuation of the work ... overseas” and provided receiving Peace Corps countries the

18. A Discussion of RPCVs, March 3, 1965, Returned Volunteers Conference, box 5, Personal Papers Gerald Bush, JFKL; Warren Kinsman, “Working Paper — Foreign Students and A Reverse Peace Corps,” box 46, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection, JFKL.

19. University of Michigan News Release, January 11, 1961, folder 28, box 36, Henry S. Reuss Papers, UWMLA; Samuel Hayes, *An International Peace Corps: Promises and Problems* (Washington, DC, 1961); Millikan Report, 18, folder 27, box 36, Henry S. Reuss Papers, UWMLA; Rice, *The Bold Experiment*, 291; Editorial, “Send a Peace Corps There!” *The Ghanaian Times*, June 8, 1963, 2; “Africa, Help Us Civilise Barbaric Racists Here: Afro-American Freedom Fights Appeal to Us,” *The Ghanaian Times*, August 16, 1963, 2. For more on SNCC and Ghana, see Wood, “Freedom is Indivisible.”

opportunity to “contribute substantially to us in return.” Harris Wofford, the associate director of the Peace Corps, explained that the reverse Peace Corps “will help to make the Peace Corps a two-way street, what we’ve always hoped it would be.”²⁰

In the summer of 1965, the first Peace Corps director in India, Charles Houston, implemented a pilot project for a reverse Peace Corps. Writing home a year earlier, he believed the “aid pattern of the future” was a “two way pattern of giving.” With the support of the Foundation for Voluntary Service, Houston started a pilot project that brought five social workers from India to the United States. Peace Corps staff member David Schimmel and returned volunteer Neil Boyer helped run the pilot project. These volunteers spent their first six weeks as Hindi instructors for new Peace Corps trainees at St. John’s University and then worked for a year at either the Henry Street Settlement House in New York, the Opportunities Industrialization Center in Philadelphia, or the Central Outreach Program in Cleveland. Alfred P. Jones, the director of the Foundation for Voluntary Service, believed the program had been successful. “Now these foreigners—and there ought to be more of them,” he said in an interview, “learn that even the richest county in the world has problems and is trying to come to grips with them.” Houston and Jones encouraged the expansion of the program and lobbied Sargent Shriver, Warren Wiggins, and Harris Wofford. President Lyndon Johnson endorsed the program in 1966 as part of a larger initiative for international education and proposed an initial goal of five thousand volunteers. “Our nation has no better ambassadors than the young volunteers who serve in 46 countries in the Peace Corps” and he believed that similar “ambassadors” needed to be welcomed to America because “we need their special skills and understanding.” By the fall of 1966, the first volunteers arrived in the United States.²¹

ENCOUNTERS AND REFLECTIONS OF VTA VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers to America attempted to realize the Peace Corps’ cosmopolitan ideal of community development. It served a dual purpose. The program would both support War on Poverty initiatives and help expand international education opportunities. As its staff and supporters explained, the program both

20. U.S. Congress, Senate, *Peace Corps Act Amendments of 1966*; “Congress Should Approve ‘Reverse Peace Corps’ Plan,” *The Michigan Daily*, February 10, 1966.

21. Charles Houston Letter Home, September 12, 1964, box 92, Returned Peace Corps Collection, JFKL; Volunteer Forum, “Report on Experiences of Five Indian Volunteers in America,” June 22, 1966, box 23, Record Group 490 (hereafter RG 490), Subject Files of the Office of the Director, 1961–1966, National Archives (hereafter USNA); Peter Landau, “Alfred Winslow Jones: The Long and Short of the Founding Father,” *Institutional Investor*, August 1968; Lyndon B. Johnson, “Special Message to the Congress Proposing International Education and Health Programs,” February 2, 1966, available online at Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, accessed February 24, 2017, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=27848>.

“demonstrates acknowledgement by the United States of its deficiencies and of its interdependence with other nations.” Peace Corps director Jack Vaughn explained that the VTA would primarily draw volunteers from countries that were often underrepresented in current programs. VTA volunteers came from Latin America, Africa, and Asia, particularly Colombia, Costa Rica, Ghana, Honduras, Iran, Korea, Nepal, and the Philippines.²²

Supporters of the VTA underscored the cross-cultural value of the program and how it would enrich community development practices in the United States. The assistant secretary of state, Charles Frankel, believed that the volunteers would be “a valuable catalyst in the process of our self-education.” Peace Corps director Jack Vaughn emphasized that the volunteers “will work with social agencies, health organizations and youth groups,” not just as teachers or scholars. In these positions, the volunteers would “teach their own methods, and learn with their American counterparts in common efforts to design programs that will alleviate the conditions of poverty.” The program would also help introduce foreign “cultures and languages to low-income areas,” especially where previously there had been “no provision for assignment of exchange teachers or students.” Reflecting these goals, volunteers were placed in various Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) projects in Texas, the Chippewa Indian Reservation, and in a migrant program in Pennsylvania. In North Carolina and Appalachia, volunteers from Argentina, Iran, Korea, and the Philippines served with CAPs and helped set up credit unions and work cooperatives. Many of the volunteers from Latin America were placed in Puerto Rican communities in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. VTA teachers that worked in public schools were also placed in CAPs or War on Poverty programs during their summer breaks.²³

By placing volunteers in War on Poverty initiatives, the VTA program created an opportunity for foreign nationals to be active participants in domestic problems in the United States. VTA Director Neil Boyer believed that the program provided “participants with a more complete view of the United States,” in which community development work in the United States gave the volunteers “far more than the surface glimpses usually obtained by foreign students or tourists.” In his welcome letter to volunteers, he explained that the volunteers would be exposed to “poverty, hunger, riots, guns” and “relations between races, and about war.” He hoped that

22. VTA FY 1970 Back Up Data Book, box 1, Records Relating to the Volunteers to America Program, 1967–1971, RG 490, USNA.

23. Statement of the Honorable Charles Frankel Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, July 21, 1966, box 1, Records Relating to Volunteers to America Program, 1967–1971, RG 490, USNA; U.S. Congress, Senate, *Peace Corps Act Amendments of 1966*, 4; Volunteers to America: Proposals for Action in 1969, December 1968, Neil Boyer Private Collection; VTA, FY 1969 Back Up Data Book, box 1, Records Relating to the Volunteers to America Program, 1967–1971, RG 490, USNA; US Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, *Volunteers to America Pamphlet*, box 1, Records Relating to Volunteers to America Program, 1967–1971, RG 490, USNA.

VTAs would “take action in particular fields” and in the situations where the volunteers “sense there are problems” and “where Americans are not doing enough.”²⁴

The training program attempted to prepare the volunteers for their work in the different VISTA and Community Action projects. Boyer told training staff that the program needed to prepare the volunteers to encounter difficult situations in the United States. “Tell them how it is to grow up in a ghetto,” Boyer explained to training staff, “how the family wants you to drop out and get a job, and how bad the job prospects are even if you do graduate, and how the school can’t get good teachers, and how bad the facilities are.” Training seminars focused on education, race, and class and included such seminar topics as “Social Class and Social Mobility,” “Objectives and Themes in U.S. Schools,” and “Teacher Status in American Society.” As part of the training program, volunteers read Michael Harrington’s *The Other America*, Bel Kaufman’s *Up the Down Staircase*, and Jonathan Kozol’s *Death at an Early Age*.²⁵

While the training program may have made the volunteers aware of “the other America” intellectually, the social experience forced many of them to grapple with questions of class, race, and inequality directly. VTA volunteers were simultaneously insiders and outsiders in their American communities and this dynamic influenced how they saw the United States and its problems. Volunteers used their day-to-day encounters and conflicts with American racism, parochialism, and poverty as sources to critique the American way of development. Instead of seeing poverty as a cultural deficiency, volunteers’ unique positions in American communities enabled them to identify the racial and economic forces that limited and marginalized the communities where they worked.

In the first two years of the program, VTA and VISTA staff often noted that the volunteers’ foreign background placed them in a unique position in minority communities in the United States. During the pilot project, one agency official observed that the Indian volunteers were more successful because often the people in the communities regarded middle-class American college students with suspicion. “They had no category in which to place the foreign volunteers,” the agency official remarked, “and many poor identified with them rather than with professional social workers who they perceived as representing ‘the establishment.’” The 1970 VTA report concluded that “VTAs assigned to work as VISTA Volunteers found that, as foreigners, they often had an easier entrée in communities than did their American counterparts.” The volunteers from

24. Volunteers to America: Proposals for Action in 1969, December 1968, Neil Boyer Private Collection; Memo to Volunteers to America from Neil Boyer, July 2, 1968, Neil Boyer Private Collection; Welcome Letter to Group II Volunteers, July 10, 1968, Neil Boyer Private Collection; Memo to Volunteers to America from Neil Boyer, November 20, 1967, Neil Boyer Private Collection.

25. Neil Boyer Memo to Howard Meyers, October 11, 1967, Ester Hawkins’ Report on the Office of Education, Neil Boyer Private Collection; University of Southern California VTA Training Program, 1967, Neil Boyer Private Collection; Experiment in International Living Training Program, Summer 1968, box 9, Records Relating to the Volunteers to America Program, 1967–1971, RG 490, USNA.

Latin America, Asia, and Africa were “able to work more effectively with Black city youths, migrant workers, and Spanish-speaking communities.” Agency officials noted these benefits. “If I had my choice,” said one local VISTA supervisor, “I would take the foreign Volunteer to the American any day.” A CAP supervisor believed that foreign volunteers “will do much to enhance [sic] the role of VISTA in the U.S.” Agency officials believed that the success of these volunteers was their position in the communities and their “unwillingness on their part to superimpose their values on the situations they find when they volunteer for service.”²⁶

Volunteers also noted the benefits of their “minority” identity in the United States. Many volunteers found that their identity as a foreigner allowed them to build trust and facilitate cooperation in the communities. Teotima Albias, a volunteer from the Philippines, moved and felt more comfortable living in the black neighborhood of Tannery Flats in North Carolina. Albias’s position as a foreign volunteer enabled him to identify with the community and wield resources outside of it. Albias helped get the county to pave the road and provide regular garbage removal for the neighborhood. Filipino volunteer Zernon Adobas similarly found the color of his skin beneficial to the work he was doing in North Carolina. He noted to VTA staff that “being non-white is a positive advantage in a place where the white man is the root of all evil.” Because of his position in the community, Adobas was able to build trust with community members and helped form a credit union and a cooperative in the community. VISTA officials recognized the value of Adobas’s position and made him the main trainer for other American CAP volunteers on the Cherokee Reservation. Other VTA volunteers noticed the benefits of Adobas’s position as well, to the extent that Irene Quiero, an Argentinian volunteer, “quietly denies she’s white if asked.”²⁷

While some volunteers had a unique “entrée” into minority communities, others found it much more difficult to connect meaningfully with the communities. A VTA report noted that volunteers on the Cherokee Reservation had “considerable difficulty” as they encountered the “factor of status which the individuals carried.” Korean VTA Cho Whee-il wrote in his report that after a year working on the Cherokee Reservation, he “felt a cool and suspicious glance from the people” and his only relation to the community came from the mere fact that he was from Korea (figure 1). Another Korean volunteer, Hyang Byong-nam, similarly expressed in her mid-year report “conflict, frustration, and disappointment” due to her inability to understand the community. The

26. Volunteer Forum, “Report on Experiences of Five Indian Volunteers in America,” June 22, 1966, box 23, Subject Files of the Office of the Director, 1961–1966, RG 490, USNA; A Proposal to Fund a Volunteers to America Program, Neil Boyer Private Collection; Owle Community Action Program Report to Binda, box 17, Records Relating to Volunteers to America Program, 1967–1971, RG 490, USNA.

27. VTA Staff Report on Teotima Albias, box 17, Records Relating to Volunteers to America Program, 1967–1971, RG 490, USNA; VTA Report, September 1967, box 17, Records Relating to the Volunteers to America Program, 1967–1971, RG 490, USNA.



Figure 1: Cho Whee-ill, a volunteer from Seoul, Korea, worked on the Cherokee Indian Reservation in North Carolina. U.S. Department of the State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, "Volunteers to America," Records Relating to the Volunteers to America Program, 1967–1971, RG 490, USNA.

Indian Bureau Superintendent noticed that the volunteers that came “from upper economic group[s] . . . found some difficulties when their relationships here at Cherokee were almost exclusively with individuals in the lower middle to lower social economic groups.”²⁸

These volunteers were also troubled by the lack of “professional recognition” which they had enjoyed in their own country. One Korean volunteer, a CAP report noted, had particular moments of frustration. “I suspect,” VTA supervisor Johnson Owle wrote, “that she has led more than a sheltered life at home and has been at or near the top of professional life for a woman in Korea.” The issues that these VTA volunteers faced illuminate the twofold effect of the foreign volunteer. Just as much as volunteer positions as foreign outsiders enabled some volunteers to successfully mobilize the community, others found their middle-class, professional, or “outsider” status to limit their abilities in the community and frustrate their work. For many volunteers, their frustrations were rooted not only in their inability to relate to the communities, but also their surprise with the issues in the United States. These experiences forced many volunteers to reconsider how they viewed the United States. After working in the United States, Honduran volunteers told VTA staff that what they had learned about the United States in their home country was “all a pack of lies.”²⁹

Along with class dynamics and the professional backgrounds of the volunteers, American race relations also directly impacted the volunteers. Many volunteers working in suburban areas encountered community members that either kept their distance from the volunteers, or directly confronted the volunteers about their presence in the community. Sam Dogbe, a Ghanaian volunteer who worked in Temple City, California, experienced both forms of community interactions. He described his experience in Temple City, a suburb of Los Angeles, as being in a “zoo” exhibit, in the sense that many people were interested in getting to know him. Yet, Dogbe also experienced the opposite, in which other community members saw him as an unwanted outsider. When driving home from school early in his service term, a group of community members followed Dogbe and directly confronted him, only to find out that he was a foreigner and not an African American. Upon realization, the community members left him alone. Dogbe was only questioned when he was perceived to be African American, but was tentatively accepted once the community learned that he was from outside the United States.³⁰

28. Letter to Neil Boyer from Indian Bureau Superintendent, box 17, Records Relating to the Volunteers to America Program, 1967–1971, RG 490, USNA; Letter to Jeffrey Binda from Johnson Lee Owle, November 15, 1967, box 17, Records Relating to the Volunteers to America Program, 1967–1971, RG 490, USNA.

29. Letter to Jeffrey Binda from Johnson Lee Owle, November 15, 1967, box 17, Records Relating to the Volunteers to America Program, 1967–1971, RG 490, USNA; Letter to Jean Wilkowsky from Neil Boyer, February 1, 1968, box 20, Records Relating to the Volunteers to America Program, 1967–1971, RG 490, USNA.

30. Sam Dogbe, phone interview with the author, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, January 23, 2015.

Dogbe not only dealt with the effects of how community members viewed his presence in suburban Los Angeles, he also experienced a justice system that he felt used the color of his skin as an excuse to arrest him. Driving with his white girlfriend in Wyoming, Dogbe was ticketed for improper lane use. Dogbe challenged the ticket and went to court where he found that “the whole trial was procedurally prejudiced and unfair.” Unable to pay the fine, Dogbe was put on the ground with the sheriff laying on his head and back while the arresting officer twisted his arm. In his final report to VTA staff, Dogbe wrote: “Every law enforcement officer that day was just ready to force a man to pay a fine, or torture him if he failed, not because this man had illegally gone against a State law, but only because he was driving by Evanston accompanied by a white girl.” His treatment, he summarized, was given to him “not as a human being, but because of the color of [his] skin,” and he was appalled “to see that white law officers are still racially prejudiced in this country.” He further emphasized that the “international dimensions of an incidence” like his “cannot be underestimated.” Dogbe eventually sent his letter and indictment to the patrolman, judge, and sheriff in Evanston; to the governors of Wyoming and California; and to the Ghanaian embassy in Washington, DC.³¹

Other volunteers confronted similar racial dynamics. While benefiting from his foreign background, Teotima Albias also experienced racism in the schools where he worked. The school district in the community asked him to talk about the Philippines to the students. He spoke to a couple of classes and received very little response from the young students. Several days later he learned that a number of the students “told their parents that a Negro had spoken to them in class” and these parents “contacted the school in complaint.” Albias told Boyer that this experience devastated him and affected how he related to the schools’ communities. Machiko Kashida, a volunteer from Japan, noticed similar issues in Eastchester, a suburban community in New York. In her monthly reports, she reflected on the narrow mindedness of the community and how it prevented its members from seeing beyond race. Her reports bring to light how the volunteers identified the social forces that tended to deny civil and political rights in the United States. Like Dogbe and Albias, she found her community to be a very “closed community,” especially because of its “racial problem,” and believed more volunteers from Africa needed to work in Eastchester “in order to correct [the community’s] thought.”³²

Ghanaian VTA Felix Boateng was well aware of this double identity as a foreign national and the contradictory effect it had on his work. Depending on the community and context, his race either placed him as another black person or as a foreign national. When he went out to a club with Irene Quiero in Memphis,

31. Sam Dogbe Arrest Report, box 13, Records Relating to the Volunteers to America Program, 1967–1971, RG 490, USNA.

32. VTA Staff Report on Teotima Albias, box 17, Records Relating to Volunteers to America Program, 1967–1971, RG 490, USNA; Machiko Kashida Report, March 1–April 30, 1969, box 16, Records Relating to Volunteers to America Program, 1967–1971, RG 490, USNA.

Tennessee, everyone stared at them as they walked in. "I didn't understand why," Boateng later noted, "but soon I realized they were appalled to see a black man dating a white girl." Yet, in other communities, Boateng's foreign background provided benefits that black Americans were not offered. In an interview, Boateng spoke at length about race in the United States. "While I can easily identify with the black American and his problems," he explained in the interview, "I feel that I am treated better than him in America, because I am from a foreign country and have an accent." Boateng's relation to American society amazed him. "I am the same as a Negro American," he noted, but "I am treated far differently simply because I am from a foreign country." He also told the interviewer that in Ghana and most of Africa, "the people simply cannot understand the meaning of black and white racism." One Iranian volunteer also noted that his experience was unique because he had "never had the experience of being black or white before." Sylvia Tucker, a volunteer from Jamaica also concluded that "even a white American has more in common with black Americans than black foreigners."³³

Their unique and at times contradictory position in American communities led many volunteers to challenge the methods of American social agencies, often to the chagrin of host agencies and supervisors. Volunteers' conceptions of community needs and social change at times diverged from American practices and ideas and unsettled agency officials. In a meeting between volunteers from India and the Hull House director in Chicago, the volunteers gave the director a "good grilling" for her disdain for the more militant civil rights groups. "The volunteers," Neil Boyer noted, "strongly favored the activities of the new groups." The volunteers also "found it hard to understand the multiplicity of agencies in the same city all dealing with poverty problems." After being questioned by the volunteers, another agency official was unable to see the problems from the volunteers' perspective and recognize the value of their alternative proposals. The official resorted to saying, "well, that's how it is; that's the way we do things in America." Many volunteers felt that the overlapping jurisdictions limited their abilities to implement programs and initiatives that they thought were needed in the communities. One volunteer who worked in New Haven, Connecticut had developed a questionnaire to survey the community, but never got approval to conduct the survey. The volunteer thought it was due to bureaucracy, but the agency official later confessed that "the questionnaire was a bad idea because it raised false hopes." Another volunteer was concerned that her work at the agency would not be continued after she left. She had started a family planning clinic in New York City. Despite the volunteers' view that "it was the most pressing need of the community," the agency had not assigned

33. "On the Race Problem," Interview with Felix Boateng, *Lance*, box 13, Records Relating to the Volunteers to America Program, 1967-1971, RG 490, USNA; "Going Home to Asia, Africa, and Latin America," *Peace Corps Volunteer* VII, no. 11 (October 1969). For parallels to Peace Volunteers abroad, see Jonathan Zimmerman, "Beyond Double Consciousness: Black Peace Corps Volunteers in Africa, 1961-1971," *Journal of American History* 82, no. 3 (December 1995): 999-1028.

anyone to take over her position since she had left. The volunteer ultimately blamed “it on local politics.”³⁴

One of the key issues, at least from the perspective of Argentinian volunteer Maria Gagliardo, was how Americans tended to view the rest of the world. In a letter to other volunteers, she asked: “How much truth is there in telling only about music and customs . . . landscapes and weather, avoiding all that upsets us?” Maria learned that her task was to tell the uncomfortable truths and challenge her students in the process. “Argentina has not an elected government at the moment,” she told her students, and “to understand the problem that my country is facing now we have to look back into the history of America.” When she arrived at this point with her students, she would then describe the legacy of European and U.S. colonialism in Latin America. The students then began to understand, Maria wrote, that “we’re different, not because we are extravagant Latins that never knew how to manage our own problems, but because there are historical and logical reasons to be different.” Working in the suburban community of Temple City, Gagliardo’s goal was to push students to see beyond narrow American conceptions of the decolonized world. Not only did she hope the students would understand different cultures, but also grasp the social and political forces that shaped inequality between countries.³⁵

Gagliardo attempted to challenge American views of the world, but like other volunteers, she struggled to see measurable impact and was constrained by the goals of the program. Volunteer conclusions in monthly reports and articles often addressed the larger social and economic structures that limited their work in the communities. Volunteers noted that the problems they encountered in their work were deeply rooted in American history. Korean volunteer Cho Whee-il, who worked on the Cherokee Reservation in North Carolina, found his work difficult because of the long history of mistreatment of Native American communities. In a letter to VTA director Neil Boyer, Cho explained that “the school has had so much gap in between the community, the family. It was not because they didn’t feel the importance of it, but because there lied an irresistible barrier between two different people, white and Indian.” Another Korean volunteer, the same one that broke down because of the difficulty of the work, also noted this in her monthly report. “The relationship between the Indians and the white people is not so good,” wrote Byong Nam Hwang. She concluded that “they still remember that they were attacked by white people” and she found that she did not “know the solution.”³⁶

34. Volunteer Forum, “Report on Experiences of Five Indian Volunteers in America,” June 22, 1966, box 23, Subject Files of the Office of the Director, 1961–1966, RG 490, USNA.

35. Maria Gagliardo, “An Every Day Experience,” in Memo to Volunteers to America from Neil Boyer, March 8, 1968, Neil Boyer Private Collection.

36. Cho Whee-il Letter to Neil Boyer, November 9, 1967, box 16, Records Relating to Volunteers to America Program, 1967–1971, RG 490, USNA; Byong-Nam Hwang Report, January 31, 1968, box 16, Records Relating to Volunteers to America Program, 1967–1971, RG 490, USNA.

Gagliardo concluded that the problem stemmed not only from the history of American race relations, but also class barriers in the United States. In particular, she critiqued the American middle class. In the process, she came to recognize the limitations of her role as a volunteer. From her experience working at her second service site in Norfolk, Virginia, she concluded that middle-class Americans “are blind to the fact that the causes of poverty are the same,” especially “because of the wall of protection they have built up around themselves.” She began to reflect on her background as a result. Her experience of “observing the cold detachment of so many middle class Americans” led her to realize how pervasive social blindness was in a group, she admitted, to “which [she] was somehow related.” Gagliardo even wrestled with the very work she was doing as a volunteer. “Though I thought I was helping, in fact what I was doing was passing on to my students, most of them from very poor families, my own middle class values: the key to success is study and hard work.”³⁷

Gagliardo’s conclusion, as well as those of other volunteers, reveals the dual effect of the international volunteer experience. Volunteers directly confronted and learned about the effects of race, class, and inequality. These confrontations made them realize the limitations of their work as volunteers and of the professed cosmopolitanism of the program. La Vak, a volunteer from Korea, reflected upon the limitations of what he saw as a distinctly American middle-class outlook. He concluded that while he was able to provide students with different ways of living and thinking, he ultimately believed “it is not enough” to challenge American racism, parochialism, and poverty.³⁸

Volunteers’ disillusionment with American exceptionalism and the country’s parochial outlook expanded their politics and led some volunteers to criticize the United States and its role in the world. Sam Dogbe wondered if development in the emerging world was really benefiting those countries. He believed that emerging countries being “developed” were also being overtaken “by the mass-mind or the mindlessness of the Western World” and, like the United States, were beginning to suffer “spiritual and mental apathy.” Maria Gagliardo concluded that the United States was not even aware of its own problems and impoverishment, especially the middle class. “The American tragedy,” she wrote, is “the amazing fact that the majority of this country’s most powerful and largest class does not know how poor it is, how underdeveloped it is. Its poverty is of a different kind; its underdevelopment of a different quality.”³⁹

37. Maria Gagliardo, “America, the host country,” *Peace Corps Volunteer* VII, no. 11 (October 1969).

38. La Vak VTA Report, box 16, Records Relating to Volunteers to America Program, 1967–1971, RG 490, USNA.

39. “Man in this Space Age,” Sam Dogbe Public Talk, box 13, Records Relating to the Volunteers to America Program, 1967–1971, RG 490, USNA; “America, the host country,” Maria Gagliardo *Peace Corps Volunteer* VII, no. 11 (October 1969).

Ultimately, many volunteers came to view the United States through a more radical lens. In the same article, Maria Gagliardo wrote, “I have become so critical of my own society through looking at the problems of U.S. society that I will have to be very careful when I go back. And I don’t feel like being careful—that’s the problem.” Other volunteers expressed similar sentiment before leaving the United States. Colombian volunteer Hernan Cardoso had been struck with “pangs of conscience” as a result of his experience. He grappled with “why should he, Hernan Cardoso, Colombian citizen . . . do anything to help the United States when the United States is doing so little to help itself and doing so much to hurt its own citizens and others around the world.” Another volunteer, Otto Benavides, also had a profound change in his view of the United States. In letters home, he told his parents that he was appalled by the United States for its treatment of minority communities. Working in Harlem for two years, he concluded that poverty in United States was not only a “poverty of resources, but also a poverty of spirits.” He told the VTA staff that in Colombia he would always take the positions “on poverty and race relations contrary to his friends” and support the United States. “Now he feels he was very mistaken,” he concluded, “The U.S. does have very real problems with what is being done with its poor and with the quality of its race relations.” When he returned home, Benavides told the staff, “he will have to admit this to his friends” (figure 2). Gloria Baustista, another Colombian volunteer, later noted that many volunteers, especially because they were so involved in the communities, had become “radicalized.” She concluded that the program was ended because “the people in power did not like having foreigners see the ‘dirty laundry’” of the United States.⁴⁰

THE LEGACY OF THE VTA

The reflections of VTA volunteers to their work in the United States tended to point to the underlying forces of poverty. While policymakers emphasized the problem of culture and attitude, VTA volunteers concluded that poverty was the result of history, racism, and economic forces that the United States government did not want to fully address. For Peace Corps volunteers involved in the program, the VTA experience paralleled their experiences abroad. At a VTA end-of-year conference in 1968, one Peace Corps staff member found it amazing how similar the experiences were between Peace Corps and VTA volunteers. “If I had closed my eyes I could have sworn they were American Peace Corps volunteers evaluating their experiences in some country overseas. The problems, the successes, the failures—everything was the same.” International volunteer programs

40. “America, the host country,” Maria Gagliardo, *Peace Corps Volunteer* VII, no. 11 (October 1969); Otto Benavides, phone interview with the author, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, January 9, 2015; VTA Staff Report on Block Communities, Inc., box 17, Records Relating to the Volunteers to America Program, 1967-1971, RG 490, USNA; Gloria Bautista Gutierrez, email interview, February 1, 2015.



Figure 2: Otto Benavides Nieto, a volunteer from Bogotá, Colombia, and Renato Casaclang, a volunteer from Manila, Philippines, worked as VISTA block workers in East Harlem, New York. U.S. Department of the State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, “Volunteers to America,” Records Relating to the Volunteers to America Program, 1967–1971, RG 490, USNA.

in the 1960s like the VTA exposed young people to the problems of racial injustice and poverty, but American development ideas and social service practices set limits on their criticisms. The VTA in particular tended to frame volunteer critiques of American exceptionalism and development more in the realm of education and professional development for the volunteer, rather than valid critiques of American approaches to the problems of poverty. Tamar Dotham, a volunteer from Israel, noted in her monthly report that she “learned a lot during this time,” especially “about another way of life” in rural Appalachia. But, she also admitted

that she was unable to effect any real change in the community outside of a new cooperative thrift store. VTA and VISTA program officers found such reflections to capture the success of the program.

The VTA reveals a shift in how Americans viewed the relationship between community development and education. Alongside the Peace Corps, the VTA redefined community service as a method of individual development for the volunteer. Campus-based training defined volunteer work as a “profoundly educational” experience for young people, in which “the threads of action and understanding are bound together.” Barbara Wilder, a VTA trainer at the University of Southern California, believed the volunteer experience represented a new form of professional development that gave young people direct experience in the problems of poverty. Like Wilder, other educators and university administrators also saw work in the community at home and abroad as an educationally valuable experience. Samuel Gould, the president of State University of New York, believed that “this exciting innovation [exchange Peace Corps] recognizes that international education is a reciprocal process—one we may learn from.” Katherine G. Heidenan, the Superintendent of Copper County School District in Hancock, Michigan, believed the VTA was a new form of education, “a type of education that isn’t just memorize-and-regurgitate, but is imaginative.” It was, in the mind of VTA volunteer Helma Aponte Santos, a “total education.”⁴¹

The 1970s witnessed a boom in new programs defined as “study service” or “service learning” that connected community development work with traditional academics. By the mid-1970s, over 186 American colleges and universities supported some type of service learning on their campuses. Outside the United States, other countries implemented similar study service programs, including the National Office for Volunteer Service in Chile, *Acción Comunal* in Colombia, and Ethiopia University Service (EUS). The EUS program, for example, required Ethiopian university students to work for one year in rural areas with the goal of making the students “more conscious of the home problems” and their education “more meaningful.” American service learning programs also tended to place more emphasis on the educational value of the experience rather than how or in what way student work in the community would address problems of inequality. While these programs made young people aware of poverty at home and abroad, the tendency to focus on individual education and professional development limited

41. Experiment in International Living: Approach to Training, box 3, Records Relating to the Volunteers to America Program, 1967-1971, RG 490, USNA; Benjamin H. Pearce, “Volunteers to America,” *American Education* 1968; Experiment in International Living, VTA Training Syllabus, box 3, Records Relating to the Volunteers to America, 1967-1971, RG 490, USNA; Excerpts from Letters on Volunteers to America, Neil Boyer Private Collection; VTA “Tell It Like It Is,” box 9, Records Relating to the Volunteers to America Program, 1967-1971, RG 490, USNA.

young people's actions to what ultimately became temporary charity and philanthropic work in the community.⁴²

In his 1966 article on the "reverse Peace Corps," the social commentator Thomas E. Quigley noted that Americans "love the foreign student so long as he knows his place, which is that of a grateful beneficiary of [America's] largess." But, when the student "engages in campus politics or criticizes American policy or pokes around in the open wounds of our [American] society," he is practicing "universalism on a scale that the average American doesn't appreciate." Quigley's article was prophetic. The VTA embodied a "universalism" that many Americans—and particularly many American congressmen and women—did not appreciate. During the 1969 congressional debate, Congresswoman Julia Hansen summarized what many volunteers had experienced. "If you bring any Peace Corps member in reverse into the United States to look at the Indian reservation," she told the House Foreign Affairs Committee, they will go home and say, "let the United States tend to her own business . . . and provide the money for adequately financing solutions for their own problems before they come abroad and tell us how to clean up our underdeveloped nations." Or, as Congressman Hays explained, the United States had "enough anarchists" in the field of social work, "without bringing in any foreign ones." Even VTA Director Neil Boyer admitted that the VTA made American politicians uncomfortable. Quoting an inside observer at the congressional debates, Boyer wrote that Congress did not "like the prospect of being on the receiving end of foreign aid." With a small amendment tacked onto Peace Corps legislation, Congress ended the VTA program in 1971. The VTA shows that policymakers were not ready to reconsider how Americans dealt with problems of race and poverty within as well as beyond the borders of the United States.⁴³

42. ACTION, National Student Volunteer Program, "Directory of College Student Volunteer Programs, Academic Year 1972-1973" (Washington D.C., 1973); Andrew Quarmby and Diana Fussell, "The Ethiopian University Service" (Washington, DC: International Secretariat for Volunteer Service, 1969), 2.

43. "The Exchange Peace Corps," *America*, June 11, 1966; Reverse Peace Corps Congressional Debate, May 27, 1969, box 2, Records Relating to the Volunteers to America Program, 1967-1971, RG 490, USNA; "Death by Congressional Fiat," November 1969, Neil Boyer Private Collection; U.S. Congress, Senate, House Foreign Affairs Committee, *Peace Corps Amendments of 1969*, 91st Congress, 1st Sess., 13.