Volunteering as Othering: Understanding a Paradox of Social Distance, Obligation, and Reciprocity

Neriko Musha Doerr

This article challenges the notion of border crossing through volunteer work, arguing that recent literature on volunteer/service learning tend to assume that difference between volunteers and the community they work in is a given. Based on interviews of volunteers in a college alternative spring break trip in March 2013, this article shows that such difference is socially constructed through the naming of certain work, but not others, as volunteer work. The common interview answer was that volunteer work is something done for people distant from oneself—when one helps family or friends, it is not called volunteer work. Focusing and closely analyzing interviews of three volunteers, this article argues that calling certain work volunteer work is an act of othering the people one is helping as strangers. Advocating acknowledgment of this aspect of labeling volunteer work and seeing the benefit of the work not in border crossing but in re-imagining connections with various individuals, this article discusses ways to overcome the othering aspect of volunteering.

I think my high [moment in this volunteering experience] was the chance to meet . . . the house owner. . . . To see for whom we are doing it for and to see how things are changing . . . It made the whole experience more real because we got to talk to them and see what their experience was like going through Katrina.

—A student's comment at the debriefing meeting with the NPO leader

During a week of working with a nonprofit organization (NPO) that helps rebuild houses damaged by Hurricane Katrina, many in our group mentioned how wonderful it was to

see and talk to the owners and neighbors of the homes we were working to rebuild. It was March 2013, and our group of 10 — eight students and two chaperones from a college in the northeastern United States — was on an alternative spring break trip. Some mentioned that getting to know the owners put a human face on our work, making it more meaningful and "real," as the epigraph above suggests. This led me to ask a question: What if we had known the owner very well, as a family member or friend? It would feel unusual to call helping to rebuild a relative's or friend's house "volunteer work," which made me curious about the relationship between what is considered volunteer work and the degree of social proximity between the individuals involved. After returning from the trip, I posed this question to the group, whose members all participated in my ethnographic fieldwork. Their answers revealed that what is called volunteer work is done for people with low social proximity to the volunteer. Having analyzed these answers, I will argue in this article that calling work "volunteer work" is an act of *othering* those for whom the work is done. This implies a paradox, if volunteering is meant to bridge a gap between different groups (Chesler, Galura, Ford, & Charbeneau, 2006); therefore, I will also explore ways to bypass this othering effect.

This article examines the construction of social relations by asking why, of the many acts done without monetary compensation, some are considered volunteer work while others are not. What does the distinction say about the nature of volunteer work? What vision of society does it encourage? And how does understanding these questions allow the creation of communities of mutual help[i] while avoiding the hierarchy between workers and beneficiaries of the work that is a pitfall of "volunteer" work (Nenga, 2011; Sin, 2009)?

Discussions on volunteer/service[ii] work tend to assume that "difference" already exists between those providing the work and the community in which they work. For example, this clear-cut social border is presumed in the recent focus on social border-crossing, which celebrates assumed White, middle-class students getting to know, and thus developing understanding about and empathy for, people from lower-class minority communities[iii] as an important benefit for students in service-learning (Chesler et al., 2006; Hayes & Cuban, 1997; Taylor, 2002). Studies of the commodification of volunteer work in "voluntourism" have critically analyzed the highlighted distinction between "voluntourists" and the communities they work in as a way of attracting customers (i.e., voluntourists), some aspects of which can inform the understanding of effects of volunteering in noncommercial contexts (Manzo, 2008; Munt, 1994; Sin, 2009). However, little existing research has discussed how that particular difference, out of myriad differences among individuals, was recognized to begin with. This article analyzes that process by drawing on works by Louis Althusser and Judith Butler that theorize construction of difference and anthropological theories on gift exchange. It focuses particularly on how *calling* an act "volunteer work" constructs difference between those who work and the communities in which they work.

Because such difference is usually viewed in hierarchical terms that position those with the ability or agency to change the situation (i.e., volunteers) over those with little agency, who are helpless (i.e., the community) (Sin 2009), the findings in this article suggest that even volunteer work that seeks to eradicate that hierarchy unwittingly reproduces it. Thus, the article suggests ways to avoid such reproduction.

In-depth interviews conducted with three members of an alternative break trip group (one chaperone and two students) are supplemented with the views of six others in the group, to analyze how the volunteers themselves called certain acts, but not others, volunteer work. It is worth noting that the view of volunteer work as something done for people distant from oneself may be specific to mainstream Americans (all the participants on this trip identified as White, Caucasian, or of European ancestry). A contrasting example is that of African Americans, who, as Evans et al. (2009) suggested, do not compartmentalize community service but instead consider it part of their daily communal life.

Nonetheless, this article advocates acknowledgment of this othering aspect of compartmentalized volunteer work by those involved as well as researchers because such acknowledgment can prompt a change. It thus calls for seeing the work not as volunteer work but as working together—cooperation and collaboration among those who are willing to work to make society a better place for everyone.

The article is part of larger ethnographic research on the production of difference through the construction of space, time, and subjectivities in various arenas of education, including experiential learning during alternative break and study abroad trips (Doerr, 2013; 2014; 2015). In what follows, I first discuss existing research on discourses of volunteer and service work that frames relations between the volunteer and the community, before explaining the theoretical frameworks upon which this work is based. After explaining data sources and methodology, I describe and analyze three interview cases and discuss ways to overcome the othering aspect of volunteering.

Volunteer–Recipient Relations and the Question of the Border

In studies of volunteering and service-learning, several discourses frame relationships between volunteers and the community in which they work. Researchers have extensively discussed discourses of charity as opposite those of citizenship.[iv] Though some view charity as an act of caring (Taylor, 2002), the discourse of charity is often seen as paternalistic, rooted in "the well-off doing service to the poor if and when they feel like it, and then only on their terms" (Morton, 1995, p. 25; also Barber, 1994; Illich, 1990). Here, the division between volunteers and those who receive the work is assumed.

The discourse of citizenship, which is gaining force as the main frame of volunteering and service-learning (Taylor, 2002), views such work as "a duty of free men and women whose freedom is itself wholly dependent on the assumption of political responsibilities" (Barber, 1994, p. 86) without which democracy cannot function (Rhoads & Neururer, 1998; Saltmarsh, 1996). Service-learning that involves civic engagement in line with the discourse of citizenship presumes difference between those doing the service work and those being served, for example in discussions of reciprocal respect for the other party's need. Challenging this binary of "server" and "served," Sue Ellen Henry and M. Lynn Breyfogle (2006) urged all stakeholders to figure out a solution together, echoing Harry Boyte's (2003) call for people to work together to solve a problem rather than one group "serving" the other, because the latter will maintain the status quo. Similarly, Joseph Kahne and Joel Westheimer (2003) argued for involving students in collective efforts to improve policies and institutions rather than developing individual character traits (e.g., compassion, kindness) and volunteerism. This approach tries to go beyond the binary, but it does not recognize that the very act of naming the effort "service work" constructs difference between the server and served (much as naming it "volunteer work" does).

The discourse of border crossing argues that volunteering and service-learning allow students to encounter individuals different from them, which pushes them to develop better understanding and empathy toward them (Chesler et al., 2006; Green, 2001; Hayes & Cuban, 1997; Rhoads & Neururer, 1998; Taylor, 2002). Here, a border is necessarily assumed between students who volunteer and the communities in which they work. Yet Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) notion of border crossing and Henry Giroux's (1992) border pedagogy, both with seminal influences on the discourse of border crossing, suggest borders are not foreordained but constructed. Andzaldúa (1987), who saw the border as a way to artificially set up a binary, instead favored cultivating hybrid qualities within individuals, and Giroux (1992, p. 28) described the border as a notion "forged in domination" that needs to be challenged and redefined. However, they did not consider that the framework of the discourse of border-crossing itself constructs a border by directing attention to difference rather than commonality between those who volunteer and the community.

The highlighting, though not the constructing, of contrast between volunteers and the communities in which they work has been discussed in the field of *voluntourism*— volunteering combined with tourism (Jakubiak, 2012). Although this research field is limited to a specific context of commodified volunteering, it is worth mentioning because some of its critiques apply also to noncommercial contexts.[v] For example, the criticism that both volunteers and hosts actively perform their respective identities as caring, responsible volunteers, and needy locals "poor enough" to attract voluntourists (Manzo, 2008; Munt, 1994; Sin, 2009), applies also in the situation where various communities compete for volunteers in noncommercial contexts. Nonetheless, it still does not touch upon the actual construction of difference that is not preordained but

rather constructed by the very act of labeling the work volunteer or service work. I draw on Louis Althusser's (1971) and Judith Butler's (1993) analytical frameworks to analyze this construction of difference.

Analyzing Constructions of Difference

Althusser (1971) argued that ideology works by interpellating or positioning individuals as subjects within systems of categories. People experience the world through categories, and these categories structure their practices. In turn, individuals' behavior and language articulate perceived differences in people, thereby materializing ideology (Althusser, 1971; Hall, 1985). For example, the ideology of nation-state categorizes individuals according to nationality. It also positions those who were born to parents of different nationalities or have lived in several countries ambiguously, sometimes delegitimizing their claim to one nationality. Unlike Althusser, though, I do not regard individuals as *always already* subjects or deem them inescapably interpellated. Subjects are constituted by contradictory interpellations throughout their lives (resulting in a multiplicity of subject positions within one subject), and a single discourse can interpellate individuals with diverse histories differently (Smith, 1988). Butler (1993) suggested the notions of *performativity* and *citationality* to further develop this framework. She used the notion of performativity "not as the act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names, but rather, as that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains" (1993, p. 2). Her concept of citationality implied that certain systems (she called them "matrices") of difference, by being cited as the norm, become naturalized and materialized as meaningful sets of categories by which to classify people.

Althusser's framework indicates that categories of individuals, such as "volunteers" or "friends," are not predetermined but result from individuals' interpellation into these categories. Butler's framework supports the argument that interpellating someone as a volunteer instead of friend is an act of performatively citing volunteer–volunteered as a meaningful way to frame the relationship of those involved. Whereas Butler's citationality focuses on cases when categories (and thus the system or matrix of difference they are part of) are used, that is, cited as meaningful, this article focuses on the emergence of "difference," arguing that *labeling* an act volunteer work, rather than a family obligation or the duty of a good neighbor, performatively constructs a difference, or border, between the two parties involved.

Research Methods

This article examines the ways three individuals participating in a college alternative break trip talked about volunteering, as related to how others within the group talked

about it. The ethnographic work consisted of participant observation and interviews, allowing for holistic, multidimensional, in-depth qualitative analysis. Participant observation focused on actions and utterances situated in particular contexts, while interviews produced utterances in controlled settings allowing in-depth exploration of particular topics and comparison to others' views (Levy & Hollan, 1998).

The alternative break trip was offered by Cape College (all names are aliases), a public liberal arts college. A total of 10 participants visited New Orleans March 16-24, 2013, to work for an NPO that helps rebuild houses damaged by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The group included eight college students (Janet, Bisera, Dena, Cathy, Paul, Irene, Tina, and Andrea, one of whom had worked with the NPO before and organized the trip) and two chaperones (Will and myself), all of who participated in the work in the same way. The student trip leader selected trip participants from a pool of student applicants, and the two chaperones and the assistant director of the Cape College Community Center approved the selection. The three interviewees whose utterances are analyzed were chosen because they discussed the topic in greater detail than others did. At times the three main informants' views are supplemented with those of the other students.

I carried out research in three stages. Before the trip, I conducted interviews lasting approximately 15 minutes each with all participants, in which they related their backgrounds, expectations about the trip, and future plans. I also collected data as a participant observer during three pre-trip and one post-trip meetings. Throughout the trip, I audio-recorded some debriefing sessions and interviews lasting 20-30 minutes each about what participants felt they were learning, what they liked and disliked, and their views on various incidents during the trip. After the trip, in interviews lasting 30-60 minutes, I asked all participants about their experiences, as well as questions about what activities they considered volunteering. All interviews and meetings were recorded with permission.

To understand how the participants defined volunteer work, I asked them what acts they did and did not consider volunteering, following the structural linguistics (Saussure, 1916/1959) tenet that a word's meaning is constituted in relation to something with which it is contrasted. This approach can reveal important assumptions that are not explicitly recognized as part of the conceptualization of the given notion. Critics of structural linguistics who hold that an utterance's meaning is constituted at the moment of utterance in the given concrete context (Volosinov, 1973) would describe the result as a contextually changing meaning of volunteering. The semi-structured interview questions were derived from my reactions to a statement I noticed during participant observation, mentioned in the epigraph—that getting to know the homeowners was meaningful. I then identified and analyzed common themes in the interview results regarding what is and is not considered volunteering.

Interviewees

Three participants—Will, Janet, and Bisera—are the focus of this article. Will, a chaperone trip leader, worked at Cape College in the Residence Life Department. A Cape College alumnus, he was in his mid-20s at the time of the trip and identified himself as White. He had prior experience: while in college, he had taken two 2-week summer service trips to the Dominican Republic to do manual labor and teach children. He had also served one year in the National Civilian Community Corps of AmeriCorps, building and renovating houses, and working at centers for underprivileged children and assisted living. Further, the previous year he had been a trip leader on another Cape College alternative break trip to help build housing for those in need. His elaborate answers showed that he had put much thought into the topic.

Janet, a junior nursing student, identified herself as "Irish, Italian, German, Dutch, and Swiss." She explained in her pre-trip interview that she had decided to go on this alternative break trip because a past service trip in high school with a church group to the Dominican Republic had changed her life. Feeling she had grown up "in a bubble," she wanted this trip to New Orleans to open her eyes to a place outside her hometown, and wished also to learn about New Orleans culture. Janet was the community service chair in her sorority and had worked in nursing homes, schools in poor areas, and a home makeover project, she said. She wanted to become an emergency room nurse in the future.

Bisera was a senior majoring in psychology at the time of the trip. She identified herself as "Caucasian." Twice before she had gone on alternative break trips to help (re)build houses. The New Orleans trip interested her because it combined two of her interests— environmental issues and the social issue of inequality—indicating that she regarded the suffering of the people there as due to both global climate change and the unequal distribution of wealth reflected in the speed of rebuilding. Bisera had also completed a two-semester internship assisting refugees from Sudan. She planned to attend graduate school.

Construction of Answers in the Interview Process

Fieldwork is interactive and collaborative. Instead of digging out what interviewees already know, it tries to arrive at ideas dialogically through the process of interviewing (Clifford, 1986). For example, the answer to what constitutes volunteering developed and took shape during the interviews. For example, Will reflected:

> It [the interview process] helps me think about it [what is volunteering] a lot more . . . sometimes I talk in big circles . . . where I'll say something and I come back to it again and come back to it again and it might be different by the third time I come back to it 'cause my brain is still trying to figure it out.

Likewise, Janet said: "I'm discovering my own definition of this as we go along. 'Cause I never sat and thought about it before." She often responded hesitantly, sometimes saying first that she did not know the answer but then producing an elaborate response. Bisera too mentioned that being interviewed allowed her to be "contemplative about the trip more. I in general try to be, but with an interview, it contributes more." She was sure about her initial definition of volunteer work, but became less sure when asked about types of work she does for friends and family. Will, Janet, Bisera, and the director and assistant director of the Community Center read a draft of this article and provided feedback, all of which was supportive of the analysis.

My positionality as a professor may have affected the interview process by putting pressure on interviewees to display knowledge more than when other students interviewed them. However, my position was less pronounced than in the classroom context (e.g., students called me by my first name, an uncommon practice in the classroom context) for two probable reasons: I was not grading their performance; and throughout the trip I participated in everything and was treated the same as others by the NPO members.

What Is Volunteering?

The understanding of what constitutes volunteering evolved throughout the interview, as mentioned. Here, I introduce Will's, Janet's, and Bisera's initial definitions, supplemented by those of others. Then I describe how they revised their definitions as I asked whether or not they considered various concrete examples of work volunteering. After pointing out tensions in their answers, I discuss how their answers suggest "volunteering as othering."

Initial Definitions of Volunteering

When defining volunteering, Will initially mentioned two components: (a) helping others, and (b) not expecting payback: "just giving your time up to help others without expecting any kind of . . . payback." He then rethought his answer: "The payback part might not be necessary for it. . . . But if you are doing it and expecting payment, it's generally not volunteering." All others on the trip expressed a similar idea: "giving your time in order to help. . . . Don't do it for money" (Paul); "giving your time. . . . You don't get anything back from it necessarily" (Irene); "something for someone who cannot repay you" (Tina); "a selfless act to help someone else" (Dena); and "helping people without wanting anything in return" (Andrea).

Janet's initial definition of volunteering was threefold: (a) helping those in need, (b) doing it voluntarily, and (c) doing it for those outside one's own group. Defining volunteering as "dedicating your time to something that needs you," (a) Janet's focus on

the condition of the helped implied a hierarchical relationship between those in need and those not in need (who thus can help the needy) (see Sin, 2009). Defining volunteering also as "doing it because you wanted to," (b) she explained that helping others while complaining about is not volunteering: "It has to be something that you are passionate about." She did not mention, however, what creates such passion—civic responsibility, a sense of charity, common humanity, or something else. For Janet, volunteering also involved the volunteer's distance from the work, (c) "dedicating your time to something outside of where you are." She cited "outside Cape College" as an example, adding that her work helped people "less fortunate than I am." Along with the first part of the definition, this suggests Janet views herself, as well as Cape College students, as privileged. The picture implied here is a group of college students leaving their privileged life to help less fortunate others.

Bisera's initial definition of volunteer work focused on the bigger picture: "having . . . a societal issue . . . which you think is causing a lot of inequality in the society and . . . you just put in some work . . . trying to help." Further, Bisera suggested, people have an obligation to correct societal inequality, which she found artificial and unfair:

> I think we should all volunteer 'cause it's, especially those of us who are so . . . almost everyone who goes to this college is wealthy, even if they come from the [financial aid] program . . . we have almost an obligation to help 'cause . . . our society is too unequal. And I think we have to help 'cause it's just not fair. It's artificial, the way how some people have so little and most of us have too much.

Here, she suggests that everyone, especially wealthy college students, has an obligation to help—not because they can afford to and the helped cannot help themselves, as critics claim (Sin, 2009), but because society has an obligation to diminish unequal distribution of wealth. This idea resonates with John Dewey's vision of democratic society (Saltmarsh, 1996), which Benjamin Barber (1994) took up to argue that social service is a duty of citizens in a democratic society, as mentioned above.

In sum, Will, like the rest of the group, emphasized absence of payback as the defining quality of volunteer work; whereas Janet stressed the condition of the helped, the worker's desire to help, and social distance between the worker and the helped. Here Will focused on selflessness, while Janet focused on the desire to help. In contrast to this focus on individuals helping other individuals, Bisera directed attention to the societal level, suggesting that helping to reduce inequality is everyone's obligation.

What Is Not Volunteering, and Evolving Definitions of Volunteering
To solicit in-depth discussion of what volunteer work is, I asked specific questions regarding whether or not the participants considered the following activities volunteer work: helping out with meals for our own group during the trip; helping family and

friends; helping neighbors; and helping Beth, the owner of the house we helped rebuild in New Orleans. In response to this question, they developed their definitions of volunteer work further and uncovered some of the assumptions determining the meaning of a word in relation to what it is not (Saussure, 1916/1959).

Helping out with the group: Will, Janet, and Bisera all said that helping out with our own meals was not volunteer work, but they gave different reasons. Viewing the meal itself as an indirect "repayment," Will saw the dishwashing he had done not as volunteer work but as "working together." This suggests a potential relationship model that differs from volunteering. This conversation led him to revise his definition of volunteer work by adding the notions of not having a stake in the work and, following from that, the idea of social distance between the worker and the helped.

> I guess if you don't have a stake in what you are volunteering to help with, maybe that also helps it be good volunteering. . . . So, [it is volunteering] if you are helping *something not related* to you [emphasis added], like these houses [we helped rebuild]. . . . Building up your own house is a lot different from building up someone else's house. Especially in a community that you don't live in.

To the same question, Janet hesitated, laughed a little, and stated: "I wouldn't say [helping to cook our meals is] volunteering because the other people on that trip were all capable of doing it, too. [But] these people [whose houses we helped rebuild] aren't really capable of building their own houses." Then she qualified her answer, adding that in fact they could do it on their own, but with much greater difficulty than many people doing it together. Bisera said her grocery shopping contribution to our meals was not volunteer work, but she was unsure what to call it because, like volunteer work, it was done without payment. Subsequently she called it "cooperation" and "collaboration," which can offer a potential alternative model for volunteer work.

In short, their various reasons not to view helping with our own meals as volunteer work led them to contrast volunteer work to work done by people with a stake in its result (Will) and to cooperation or collaboration (Bisera), but also reinforced the original definition of helping those in need (i.e., helping people who are able to help themselves is not volunteer work) (Janet).

Family: As to whether helping one's family members would be considered volunteering, Will responded: "You *are* volunteering your time, but if you were to compare it to a scenario where it's *someone you don't know*, I feel like that would be a different version of volunteering. You know, 'cause you are helping *your own* [emphases added]." Elsewhere he had also explained: "If I was trying to say like 'this is volunteer work and I'm helping my parents out,' they [his parents] might roll their eyes a little bit. It's like chores. You wouldn't look at chores as a kid as volunteer work. . . . You're expected to do it to

help the house function." Here, the notion of social distance from someone you do not know versus your own came to the fore in the definition of volunteer work. Also, when contrasted to the case of family chores one is "expected to do to help the house function," volunteer work suggests that one is not expected to do that kind of work or is not part of the group responsible for that work. In other words, one does chores as an insider and volunteer work as an outsider.

Janet said she would not view helping family members as volunteering because "I would be expected to do it because that's my family member." She described a family member as "somebody whom I love and I care about and who I'm sure has been there for me in the past." These responses suggest not only love but also obligation based on the unwritten law of reciprocity. Her family members would be upset if she called helping them volunteering, she said, because they would help her if she needed help. She connected this observation to the voluntariness that formed part of her initial definition of volunteer work: "Volunteering I think is doing something that you don't necessarily need to do but you want to do it." The contrast here is obligation (to family, for whom work is not volunteering) versus choice (to work for people you do not have to help, i.e., volunteering).

Bisera differentiated friends and family from her concern to improve society:

> I would never ask friends or family for money for work I do for them. But I don't consider it volunteering . . . 'cause they are friends or people [who] are really close to me who I really care about . . . I just don't know . . . why I don't consider it volunteering.

She then revised her definition of volunteer work: "Volunteering then for me is you help people or help strangers. This should be included in the definition, I guess."

In short, none of the three considered helping family volunteer work, but for differing reasons. Whereas Will viewed helping family as done for your own, involving a stake in the outcome, and expected, Janet viewed it as an obligation based on reciprocity. Bisera saw her caring about family and friends as the reason to help them. Some other interviewees' answers resembled Janet's: they would help family members out of a sense of reciprocity and obligation: "He [my brother] does something for me, so I'd go out to do things for him. Obligation" (Paul); "family, expected and don't think twice" (Dena); "feeling of obligation with your family. . . . If I don't help family members, they're gonna be like 'you didn't help me!'" (Tina).

Thus, they defined volunteer work as helping someone you don't know (Will and Bisera) or do not have to help (Janet). Others' definitions resonated with this view that volunteer work helps strangers: "It is easier to see it as volunteering if [the person you help is]

separate [from you]" (Dena); "Volunteering is helping someone that you don't know" (Paul). One exception was Andrea, who viewed volunteer work as helping anyone.

Neighbors: In terms of distance from oneself, neighbors differ from family members but are not quite strangers. Will's, Janet's, and Bisera's responses further refined their definitions of volunteer work. Will said it was a matter of "degree of separation." Compared to family, he said, a neighbor is "one more . . . degree of separation from yourself." Janet said it depended on the situation: "If it was something that they really desperately needed me to help them with, because of the bad situation that they were in, I would think that it would be volunteering my time." She gave the real-life example of Hurricane Sandy ripping their house to pieces. However, "if my neighbor was just fixing up their room in the house and asked me help them paint . . . I wouldn't view that as volunteering." This situation-focused view of volunteering is important because in it, the hierarchy between volunteers (as doers who can work change) and the beneficiaries of volunteering (as helpless, needy people incapable of taking care of themselves) is temporary (Sin, 2009). Bisera said she regarded helping neighbors as volunteer work.

Beth: When asked whether our work could still be called volunteer work if we had become friends with Beth (the owner of the house we helped rebuild in New Orleans), Will, Janet, and Bisera all answered yes, indicating that the initial relationship mattered. Had she been friends with Beth already, Janet said, helping her rebuild her house would not have been considered volunteer work. That is, because Janet's work had started with the assumption of social distance from Beth, the work's volunteer nature and the social distance remained the same.

Will, however, suggested that whereas social distance may remain, getting to know people can increase one's willingness to help them. Regarding our exploration of the city of New Orleans in our free time, Will said:

> That was awesome. 'Cause you got to see the culture of the area that you are helping out, you can get more connected to it. I think the more connected you are to something . . . the more you understand something, the more you are willing to help it . . . the family, you are normally very connected to and your friends also.

This "strangers we know" model resonates with the border-crossing model in which one gets to know the community one works in and feels motivated to work hard, but does not connect at the more fundamental level of the us–them binary, viewing the work as volunteer work and keeping a distance from the community.

Tension between Selflessness and Helpfulness

Though Will, Janet, and Bisera all acknowledged that volunteering helps those who are socially distant from oneself, some tension remained regarding how that distance affects the value of the work. Will explained that the more selfless the work is, the more it qualifies as volunteer work, but the level of a worker's selflessness does not affect the value of the work in terms of helpfulness:

> Philosophically you can argue . . . humans are all . . . in the same boat, so you are helping your own so to speak. It's just that I think the degree of separation kind of comes into play when you see how selfless you are with volunteering.

This tension remained throughout his theorization. On the one hand, he said: "Helping yourself versus helping others. I guess that's the baseline for volunteering. . . . As soon as I separated it from myself, you can consider that like a low level to high-level volunteering." He named the Peace Corps as an example of "really high-level volunteering;" followed by AmeriCorps, which remains domestic; then work in "your local habitat," that is, in proximity to "your own town;" and finally work for "local friends, family . . . and then yourself." Nonetheless, he hedged by saying that this spectrum is not a hierarchy valuing one type more than another, "because I feel like as long as you are doing that good work, you are doing that good work."

Also, when I asked whether a greater degree of separation in volunteering makes one a better person than someone who is helping his or her "own," Will said no, stating that "the only thing that matters is that you are helping people out." He compared himself, helping out at a campground in Arkansas, with the local people working alongside him: the latter had a greater stake in it, as they would use the campground more than Will would, but "at the same time at the end of the day we are all doing the same amount of good." When asked how much having a stake in it mattered, he replied, "A little bit," because having a stake in work being done is like "helping yourself out." Then, however, he reiterated that he did not "put one volunteer over the other, cause it's all good [work]." He also repeated the same point several times: "The bottom line is that people should help . . . just helping out is the important thing. You don't have to go to another country to be like the best volunteer." He also mentioned: "If you are saving somebody's life, I don't think they're gonna be too upset what you are calling it."

Volunteering as Othering

Despite their different takes on volunteer work, Will, Janet, and Bisera shared one belief: volunteering is helping strangers. Nobody called helping family members volunteering. This aspect of the notion of volunteering is often hidden, however.

Will's definition evolved throughout the interview. His initial definition of volunteer work was (a) helping others, and (b) not expecting payback. The latter eventually included the notion of not having a stake in the final result. Finally, Will described volunteering as working for something unconnected to oneself; to do work otherwise is to "help yourself out." His thesis was that the degree of separation from oneself relates directly to the degree to which work is considered volunteering. So for Will, helping someone via volunteer work defines that someone as "other" to oneself.

Janet initially defined volunteer work as having three aspects: It is done (a) to help those in need, (b) because one wants to do it, and (c) for those outside one's own group, often less privileged people. The third aspect recognizes social distance between the volunteer and the helped, but Janet highlighted social distance as central to volunteer work when she divided the recipients of her help into socially close people whom she is *obliged* to help (i.e., family members) out of reciprocity; and socially distant, less privileged people whom she *wants* to help. For Janet, helping the former is not volunteer work, but helping the latter is. It is worth noting that Janet said volunteer work was doing "a good thing" but did not laud helping family members—an obligation—as "a good thing."

Though Bisera viewed members of society as interconnected and responsible for each other, social proximity still mattered to her. She did not see helping her friends and family as volunteering because they were close to her and she cared about them. Upon recognizing this, she made helping "strangers" an explicit part of her definition of volunteering.

The foregoing indicates that calling a particular act of helping volunteer work is a performative act of interpellating those who are helped as "other," differentiating and distancing them by citing (Butler, 1993) an us–them distinction, and thus a border. The border between the volunteer and the helped, then, is not preexisting, as literature on volunteering and service-learning tends to suggest, but constructed. Volunteering is othering.

Gift Exchange and Social Distance in Volunteering as Othering

Anthropologists' discussions of gift exchange can explicate the social meaning of volunteering as othering suggested in these interviews. In his classic work *The Gift*, Marcel Mauss (1950/1990, p. 13) argued that exchanging gifts—food, women, children, labor, and so on—is about social bonds: "To refuse to give . . . just as to refuse to accept, is tantamount to declaring war; it is to reject the bond of alliance and commonality." Christopher Gregory (1982) maintained that the act of gift giving establishes a relationship by placing the recipient in the position of a debtor obliged to reciprocate in the near future. Marshall Sahlins (1974/2004) categorized reciprocity[vi] into "generalized," "balanced," and "negative" types connected to kinship distance: the closer the kinship,

the more social relations are prioritized over material flow, permitting postponement of reciprocation.

What Will, Janet, and Bisera described suggests that helping family and friends—those close to you—is an exchange practice that builds social bonds. The "stake" (Will), "obligation" (Janet), and "caring" (Bisera) implied in helping family members are all elements that reinforce the social relationship between the helper and those being helped. By contrast, they position volunteer work outside the giving-as-relationship-building dynamics because its doers do not expect "payback." Thus they interpellate those who are helped as "others" outside the loop of social relations that the act of giving is supposed to establish.

Alternatively, volunteer work done without expectation of payback can be seen as positioning the helped as a "forever-debtor" in a symbolically lower position (also see Freire, 1970). This hierarchy differs from the paternalistic hierarchy that ranks the volunteer and the helped according to the former's perceived ability to make changes and the latter's perceived inability to do so (Sin, 2009).

As Will, Janet, and Bisera saw it, however, volunteering did not necessarily position those who are helped beneath the volunteers. Will's example of helping at a campground evokes an image of all individuals working equally side by side, the only difference being the size of one's stake in the work's outcome, which determines whether one is doing volunteer work or helping oneself. Janet viewed volunteer work as wanting to help those in need. Her example of the neighbor, however, implied that the hierarchy between those who can help and those who need help is temporal. For Bisera, volunteer work was about correcting social inequality so as to end hierarchy, viewing the situation at the structural level rather than individual level, as in the discourse of charity.

Implications and Suggestions

Framing an act as volunteering or service constitutes otherness of the community benefiting from that work. This understanding allows researchers to situate volunteer or service work in wider social processes beyond its implications for social change. For example, this article adds a new dimension—a focus on the construction of social relations—to calls by Boyte (2003) and Kahne and Westheimer (2003) to view service work as working together for structural and institutional change.

This article also reveals the assumptions and risks in existing views of volunteering. The research and discourses that presume a border between the volunteer and the volunteered, for example, unwittingly reinscribe that very border, perpetuating class and sometimes race hierarchy. Shifting the focus from identifying what volunteers learn from crossing the border to analyzing and reimagining the connection between the

individuals involved could permit more meaningful relationships to develop between the them.

Detailed analysis of the interviews showed that volunteering as othering does not mean the involved parties' total alienation from each other. Will, Janet, and Bisera used their complex, sometimes tension-laden understanding of what does and does not constitute volunteering to offer various visions of society, performatively citing them (Butler, 1993). Will implied a vision of a society whose members help strangers whom they should get to know to improve motivation but who remain strangers nonetheless. This resonates with the discourse of border crossing, which encourages crossing the border while reinforcing the border. Janet envisioned society as divided into those whom people are obliged to help (socially close) and those they desire to help (socially distant); here, that desire is what bridges the gap between the two. Bisera saw members of the same society as connected by an obligation to help each other, although people helped by volunteer work are marked as strangers. In this model, volunteering simultaneously connects and distances people. In these visions of society, one relates to strangers to motivate oneself to help them more (Will), to do a good deed (Janet), and to fulfill one's obligation toward them in an unequal society (Bisera), all the while keeping the divide intact by calling the work done for them "volunteering."

Meanwhile, their perceptions of the trip group's meal preparation provide models of volunteering that can overcome divisions in society and relationships without paternalism or hierarchy. Will described the work involved not as volunteering but as "working together," alluding to a sense of solidarity between those who cooked and those who ate the food as members of the same group. Bisera called it cooperation and collaboration, suggesting equal individuals working together. If Janet's vision were modified to regard working to assist members of society who are temporarily in need as an obligation one fulfills in times of need, as in a family (i.e., different from the discourse of citizenship, which preserves the hierarchy of groups via the notion of service), it could also provide a useful model. Citing these notions (Butler, 1993), rather than those of volunteering or service, can help both parties—those providing the work and the communities benefiting from the work—imagine, visualize, and materialize their relationship as one between members of a single community who are connected on more equal terms. Such new interpellations and citations may allow development of a society free of othering, where individuals work together in partnership.

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[i] Throughout this article I have used the term *help* (unless the work itself is already framed as volunteer work) to avoid using the term *volunteer*, as the effect of using this term is the article's topic. I chose "help" because it is a word used often by the interviewees. Thus it should appear within quotation marks, rather than as a descriptive term for relationships between those providing work (active agents who can afford to help others) and those benefiting from the work (passive, helpless victims without agency) (Sin, 2009). Presenting this usage as normative contradicts this article's aim to avoid reproducing such hierarchical relationships; however, I have omitted quotation marks henceforth for the sake of readability. Also, when discussing relationships between those doing the work and those receiving the work, the former can be described as working *for* the latter (implying separation of the two groups as well as paternalism of the former toward the latter) or working *with* the latter (implying collaboration of equal parties) (Freire, 1970). In this article, unless the context specifies equal relationships between the parties involved, I have used the expression "work for" because the interviewees commonly used it.

[ii] Though the terms *volunteer* and *service* carry different connotations (e.g., the latter implies more civic duty than the former), the research participants used them interchangeably. For the sake of readability, this article mainly uses the term volunteer. The literature I cite, however, includes works that use either term, partly because the distinction is often ignored and partly because research on both volunteer work and service work deals with the issue of border crossing in a similar manner. In these cases, I follow the author's terminology.

[iii] Elsewhere I have critiqued this assumption, which is itself problematic (author under review; also see Coles, 1999).

[iv] Others, as detailed by Keith Morton (1995), suggest that three paradigms of volunteering/service—charity, project development, and social change—can complement one another when upheld with integrity grounded in coherent values. Each of the paradigms is "based upon distinctive worldviews, ways of identifying and addressing problems, and long-term visions of individual and community transformation" (Morton, 1995, p. 21).

[v] An alternative break trip engages a group of college students "in direct service, typically for a week" after learning about social issues (http://www.alternativebreaks.org/learn/lexicon/). This service differs from service-learning in that it is shorter-term and not part of a class involving graded learning activities. The trip's noncommercial nature distinguishes it from voluntourism, but the two look similar in contrast to longer-term volunteer projects such as AmeriCorps, whose participants are more skilled. Despite these differences, I argue, the common theme in volunteer and service work, voluntourism, and alternative break trips is that none of these activities apply to work done for friends or family members; instead, all involve people who are at some social distance.

vi Here the suggested notion of reciprocity is broader than the use of the notion in the context of service-learning, where the notion often applies to mutual interchange of benefits, resources, or actions between students carrying out service-learning and the community being served (Henry & Breyfogle, 2006). Dostilio et al. (2012) further categorize reciprocity into exchange-oriented (mutually beneficial interexchanges of resources and actions, which is the most common type), influence-oriented (projects in which participants mutually influence ways of knowing and doing), and generativity-oriented (projects in which participants become and/or produce something new together) types.