Volunteers on the Threshold:
Fragile Opportunities and Fractured Selves

by
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Abstract

In recent years, ‘Volunteer Tourism’ and experiential education have become popular ways to experience international development. Over 65,000 Canadians have volunteered on development projects that espouse a shared commitment to global poverty reduction and personal adventure. Hence, volunteer tourism has become a topic of extensive scholarly buzz. However, contrary to the literature’s static depiction of the volunteer tourist as apolitical, unknowing, and defined only by self-less or self-centered motivations, I found volunteer selves to be fluid, fractured, and fragile with their acts of care bordered by uncertainty. Centrally, this research considers the indeterminate and uncertain space where students and volunteers make and unmake their selves in order to find a sense of worth and belonging. By illuminating the socio-economic and discursive matrices that shape volunteer selves, this thesis suggests that volunteer lives, beyond their intentions, remain hidden and unnoticed—their unpaid labour exists on the cusp of visibility.

Keywords: Volunteer tourism and experiential education; international development; Canadian student un-belonging; relational selves; self-care and care-giving; citizenship and labour
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-For Kellie, caregiver and friend-
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Introduction & Literature Review: An Outlet to Care

Becoming Volunteers

In recent years, ‘Volunteer Tourism’ has become an increasingly popular mode of travel. This global industry, worth $173 billion dollars annually, unifies service, leisure and education as a novel approach to international development efforts. To date, over 65,000 Canadians have volunteered on these development projects that espouse a shared commitment to global poverty reduction and personal adventure (Kelly & Case 2007). Tourism and development scholars exploring this phenomenon appear to be sharply divided on the value of this industry and the volunteers who sustain it. While some proponents position volunteer tourism within a sustainable framework of giving and cross-cultural understanding, critics have outlined the one-directional accruement of benefits back to volunteers and not the communities they intend to help. Both sides of this debate implicate the volunteer by drawing almost exclusively on characteristic motivations for going abroad. That is, both allude to a volunteer self that is somewhat fixed and measurable.

In this thesis I move beyond a dichotomy of volunteer intentions by examining the volunteer self as multiple and in flux—that is, selves that are continuously made and unmade by socio-economic conditions, discourses, personal histories and relationships. In doing so, I challenge both sides of the debate in their conception of a one-dimensional and individualistic volunteer self. Their depiction of the static, unknowing and often apolitical volunteer self has not only altered how volunteers think about themselves; it has also inadvertently shaped the direction of the volunteer tourism and development industry. In this thesis, I explore the specific and diverse realities that shape volunteer selves, highlighting the intersections that span over the academic institution, the Canadian state and the international landscape. By complicating existing ideas about the volunteer self, we find that volunteers are so much more than an individual and
unchanging intention—their selves are both fractured and fragile, and their lives are bordered with uncertainty. Centrally, this thesis considers the indeterminate and uncertain space where students and volunteers make and unmake their selves in order to find a sense of worth and belonging. By illuminating the gaps and exceptions that shape volunteer selves, this thesis suggests that beyond motivations for going abroad, volunteer lives remain hidden and unnoticed. Instead, volunteers exist on the cusp of visibility.

The Volunteer Self

Advocates of volunteer tourism mobilize an image of the self-less humanitarian—the global citizen. This volunteer is epitomized by their self-sacrifice, moved by their sense of responsibility to those less fortunate beyond their borders. Critics have been quick to dismantle this ideal of altruistic humanitarianism, arguing that volunteer tourism is more often a self-centered endeavour of personal discovery and fulfillment. In her study of Canadian youth, Rebecca Tiessen (2012) found that most volunteers were testing a career choice or padding their résumé, concluding that self-betterment and not selflessness framed motivations for volunteering abroad. Some have suggested that while volunteer actions may be framed as both self-less and self-interested, ultimately the latter will overshadow even the best of volunteer intentions.

By interrogating these intentions and the perceived and realized benefits of volunteer tourism, these scholars address a long and deeply problematic history of development intervention in the so-called Global South. Their work contributes to an extensive body of literature debating the exploitative and neo-colonial practices implicit in international development efforts. This critical framework is valuable and necessary as it draws on historical and political nuances to tackle important questions of power, ethics, and governance concerning development. Kristin Lozanski’s (2010) work on independent travel and the liberal self reminds us of the colonial legacies that tie historical incursions into the developing world to our present. She highlights how this seemingly more benign form of travel emerges from, and is maintained through, the ongoing involvement of Western nations in the developing world. Although these travelers embrace hardship as a way to separate themselves from mass tourism, they
end up purchasing the very structural violence they had set out to overcome. While their intent may be to mediate some of the negative effects of mass tourism, the overarching goal for self-development through hardship cannot be disentangled from neo-colonial practices. This liberal self, she argues, is couched in the larger Western project of subject-making that celebrates diversity by obscuring the inequality it emerges from. Ultimately, even the best intentions are not enough. Critiques of international development, aid-work, and western non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the Global South follow a similar line of argument. Unintended effects of development projects, new relations of dependency, issues of access, and the protection of corporate interests over human rights are but some of the critical contributions to this expansive literature.

At the same time, these critiques of development intervention and privileged travel do not further our understanding of the volunteer self. Instead, both scholarly camps seem to take the “self” for granted. While this literature invokes the volunteer self, it fails to reveal how the self is complex, diverse, and fluid. For them ‘the volunteer’ is generic—an essential, albeit illusive traveler that we can all easily imagine. Volunteers are partitioned according to self-less acts of giving or selfish acts of personal development and career advancement. Through this classification, volunteer tourists are rendered as apolitical and passive as the development projects they take up. In light of these convictions, adherents of this massive global industry sought to rebrand volunteer tourism. The emergence and rapid growth of experiential education opportunities, global co-op placements and international internships is indicative of this shift away from more “traditional” forms of volunteer tourism. This marked discursive alteration has made the boundaries between alternative forms of unpaid labour and travel increasingly difficult to define. Rebecca Tiessen and Robert Huish (2014) document this changing terrain of volunteer tourism, observing how this morphing industry seems impervious to the mounting scholarly critiques against it. Less documented, however, are the attempts of volunteers to rebrand themselves as interns, practitioners, students, and researchers—anything but the apolitical, privileged, misinformed volunteer tourist. This led me to question how scholarly assumptions about the volunteer self might actually impact the identities and lived realities of volunteers. Perhaps a more fundamental question to ask is what do we really know about these volunteers and their lives?
Certainly, we know about some volunteer motivations for going abroad to work on development projects from previous studies. These intentions are usually segregated into saviour complexes on the one hand, and self-serving exercises on the other. We also know that many volunteers are young adults from the Global North with the privilege and power to freely travel, and that the majority of these volunteers are women (Heron 2007). We have extensive knowledge of the harm and exploitation implicated in development projects and aid-work, and that many volunteers attempt to mitigate these concerns by distancing themselves from traditional or mass forms of tourism operating in developing countries. But we do not know much about the specific and diverse socio-economic conditions shaping their intentions. Nor have we asked about their individual histories, relationships, or sense of personhood. How do volunteers understand their work abroad? How do they relate to or diverge from other volunteers doing similar work? How do they position their selves in relation to those they care for?

Structurally, we know that volunteers are often informed by institutional and discursive practices within the “development apparatus” (Ferguson 1994). To this end, some post-structural critiques have argued that development is a subject-less machine (Ferguson 1994, Escobar 1988). But as Margaret Everett (1997: 147) remarked, these scholars “have largely failed to reveal the agents of this repressive system.” How do these volunteers engage with, and actively reshape, these discourses? While the scholars that focus on individual intentions can be contrasted with those who highlight overarching structural conditions, they both discount volunteer perspectives as apolitical expressions of a static and homogenous subject. In an effort to shed light on the agents of development, the other “ghost in the machine” (Everett 1997), this project reversed the lens of inquiry frequently aimed at the beneficiaries of aid in the developing world onto the individual volunteers who venture abroad on development projects—who they are, how they change, and how they experience their unpaid labour.

Following Liisa Malkki’s (2015) exploration of humanitarian vulnerability and neediness, this research focused on the intimate needs, vulnerabilities and histories of those often touted as self-less actors of relative affluence in global relations. In her study of Finnish humanitarian aid workers, Malkki (2015) illuminates a marked neediness in humanitarians, and in doing so, she confronts the assertion that suffering and need
belong to the developing world. Mirroring her findings with humanitarian workers, I also observed that volunteers did not experience selflessness in an altruistic or sacrificial sense, but experienced, rather, a kind of self-loss or self-escape. In addition, I found that volunteers did not fit neatly within self-serving nor self-interested parameters of personal growth and achievement. Drawing on Malkki’s (2015) inquiry into the relation of self to self, this project traced the various and unexpected forms of the volunteer self that emerged from, and even within, in-depth interviews with volunteers and students. These volunteer selves were multiple and dynamic, porous and often contradictory. They hardly resembled, and often firmly rejected, any likening to the generic volunteer tourist painted in the literature. Most importantly, they were political selves changing from moment to moment, shaped and reshaped by the socio-economic conditions and relationships they found themselves in. As Joao Biehl (2007) reveals, individuals are never acting alone. Their decisions and actions are intertwined with others and the many techniques of governance surrounding them. Volunteers did express a deep desire for “an outlet to care” for others both near and far away. At the same time, these aspirations fulfilled a personal need to care for the self.

While Malkki’s (2015) work reimagines vulnerability in the humanitarian exchange, this project captures a different fragile reality in the Canadian context. I had expected that the world of poverty and suffering portrayed in tourism and development brochures would inform volunteer selves in significant ways, but surprisingly it was the university as a unique social world that was more important. Young students attending university enter a space where they are no longer free of responsibility, but at the same time, they are not yet considered full, productive members of society—they exist on the threshold of inclusion. This liminal space is both fruitful and fraught as students take up, and compete for, volunteer positions, unpaid internships and other forms of experiential education. In this space, there are few guarantees and fewer securities, but a world full of opportunities. While students are normally presented as the face of resilience, I found their need for self-worth emerged from these rather fragile possibilities, existing alongside an unrelenting quest to find purpose—one’s value to society and to others. In the spirit of a post-structuralist understanding of the self, I began to examine the volunteer beyond self-less or self-centered intent—that is, as fractured and multiple,
necessarily inter-subjective, and continually transformed by specific socio-economic conditions, relationships and personal histories.

Literature Review: A Window into the Self

Voluntourism: The “Dirty” Word

Recently, international development and tourism scholars have entered into a novel conversation as they consider the growing overlap between their distinct fields. The trade-off between socio-economic growth and exploitation is a key area of debate in this literature as researchers speculate on the long-term effects of development tourism. Some have argued that if ethical measures are taken to ensure sustainable practices and local ownership, development tourism has the potential to be an effective form of community-led development (Scheyvens 1999). Others have suggested that these idealized notions of sustainability and the grassroots obscure the destructive impact of development tourism in these communities. Frank Hutchins' (2007) work on tourism projects in Ecuador explores how the commodification of culture, nature and identity into preserved units amounts to a detrimental performance for the tourist gaze. In another ethnographic investigation of place, Gaston Gordillo (2014) draws our attention to the importance of geographical spaces in the production of meaning. Gordillo shows how the colonial ruins of missions, churches, and forts in the Argentine Chaco fulfill a romanticized version of the past for the Western gaze. For local communities in the Chaco, however, these ruins are intimately tied to the violence and destruction created by a long history of capitalist development and imperialist intervention.

These examinations of commodification, destruction and preservation have also been widely taken up in the literature on tourism and leisure. Critical tourism scholars argue that mass travel has indeed standardized culture into staged inauthentic performances for the ‘tourist gaze’ (Murtola 2014, Potter 2010, Mbaiwa 2011, Gladstone 2005, Butcher 2003, King & Stewart 1995). Privileged travelers consume a ‘real’ experience with what they take to be the ‘authentic Other’ as a way to escape their own alienation (Xie 2011, Haldrup & Larsen 2010, Cohen 1988). In this way, travelers seeking social status or self-affirmation purchase tourist “signifiers pointing to the
prospect of some contrived experience” (Gladstone 2005: 197, Munt 1994). For these scholars, tourism is a status marker and a form of social capital for those who can afford leisure after work (Bourdieu 1984). Through the “global cultural industry” of tourism (Haldrup & Larsen 2010: 14), history is either nostalgically rewritten or disappears entirely: “History is extruded from tales which have become cultural commodities” (Adorno 1991: 77). The search for authenticity is met with staged cultural performances, and in turn, the meaning of local rituals and practices is lost (Shepherd 2002). “Cultural value” is therefore converted to “commercial value” (Lanfant 1995) through the reproduction and consumption of tourist sites. To that end, tourism is presently understood as a “culturally constituted consumer good” (Gladstone 2005: 197). By extending Gordillo’s (2014) argument about the geographical ruins in Argentina to the tourist sites spreading throughout the developing world, we begin to see how preservation and commodification occur simultaneously (Davidov & Buscher 2014), obscuring the violence and destruction that is reinforced through these forms of development.

This vast and inter-disciplinary literature underscores the exploitative colonial legacies and self-affirming capitalist enterprises extended through tourism as a means to development. Adherents of volunteer tourism and other alternatives to mass tourism aim to subvert this longstanding asymmetry between the developed and developing world by claiming to move past the commodification and consumption of histories, places and lives (Lozanski 2010). But as Kate Simpson (2004: 686) notes, “doing development” through volunteer tourism continues to reproduce these divisions between North and South, and reifies the South as the “geography of need”—a geography without history or politics. Many scholars have thus concluded that despite volunteer intentions, volunteer tourism projects do more harm than good (Tiessen & Heron 2012, Coren & Gray 2012, Spencer 2010). While “voluntourism” was once touted as a benign and altruistic alternative to the consumer-driven “cultural industry” of tourism outlined above, it has been deemed yet another form of privileged social capital imbued with the legacies of racism, cultural commodification and failed development schemes.

In her study of race and gender in development encounters, Barbara Heron (2007:4) summarizes the voluntourism relationship: “what really counts and must be
preserved are our standards, our perspectives, our national fantasies, our imaginings of
the Other (…) our experiences ‘there.’” These desires have produced an image of the
self-affirming, apolitical volunteer self. Tiessen’s (2012, 2014) ongoing work in this area
addresses the motivations of young Canadian volunteers going abroad and the broader
implications of development tourism. Her most recent study sheds light on the morphing
voluntourism industry and the evolution of international experiential learning, including
service learning, study abroad programs and practicum placements. The formalization of
global learning opportunities beyond the classroom, she argues, positions the Global
South as an experimental laboratory for testing academic or career paths (Tiessen &
Huish 2014). Evidently, tourism and its countless facades are implicated in an
exploitative past that obscures a perilous present. The essentialized image of the
volunteer tourist has become the face of this reality, one motivated by self-interest but
concealed by selflessness. Steeped in a dark chronicle of development interventions in
the Global South, voluntourism has become a “dirty word” between academics and
volunteers alike. While it is not my intention to pass over this deeply problematic history
of tourism and development, the colonial narrative of the ‘authentic other’ came to matter
in a very different, unexpected way in my research. The other, it seemed was no longer
found abroad, but rather, was found at home. Students positioned themselves against
this potential other in their classrooms, while stressing the similarities between
themselves and those they encountered in the developing world. Similarly, the
volunteer’s desire for an authentic experience abroad revealed an equally profound
desire for authenticity at home—a need to be found of value. In others words, their
desire for an authentic experience was rooted in their desire to be considered authentic,
legitimate, and valuable by their peers and intimate networks back home. Although this
thesis explores the production of authenticity through experiential education and
volunteer tourism, these observations are from the perspective of participants. As a
contentious area, I employ authenticity not as an analytical category, but as a way to
highlight how volunteers and students understood what or who was authentic, legitimate,
and valuable. This led me to question the portrayal of the generic and unchanging
volunteer self so fervently critiqued by scholars and defamed by other volunteers. How
does this single frame of vision take the volunteer self for granted? More specifically,
how do these debates over selflessness and self-centeredness in volunteer work
obscure the multiple identities and lived realities of volunteers? In a world shaped by
global connection, mobility, and ever-changing forms of international experience, is it possible that these academic evaluations of the self-affirming tourist have inadvertently driven the very industry they denounce?

**International Development as Opportunity**

There is an ongoing debate in the sociology of development that interrogates the perceived value of development projects operating in countries found South of the equator. James Ferguson (1994) divides these scholars into two camps. First, there are the development sympathizers who believe first and foremost in a collective fight against global poverty and inequality, suggesting that through policy reform there is potential for beneficial progress. In the other camp, scholars present a radical critique of development efforts, arguing that development serves only to aid capitalist expansion and exploitation. These two approaches extend from historical divisions, which theorized that development was either an inevitable force of modernity or a capitalist program to ensure Global South dependency. Ferguson (1994) charges both camps with failing to go beyond this historical debate of development as an inherently good or bad thing. Neither side addresses how development is mobilized. Recent post-structuralist work on development, largely inspired by Foucault's analysis of power, emerges from this line of inquiry. This new wave of scholarly work has concluded that much like more benign forms of tourism, development projects, more often than not, only exacerbate existing structural inequalities. While they remain critical of the material conditions of international development, post-structuralist analyses emphasize the discursive and institutional conditions that allow this form of management and control to persist. Andrea Cornwall (2007) provides a detailed overview of some of the “buzzwords and fuzzwords” found in development discourse. She suggests that development’s buzzwords are powerful because they are both normative and ambiguous, and therefore “place the sanctity of its goals beyond reproach” (Cornwall 2007: 472). Words such as poverty circulate in the discourse for long periods of time because they carry moral weight and are thus difficult to find fault with. These “languages-of-power” (Anderson 1991:48) produce and reproduce asymmetrical representations of the world. Other words like community, participation, and sustainability came into vogue more recently (Cornwall 2007). The tourism industry has adopted many of these buzzwords, including
development itself, producing new meanings by situating them within a moralized framework of local ownership and grassroots social change. Voluntarism working alongside poverty reduction packs an even larger moral punch, altering how volunteer tourists think about themselves and the world of underdevelopment they enter and leave behind.

Escobar’s (1988, 2011) well-known works examine the discursive “invention” of underdevelopment, underscoring how development is managed through powerful discourses and institutional practices. This production and extension of discourses shaped how those both in and outside the developing world defined themselves, altering the “relations between rich and poor countries” (Escobar 1988: 429). In short, he argues that the problem of poverty was created, making room for development experts to impose market-friendly structural adjustment policies. Similarly, Ferguson (1994) examines how institutional practices have successfully, and often accidentally, mobilized development. He concludes that development is a “subjectless” global apparatus that circulates historical and moral discourses of economic progress and poverty reduction without ever actually achieving either goal. These “powerful constellations of control” (Ferguson 1994: 19) remain effective precisely because they are not left to individual decision-makers, but rather, are exercised through an intricate structure of knowledge. Particular truths create acceptable practices that shape both development professionals and local populations, which has an unintended, albeit instrumental depoliticizing effect. Development, for Ferguson (1994), is thus a pervasive and decentralized “anti-politics machine.” His focus on the unintentional consequences of development serves to reiterate how development occurs “not at the bidding of some knowing and powerful subject who is making it all happen, but behind the backs or against the wills of even the most powerful actors” (Ferguson 1994: 18). These arguments help explain how notions of development are continuously reinforced, despite the repeated failure of development projects to live up to their stated objectives. However, much like the volunteers depicted in tourism literature, these critiques paint development subjects with a broad brush—static, apolitical, and unknowing.

Margaret Everett’s (1997) work on agency—“the ghost in the machine”—makes a particularly strong argument against Escobar (1988) and Ferguson’s (1994) critique of
the development apparatus. She notes how their portrayal of subjects as unconscious or incapable of intellectual thought leaves us wondering where development discourses come from or how they might be reshaped by the struggles of real people. Everett (1997) infers that the ghost in the machine is unseen as are the practitioners who drive it. While she primarily discusses the agency of local populations in developing countries, this project extends her line of argument to the other ghost in the machine—the volunteer self. These volunteers take part in development projects around the world dedicated to poverty alleviation, sustainability, and economic growth. Yet, we do not know how volunteers produce, reinforce or resist these morally charged buzzwords of development. As Cornwall (2007) reminds us, it is in the ambiguity of development’s buzzwords that we find potential for contestation, and importantly, the agency within the power effects of discourse. Even though some volunteers I spoke with did take up and reinforce these vague discourses of poverty, lack, and underdevelopment, most volunteers cut through them. Instead, these deeply critical volunteers mobilized a less familiar set of development buzzwords. These words did not evoke the development apparatus, a subject-less machine, but rather, these were words of conscious, political agents struggling to find purpose, value and worth. Their struggles illuminated yet another volunteer self—another face of development—driven by evanescent opportunities to belong more, experience more, and be more.

**On the Threshold: Making Volunteer Selves**

The literature on international development and tourism helps us to consider how these two areas are historically and presently connected, and how together they create a powerful knowledge structure that alters how volunteers think about their projects and the communities they work within. However, this structure imparts an essential and unchanging volunteer self. It fails to demonstrate how volunteers think about themselves or other volunteers doing similar forms of unpaid work, and importantly, how these inherently political ways of thinking and behaving might change over time, or even from moment to moment. Further, this inter-disciplinary literature overlooks the socio-economic conditions and individual particularities that shape volunteer desires to help others that, at the same time, fulfill a need to care for the self. A few anthropologists have explored this intersection between collective and individual forms of care,
discerning the political and historical nuances of voluntary work. In her ethnographic exploration of voluntarism, morality and neoliberal citizenship, Andrea Muehlebach (2012) discusses the state’s appropriation of morality—pure acts of voluntary charity—in lieu of social service programs. She argues that present forms of citizenship exist in a precarious relationship with labour conditions. In our current global order, social belonging is almost entirely contingent on productive and public contributions to a volatile labour market. For those individuals found at the margins of employability, moral acts of unpaid labour transform them into valuable members of society. Similarly, Malkki (2015) observes how unrequited caregiving can provide a sense of purpose and pride to elderly individuals who are excluded from formal channels in the Finnish economy.

In a study that echoes this reality in the North American context, Kevin Lyons, Joanne Hanley, John Neil and Stephen Wearing (2011) found that youth were targeted for volunteer tourism precisely because they are often unemployed. That is, youth comprise a flexible labour source looking for work in an unstable job market. It is during this liminal stage of belonging and value that some youth are rendered useful—good productive citizens—at the exclusion of others. This uneven membership emerges in conjunction with the restructuring of Canadian labour and employment conditions along increasingly insecure and temporary lines. These socio-economic realities create new possibilities for being—new selves—at the same time that they extinguish others. It is this existence on the threshold that illuminates dynamic and multiple volunteer selves. Although self-care and selflessness are possibilities for volunteers, other fractures of the self are equally important to understand. For many of the volunteers I spoke with, self-knowledge, self-control, and self-worth were enmeshed in their desire to help others. While I draw on scholarly debates around selflessness and self-interest, and the development subject versus the “subject-less” apparatus, I do so with the intention of dismantling these binaries by shedding light on the self as fragmented, political and intricate, shaped and reshaped by socio-economic conditions, personal histories, relationships and vulnerabilities.

Theoretically, a post-structuralist understanding of the self as multiple and relational guides this thesis. In order to consider the dynamic and fractured volunteer self, I rely on theories of subjectivity, stigma, governmentality and self-making. In
Chapter One, ‘To Know Oneself and Imagine the Other,’ I explore the classified and discredited volunteer tourist, which participants often drew on as part of their process of self-making. As students mobilized the education system to justify their trips over traditional volunteer tourism, I began to question the relationship between critical academic evaluations of volunteer development tourism and the expanding industry for these programs. In Chapter Two, ‘To Lose Oneself and Find Another,’ I look at the diverse and shared forms of self-loss and self-gain tied up in volunteer self-betterment projects, while highlighting the private forms of care and responsibility that are hidden beneath its surface. In doing so, I push the boundaries of selflessness and self-centeredness outlined in the literature, problematizing our simplification of volunteer selves and volunteer lives into one-dimensional, individualistic intentions. Finally, in Chapter Three, ‘The Precarious Self: Manufacturing Value, Managing Worth,’ the informal politics of societal membership that buttress volunteer self-making are explored alongside the changing political and economic boundaries of citizenship. Through the lens of the citizen self, this chapter queries the relationship between international proficiency and the Canadian self, and discusses what it means for volunteers to belong as a citizen of value.

This thesis underscores the multiplicity of volunteer selves that arise when we look past an individualized intention, and instead asks what kind of socio-economic conditions, discourses, relationships, and particularities make and unmake volunteer lives in unexpected ways. While the extension of harmful neo-colonial practices through voluntarism and experiential education should not be overlooked, the purpose here is to create space for exploring volunteer subjectivities by temporarily suspending these debates. This is not to discount their significance, but rather, with their critical implications in mind, the intent is to open up a new line of inquiry in the literature. Foundationally, this thesis is framed around a rather basic, yet unexplored, set of questions about young Canadian volunteers: who are they, how do they change, and how do they experience their unpaid labour? At the same time, these questions are contextualized through an exploration of volunteer experiences of liminality and un-belonging—the uncertain threshold where students grasp at evanescent opportunities to be more, and be enough. It is a space where volunteers are slipping unnoticed through
the social fissures they must also fill, and it is ultimately their invisibility that this thesis resists.
Theoretical Framework & Methodology

Meredith meets me at the library. Last week she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in International Relations. She is already working full-time doing community-based experiential learning through the university, however, she tells me that her job hunt began several months ago. When I ask her how she first became interested in volunteer work, Meredith laughs and tells me about her uncritical fundraising efforts for international organizations back in High School. After a short pause, she smiles and continues:

Then I went to university and started my IR degree and totally rebelled against that side of myself (...) thinking that oh my gosh I was so naïve and I was doing everything wrong and I was perpetuating all of these awful organizations (...) and kind of went through a period of time where I didn’t do much volunteering locally or globally because I was worried about what I was perpetuating and supporting by giving my time, and then kind of in my later years of university I sort of...not swung back the other way, but realized that I could honour both sides of myself—the side of me that was critical about what we are perpetuating and the side of me that wanted to give my support and learn from these organizations, which is what kind of led me to an international service learning trip.

In a single moment, Meredith presents her self as fractured, conflicted and shifting. She recalls her self as two very different kinds of people—one deeply critical of international voluntarism and aid, and one who just wants to lend support in any capacity she can. Each side encounters the other throughout the course of a university degree in International Relations. Each side draws a connection between local and global spaces, and each side affects her actions within them. These aspects of her self appear to be bound up in the gaze of others. Similarly, her feeling of being “so naïve” is both an intimately personal experience, and at the same time, a necessarily relational process. These intersections create novel possibilities for being, new selves, which are continuously affected and shaped through encounters with others. Yet, these meanings
of the self are equally taken up and rewritten in unexpected ways by volunteers like Meredith. In order to consider the dynamic volunteer self, this thesis relies on theories of subjectivity, governmentality and self-making. These windows shed new light onto the different kinds of people that volunteers enact from moment to moment, revealing how these selves are informed by social and discursive matrices, personal histories and relationships with others. Importantly, these theories also capture the ghost in the machine—the agency of volunteers—found within this extended matrix of interactions.

Theoretical Framework: Subjectivity, Governmentality & the Self

Subjectivity & Kinds of People

In the world of volunteer tourism and international development there are certain ideas or classifications that exist, which shape both the direction of the industry and the people within it. Ideas about suffering, need, and Third World destitution are especially relevant here, as are more feel-good concepts like empowerment, self-help, and sustainability. ‘The volunteer’ and ‘the tourist’ have also proven to be important classifications in scholarly debates over the future of development tourism. In these analyses, the volunteer or tourist is a kind of person—a static, essential identity. More specifically, these labels encompass a set of ideas, which, in turn, constitute the volunteer tourist. This is perhaps why many volunteers I spoke with contested any likening between their work and the volunteer tourism industry, citing undesirable behaviours and attributes associated with the volunteer tourist. In exploring these divergent volunteer selves and the underlying assumptions that comprise them, Ian Hacking’s (1986, 1999) work on human “kinds” or “species” is instrumental. The creation of human kinds is simply the process of “making up people” (Hacking 1986: 222). In this vein, we can understand classifications like ‘the volunteer tourist’ as a product of many interacting entities, including people, ideas, and institutions—what Hacking (1999) dubs the “matrix.” Discerning ideas from objects under this lens is difficult precisely because of the interaction that takes place between them. When participants spoke about the volunteer tourist they did not know this person, yet they had many ideas about them—the line between object and idea was blurred. Much like the literature on volunteer
tourism and development, participants referred to volunteer tourists as a kind of human, a generic self, imagined into existence through a powerful constellation of ideas and material conditions.

Drawing on Foucault’s “constitution of subjects,” Hacking (1986) argues that human kinds are sculpted through matrices of interaction between desires, thoughts, people, institutions and material environments. Importantly, these categories or selves are not fixed, thus, neither are the “possibilities for personhood” (Hacking 1986: 229). To this point, the essential volunteer self is neither static nor inevitable. In making up people we create new ways of being, albeit within the limits of possibility including time and place. Furthermore, with every classification there are two oppositional forces at work. First, there is the label of the volunteer tourist often applied from above by a group of institutional experts. Below this we find the individual classified as the volunteer tourist pushing up against this label, “creating a reality every expert must face” (Hacking 1986: 234). Hacking (1999) refers to this interaction as the “looping effect.” Hacking’s focus on the power of institutional experts, specifically medical experts—those who classify—is less applicable in this study because volunteer tourists are much less constrained by their label, and those who classify them do not do so from a position of power or authority over them. Consequently, I am borrowing Hacking’s concepts of the making up of people and the looping effect, stretching them to include those human kinds who can more easily negotiate and escape their classification. Still, ideas about the volunteer tourist do impact students and their experiences, which in turn, impact the material environment, looping back to alter the original conception of the volunteer tourist. In other words, these human kinds can also become aware of their classification and push back against it, transforming their identity and so too, the ideas that constitute it. Just as this interaction and looping creates possibilities for the future, it also creates possibilities for the past whereby “experiences are not only redescribed; they are also re-felt” (Hacking 1999: 130). It is Hacking’s theorization of the classified, self-conscious agent acting both under and against their classification that underscores the porous, fluid and multiple volunteer self. His work allows us to situate the self within a transformative “matrix” of interactions that is necessarily inter-subjective and always rewritten through powerful ideas, social processes, and possibilities—past and forthcoming.
In a similar assessment, Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (2007: 34) writes: “If subjectivity is an awareness of oneself, it seems to have no stable content: every moment brings a different ‘self’ to light.” This conception of the self follows an introduction in an edited collection on subjectivity by Joao Biehl, Byron Good, and Arthur Kleinman (2007) that challenges the social sciences to rethink subjectivity within a larger entanglement of cultural representations, collective experience, and social and material conditions. These interactions and the multiple selves they engender are reminiscent of Hacking’s (1999) matrix of possibilities for personhood. For instance, Biehl et al. (2007: 13) refer to the fractured nature of the self as “the ways in which persons are constituted through social experience; the often invisible operation, in between institutions and within intimate relationships.” Like Hacking (1999), these scholars take issue with the conflation of the self with an inner essence, and similarly, with the partition of the individual self from society. Instead, we can understand subjectivity, not as an essential individuality, but rather, as a dynamic and changing collection of entities, which are externally constituted and enacted or reconfigured through individual action and collective experience (Biehl et al. 2007). Subjectivity under this light is not merely a product of social control; it is also a space where consciousness, relationships, and inter-personal struggles transpire. Indeed, it is within this “intersubjective matrix” (Biehl et al. 2007: 14) that fractured volunteer selves and their possibilities for personhood are endlessly made and unmade.

**Stigma & Self-Making**

At first glance, the concept of stigma might seem tangential to an exploration of inter-subjective volunteer selves. But much like the process of making up human kinds, stigma creates new ways of being, new selves, through our interactions with institutions, classifications, and of course, with others. For Erving Goffman (1963) it is within these interactions that the self is continuously performed, perceived, and managed—that is, made up. His theory is therefore not only about the discrediting nature of a stigma. Rather, Goffman (1963) presents a theory of stigma that requires “a language of relationships, not attributes” (1963: 3). In other words, processes of self-making and identity management are necessarily dependent on the gaze of others. We can begin to see how a kind of self-consciousness emerges from this inter-subjectivity (Rorty 2007).
Goffman’s (1963) foundational work, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* helps us to further understand this connection between the different kinds of people—identities—that volunteers enact in different moments and the social relations that inform them. For Goffman (1963), the management of identity is the management of social interaction. Although it is often assumed that volunteers manufacture their identities in relation to the “exotic other” they encounter abroad (Xie 2011), I found their processes of self-making were affected by a much more intimate set of interactions at home. As Goffman (1963) reveals, personal and familial relationships require a heightened level of identity management because there is infinitely more to lose. The intimate relations that inform volunteer selves expose society’s “standardized anticipations,” (Goffman 1963) of the classified volunteer tourist.

In the literature on volunteer tourism and international development, there is a well-known classification—the suffering other. This classification pivots on powerful discourses of lack and basic human need. As Malkki (2015) notes, this other is always “over there,” a uniform mass defined only by their biological need—their “bare life” (Agamben 1998). In the past, this division between the passive other and the active helper defined the relationship between the developing and the developer. Many scholars pinpoint this asymmetrical exchange and its underlying colonial discourses as a significant motive for volunteers going abroad to help on development projects. However, returning to Everett (1997), this classification reduces both the developing and the developer to unknowing pawns within a subject-less machine. Malkki’s (2015) work unsettles some of these preconceptions about the suffering other and the active helper by drawing a map of intersecting relations between them; complex circuits of need, vulnerability, and care that cut across both worlds. Malkki’s (2015) argument confronts these rigid classifications, which led me to consider not only the neediness of volunteer tourists, but also their otherness. In this way, the imagined other encountered abroad was less important to participants than the imagined other at home—the stigmatized volunteer tourist. Participants made up their selves in relation to this imagined other, and did not want to be perceived by fellow classmates, friends, professors, or even by me, as this kind of discredited human. For volunteers, self-making occurs through these intimate relations at home with other students, often during their critical development classes, which has created new possibilities for being, new kinds of people—practitioners,
researchers, professionals, interns—that is, anything but the classified and stigmatized volunteer tourist. In effect, volunteers are not just defining who they are, but also who they are not. As Goffman (1963: 7) reminds us: “The stigmatized individual tends to hold the same beliefs about identity that we do; this is a pivotal fact.”

In an effort to manage identity and self-worth, a volunteer’s professional and personal network of relations is ever more important. Their value is constantly measured and perceived by those close to them. Information management is therefore more than what we hide; it is also what we have to show. Drawing on Goffman’s (1963: 57) conception of a personal identity—the “unique combination of life history items that come to be attached to the individual”—we can begin to think about the lines of a résumé as a series of documented social facts or identity pegs that publically distinguish an individual from all others. In other words, an employment record could be considered what Goffman (1963:62) calls a biographical life, “an entity about which a record can be built up” that legitimates a particular kind of public image or representation of the self. The possibilities for self-making that this personal identity affords are thus tied up in one’s interactions with institutions, classifications, and others. As the growth in experiential learning, co-op placements, and internships abroad would indicate, many volunteers are intent on distancing themselves from representations of the “other” volunteer tourist. The performance and management of this personal identity, this biographical life, is then typed into being through the aptly named curriculum vitae (CV) to be assessed by others. The power of these public records rests in their function to count and legitimize some forms of labour while erasing or discounting others. The CV, thus, has the final word on volunteer authenticity and worth. CVs are not just records of employment—they are records of authentic experience. Participants often relied on narratives of work and skill building in order to qualify how their trip abroad was more authentic and meaningful compared to other forms of volunteer tourism. We can now better understand volunteer experiences as both an individual and interpersonal process of self-making within a larger matrix of precarious interactions. It is these interactions that are constantly managed and reformed, creating possibilities for volunteer selves at the same time that it unravels others.
The Changing Self

Contemporary opportunities for self-making can be characterized by their instability. To begin with, uneven socio-economic conditions and a volatile job market convey a certain type of instability facing young, opportunistic Canadians. In a similar vein, the university as a distinctive social space for self-making offers few guarantees to its students, and even fewer social securities. This liminal space appears to operate as a holding tank for some Canadians found on the margins of economic contribution and societal value. It is a time where self-discovery is encouraged, but simultaneously reduced to academic and career prospects. Here, building the curriculum vitae—a ‘personal identity’ (Goffman 1963)—and finding one’s purpose and value to others is at stake. For that reason, identity and information management are heightened in this nucleus for social interaction. But as Hacking (1999) suggests, these identities are neither fixed nor static. Instead, instability is an important component of the multiple and fractured selves that are made and unmade through these processes. To this end, instability is a productive force; it bares the changing self. Arthur Kleinman and Erin Fitz-Henry (2007: 54) stress that individuals change amidst societal changes insofar as “experience always takes place within particular social spaces and is inextricable from the shifting exigencies of practical, everyday life within these spaces.” Their experiential framework outlines the complex and fluid ways in which human subjectivities unfold in the context of collective engagement and individual particularity, while remaining anchored in much larger political and economic currents. As social structures shift, so do our relationships, and in turn, these necessarily inter-subjective experiences and interactions engender new selves and new kinds of people (Hacking 1999) —a multiplicity of human conditions (Kleinman & Fitz-Henry 2007). With this variability in mind, we are able to explore the fractured contours of the volunteer tourist who is both classified and discredited. By moving beyond analyses of the volunteer self as either self-less or self-centered, this study engages with the changing self and its many subjective states. However, while volunteers might enact different selves in a given moment or in front of a particular audience, these subjectivities are also constituted by and through external institutions, expertise, powerful ideas, social conditions and material environments. This part of “the matrix” (Hacking 1999), to which I will now turn,
draws our attention to the networks of power and knowledge that regulate and govern the changing self and society.

Over the span of a university degree, students are encouraged to manufacture and manage different pieces of information about their personal identities. In this way, processes of self-making are also those of self-management. Within the university culture of heightened self-discovery and identity management, subjects are constituted through an assemblage of “political technologies of the self” (Rose 1990: 217). In his work, *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*, Nikolas Rose (1990: 218) traces the discursive genealogy of self-obsession to the emergence of clinical psychology, whereby ‘the self’ was “rendered into words, made visible, inspected, judged, and reformed.” He suggests that regulating and transforming the self subsequently became a science, proliferating discourses of human potential, autonomy and development. We are now obliged to self-monitor, self-govern, and self-transform—this is our emancipatory process (Rose 1990). The making up of our selves as autonomous and free lends itself to novel technologies of individuality, social discipline, and identity, a kind of ‘consumer governance’ that places the onus on the individual. Every choice we make is therefore a “message to ourselves and others as to the person we are” (Rose 1990: 227). In this process of self-making, we begin to monitor not merely our own conduct, but also the conduct of others. This kind of self-governance and individual responsibility is bred by the neoliberal order, within which even the most resistant students must find their place. Returning to Goffman (1963), in our interactions with others, he argues, we must always be switched “on.” This internalized governance shapes and reshapes who we are, and how we behave and interact.

With very few guarantees after their graduation, young students readily harness new skills—identity pegs—with the hopes of sending a strong message to others about who they are, and how they can be set apart from their colleagues. Much like the qualifications listed on their résumé, their life becomes “a skilled performance” (Rose 1990: 238). Accordingly, volunteering and other forms of experiential education are taken up as projects of self-making, which are classified above seemingly less political and less impactful forms of volunteer tourism. Although this critique of volunteer tourism is cited in the literature, the volunteers I spoke with were also quick to discredit these
initiatives, and in doing so, would find justification for their own project. However, as volunteers like Meredith spoke about their memories of volunteering, they often reimagined their selves. Sometimes this would manifest as self-judgment as volunteers began to reconsider their impact on a community, or as self-doubt as they reimagined the parallels between their work and volunteer tourism. In doing so, the value of their work, and their sense of self was determined not only by others, but also by their own “sternest and most constant critic” (Rose 1990: 239). Hacking (1994) suggests that in making memories we are also making up our selves. The way we look back on a scene from our past can create a retroactively, (re) experienced action. Through the ongoing production of knowledge, new possibilities come into circulation, allowing us to modify or “rewrite the past” (Hacking 1994: 243). If volunteer selves are governed by matrices of power and knowledge, then they are also rewritten—made and unmade—in unexpected ways through collective and individual memories, histories and relationships. In A Bias for Hope, Albert Hirschman (1971: 37) implores the social sciences “to defend the right to a nonprojected future as one of the truly inalienable rights of every person.” In an effort to leave both the future and the past undetermined, this study moves toward an analysis of volunteer selves as externally constituted, but also unfixed and nonprojected, much like the memories and relationships that shape them.

Acts of Care: Global Subjectivity—Local Governmentality

In recent years, learning opportunities for students seem to have one thing in common—their propensity to invoke the “global imaginary” (Malkki 2015). At Simon Fraser University (SFU), ‘Engaging the World,’ is not just a popular refrain; it is indicative of the changing landscape in which all students must find a future. For young Canadians, the importance of “global competency” (Tiessen & Huish 2014) has never been greater. New opportunities for gaining this real-world experience are advertised all over campus as international exchanges, experiential learning and co-op placements. At one time, these were brochures for volunteer tourism trips, but as many representatives told me at the annual ‘Volunteer and Career Fair,’ their placements were definitely not “voluntourism.” Rather, their focus was on the student and his or her career development through a “travelling internship.” In the wake of scholarly critiques against volunteer tourism, this shift in both language and practice seems to lend experiential programs a
kind of unquestioned legitimacy. However, these programs rely on a similarly liberal and egalitarian representation of the world as an interconnected, cosmopolitan, and vibrant global community. Malkki (2015) observes how liberal internationalism emerged in the aftermath of World War II as a project for both global peace and national sovereignty. International development, volunteer tourism, and now global experiential education opportunities all work within this regime of interconnected nation-states. The global citizen embodies these values and attitudes through their shared responsibility to those beyond their borders. Effectively, this global framework reifies national boundaries at the same time that it purports to diminish them. This has important implications for Canadian students who are encouraged, and sometimes even required, to gain global experience during their academic career.

In order to explore the production and intersection of global subjectivities and Canadian selves, this study extends James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta’s (2002) conceptualization of transnational governmentality. Borrowing from Foucault's idea of governmentality—the unseen processes, norms, discourses, and identities through which a population comes to be governed from a distance—Ferguson and Gupta (2002) highlight the productive possibilities of this dispersed form of power. By interrogating the division between the state and international organizations, these scholars question whether global forces undermine or reinforce the nation-state system. Global governance in some cases, they argue, allows the nation-state to stake new claims in universality by extending their spatial authority through global entities. At the same time, however, transnational forms of government may also represent novel challenges to the territorial jurisdiction of nation-states. The growing number of international experiential learning programs that mobilize discourses of global citizenship but are nevertheless contingent on Canadian nationality present us with an important iteration of transnational governmentality. Many Canadian students take up global subjectivities in their quest to gain relevant experience, without problematizing how their local citizenship status is implicated in the “global imaginary” (Malkki 2015). However, it is also necessary to examine how the formalization of unpaid labour (Muehlebach 2012) in the Canadian context places new demands on students locally as the state withdraws social services and securities.
Volunteering and other forms of experiential education are framed as illustrious professional opportunities, obscuring the precarious realities that face young students, which render them both “useful and compliant” (Rose 1999: 233). While many volunteers I spoke with expressed a desire to help those beyond their borders, they also understood their work abroad as a form of self-care. These acts of care may reinforce new forms of government, but at the same time, they create new possibilities and new selves. If we understand volunteering as a form of work that is tied to our identities, if not our souls (Donzelot 1991), then becoming volunteers is a process of governmentality and transformation. In this study, these changing and unexpected volunteer selves that surface will provide a lens that illuminates the social and economic realities within which their lives take shape. Through their memories of care, we begin to see that, in fact, there is nothing apolitical or inevitable about the volunteer experience.

Methodology & Limitations

The Relational Self

After spending most of my academic career reading and writing about volunteer tourism and international development, it occurred to me that I still knew very little about volunteers. I knew some of the characteristic motivations for going abroad to assist on development projects, and I understood how these intentions and their unintended effects could be deeply problematic. The colonial underpinnings of development, as well as the racist discourses of these interventions proliferate are well documented. In addition, the feel-good, white saviour complexes of young affluent volunteer tourists seeking self-affirmation, course credits, or a photo opportunity are familiar critiques. I was left with an essential representation of these volunteers as apolitical, unchanging, and conceited. Yet, I had never actually met one of these “hopey-changey” volunteers. With this in mind, I set out with a very basic set of questions aimed at finding out more about volunteers and their lives by simply asking about them. I wanted to meet volunteers and hear about their volunteer trips, but I also wanted to hear about their lives, relationships, and particularities before and after their trips. In order to capture the multiplicity of volunteer selves that I felt were missing in scholarly debates over volunteer tourism, it
was important that I employed a qualitative investigation of volunteer experiences rooted in semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Furthermore, given that the self is necessarily relational, I saw interviews as an important interpersonal interaction where different volunteer selves could be made and unmade. In investigating volunteer selves, the underlying social conditions, discourses, and ideas shaping them came to the fore. As it turned out, many of the volunteers I spoke with shared a similar critique of “other” volunteer tourists, without having personally encountered this other. Instead, they referred to the same scholarly critiques I had read—many volunteers are international development students—and other generic representations of the volunteer tourist. Who is this illusive volunteer tourist, I wondered?

The volunteers I met resembled nothing close to their static portrayal in the literature. Their experiences at home and abroad did not fit neatly into predetermined self-less or self-centered boundaries. This led me to question how scholarly assumptions about the volunteer self might actually impact the lived experience and identities of volunteers, and in turn, the direction of the volunteer tourism industry. In an attempt to explore these experiences, and their intersection with and divergence from the literature, I employed a qualitative case-study methodology that sought to highlight the narratives of young Canadians who have volunteered abroad on development endeavours—who they are, how they change, and how they experience their unpaid labour. This project was then guided by the various and unexpected forms of the volunteer self that emerged from, and even within, conversations with volunteers and students. These selves shed light on stigma management and self-making, subjectivities of care and loss, and the cultural, economic and social conditions shaping young Canadian students. Generous funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada helped to cover the costs of this study.

Beginning in September 2015, I started recruiting participants both on and off SFU campus through volunteer and experiential learning information sessions and third parties. I selected participants that had completed or were about to complete an experiential learning or volunteer tourism opportunity in a developing country. From early September to late December 2015, I conducted 21 in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Most of these conversations took place in person and lasted anywhere from one to three
hours. Other interviews took place over Skype with volunteers in different provinces across Canada, and in one case, with a volunteer in the Dominican Republic. Most of the participants identified themselves as co-op students or interns, but a few labeled themselves as volunteer tourists. The way they labeled themselves often shaped how they understood the work that they did abroad. I also spoke with one experiential education organization founder who had done voluntourism trips in the past. As highlighted in the literature, I also found the majority of volunteers were women (17 women and 4 men) and many were completing their post-secondary education. While some of the students were taking International Studies courses, I found that many other faculties were represented, anywhere from Health Sciences to Recreation—an indication of the growth this industry is experiencing. All were Canadian citizens except for one permanent resident, and one dual citizen from the United States and the Dominican Republic.

While my initial plan was indeed to speak with “volunteer tourists,” it became quickly evident that this “kind” was difficult to find. Noting this shifting terrain, I began to consider a wider range of unpaid labour and experiential learning opportunities. I attended the ‘Volunteer and Career Fair’ at SFU in September, where I collected brochures and spoke with booth representatives. Here I found interesting connections between the institution, career development, and unpaid experience. I started to see the university as a unique social space where self-making and self-management are heightened, and that this liminal phase is both fruitful and fraught as young people try to find purpose and value. In November I attended a Co-op Information session, ‘Work Integrated Learning,’ at SFU with ‘International Experience Canada’—a “youth mobility” program for working and travelling abroad—run by the Government of Canada. I also met with an SFU representative for the C.A.R.E program, which provides awards to students doing internships and volunteer projects abroad. At each of these events, I collected handouts, advertisements and brochures on various forms of experiential learning, including internships and volunteer trips (e.g. C.A.R.E, SFU Volunteer Services, AIESEC, INSIGHT Global Education, International Experience Canada).

Although I had a flexible interview schedule on hand, participants often raised interesting questions and new topics that would lead to stimulating discussion and shape
parts of the interview. At times, these were intimate stories and in other moments they were spontaneous and thoughtful political analyses. These conversations were recorded on my computer through the software ‘Audacity,’ and on a backup handheld recorder. Interview questions were open-ended and surrounded volunteer expectations, experiences, and meanings of volunteer tourism, international development, and unpaid labour. I also asked about volunteering histories, and whether this informed their desire to volunteer either locally or globally. Their memories of care, both at home and abroad, revealed unexpected and changing volunteer selves. Moreover, their stories uncovered a unique set of precarious conditions facing young adults in the Canadian context, such as rising unemployment, credential inflation, competition and alienation. All interviews were transcribed and coded shortly after, at which point I deleted both audio recordings.

Analysis was simultaneous with the interview process as common themes began to emerge and shape the direction of the study, which aimed to mirror the complex and unpredictable processes of change addressed therein. For instance, some of the interview data was used to select volunteer tourism and experiential education websites, including CUSO International, Cross-Cultural Solutions, AIESEC, and INSIGHT Global Education among others. This also led me to examine SFU’s webpage for ‘volunteer services’ and ‘work integrated learning,’ including a short video from the university President titled, “Why Volunteer?” Here I found the ‘SFU ENGAGE Blog’ for students, which included posts on “Finding Purpose Through Volunteering” (2016) and “3 Reasons Why Volunteering in University is Good for your Mental Health” (2015). During my attendance at SFU, I also received three recruitment emails regarding international volunteering opportunities and internships, which I printed and coded. Finally, one of my participants graciously sent me her personal journal entries from her time in Ghana in 2011. These intimate and candid details deeply shaped how I thought about the needs, vulnerabilities, and relationships that mattered to volunteer selves. Lastly, I compared the interview data with the discursive themes that emerged from my analysis of the websites and hard materials listed above. In other words, this study moved between the volunteer experience and the institutional representations of this experience, exploring their intersection and disjuncture, and considering how these interactions expose a porous, multiple, and dynamic volunteer self.
A Note on Limitations: The ‘Academic Component’

This study is limited to the Canadian context insofar as most of the participants were Canadian citizens, and there is a historical and cultural specificity associated with Canadian volunteering. However, as Malkki (2015) and Muehlebach (2012) show, austere political and economic measures, social alienation and state reliance on unpaid labour are currents being felt around the world. Almost all of my participants were students. This was not intentional, but considering my own student status and the growing role of experiential education in volunteer tourism, this largely student populace was especially relevant. Furthermore, the university as a social space proved to be a distinctive area for self-making through the various experiential opportunities presented specifically to students as they attempt to find their place and value in society. Finally, it was the continued appearance of “the academic component” in my interview transcripts that prompted me to explore in more detail the role of the university in shaping volunteer tourism and international development initiatives, and so too, the volunteers who sustain them. In many ways, the academic component became the justification for continued development interventions, but under this distinctly educational imperative. This mandate served as a form of differentiation for volunteers, which is indicative of the structural changes in the economy and labour market within which new forms of precarity are appearing.
Chapter 1.

To Know Oneself & Imagine the Other

Much like the changing parameters of international development, volunteer tourism and experiential education opportunities exist on a shifting platform, seemingly unhampered by the steady volume of critical literature on this topic. This is puzzling when you consider that the departments and faculties to which some of these critical scholars belong are often the very same ones that require students to complete international placements. There is an obvious disconnect here, which many participants aptly pointed to but then shrugged off, as if to say they know what is happening but have no traction to question it. After all, it is their future that is bound up here. This irony was mirrored in my conversations with volunteers who were familiar with many of the critiques against international development and volunteer tourism, but remained adamant that their work abroad was something quite different. On occasion, a volunteer would question this line that they—or perhaps someone else—had drawn between their own experience and the experience of the other volunteer tourist “building a house or something.” Inexperienced and unqualified Western volunteers have long been criticized for building houses or schools in developing countries. In some cases, local community members must come in over night to fix or rebuild what volunteers construct during the daytime. Participants often referred to this example when highlighting the failures of development, contrasting them with their own project. But when pressed, many participants questioned the boundary drawn between their work and the work done by unqualified volunteer tourists. As they began to consider this overlap, I also started to see how the volunteer tourism industry and its countless iterations are intimately tied to the scholars who write about them. I did not find any evidence suggesting that this booming global industry is untouched by their academic critiques. Rather, I found that the emergence of experiential education placements, international co-op internships, and other unpaid “opportunities” are directly tied to, if not driven by them.
This tension between the academic institution and the global market for volunteer tourism, international development, and experiential education was embodied by some of the volunteers I spoke with who were able to distance their trip from the moral pitfalls of volunteer tourism and international development, while being presently employed within this sector. I began to see that their reluctant acceptance of the tension between their education and their employment was first and foremost a necessity for students, whose academic and professional careers often depend on international proficiency. Importantly, I found that there is, upon closer inspection, no disconnect at work between critical development discourses, the academic institution, and the expansive global market for volunteer tourism and experiential education. Rather, there are a series of unseen interactions occurring between discourses, people, and material conditions that coalesce, traversing the academic institution, the Canadian state, and the international milieu. One of the students I met with told me her trip was motivated by the combination of wanting to volunteer, but also wanting to make herself “as competitive as possible in this globalized world.” It is within this inter-subjective and inter-spatial matrix that students begin to know and understand themselves and the voluntary work that they do both at home and abroad. It is also where students make up and change their identities and their selves in relation to others. This chapter explores one of these fractures of the volunteer self, and in doing so, traces the interconnecting streams that run back-and-forth between the academic institution, the market for international experience, and the critical and cautious students who, when all is said and done, just need to work.

The Educated Self

In our current “knowledge-based economy” (Tiessen 2014: 75), gaining a competitive education requires students to learn beyond their classrooms and their national borders. More than anything it means that students must learn through “hands-on” experience—that is, through their labour. Take for instance, the blending of Career and Volunteer Services at SFU, which is captioned by the phrase ‘Work Integrated Learning,’ claiming to represent all of the opportunities that are available to youth today. One student tells me happily about his trip to Argentina, “I couldn’t ask for more of a parallel between what we study and the experience right.” It is within this educational
framework of labour and social mobility that students took up and competed for different unpaid positions in hopes of one day finding secure employment. With surprising composure, one volunteer infers, “We are all just labour.” Most of these students, however, did not believe that this would find them fulfilling or long-term employment. Still, the educational impetus allowed even the most critical students to differentiate and justify their development project over other seemingly less-informed and less-qualified volunteer tourism endeavours. Even if it did not guarantee them their “dream job,” these students saw their education, their international practicums, their knowledge, and subsequently themselves, as one step above the others. This social and cultural capital would afford students more opportunities to distinguish themselves from their peers, positioning them competitively in the job market. Students came to know, and market, themselves according to this other volunteer tourist. Education is therefore important to volunteers and this study for two overlapping reasons. First, as a means to an end—to find meaningful work—and secondly, as a powerful institution within which students learn how to work. It is this latter idea that endorses the very foundation of emergent experiential education programs, global internships and volunteer opportunities.

During their time in university, students are learning about and encountering others, at the same time that they embark on journeys of self-discovery and self-knowledge. They are learning how to feel, interact and behave in front of different audiences, from their friends to colleagues and superiors. In this way, education is always already taking place beyond the walls of classrooms and lecture halls. While this kind of socialization is widely referred to as the “hidden curriculum,” I would argue there is nothing hidden or unknown to students about the importance of social networking, professionalism, and information management as part of their post-secondary education. Instead, we see that learning how to manage interactions, meet and network with others, and maintain a professional and up-to-date “personal identity” (Goffman 1963) may be the only guarantees that the university still offers. Co-op degrees and student internships flourish under this mandate, where the line between learning and labour is blurred until they become interchangeable. To learn is to work, and to work is to learn, but neither ensures paid or meaningful employment. Instead, they offer “opportunities.” The hopeful and beckoning language of opportunity was persistent in my conversations with volunteers. Without guarantees, students must become subjects of endless opportunity,
always willing to take on unpaid experiences because of the potential possibilities they afford. Opportunities, however, are geared towards the individual. It is as much about one’s ability to locate and exploit opportunities as it is about one’s determination over others. Far from the inclusive and egalitarian undertones advertised to students, opportunities are balanced along exploitative and exclusionary lines. Opportunity places the emphasis back on the individual, and despite its aspiring connotations, the language of opportunity is also the language of risk, disguising the self-governance it employs.

Finding remunerated work is increasingly difficult for young graduates, as are social securities and benefits. Students were painfully aware of this reality. But they maintained that their education would give them the opportunities, the experience, the know-how, and the necessary tools to learn how to work, even if it did not find them the job they desired after graduation. Leading up to this moment, students exist in a liminal space where finding and bettering their worth, their individuality, is at stake. Identity and interaction management is therefore heightened because the educated self is always subject to the review and measurement of others close by, and even more so, the educated self is reflexive, self-critical and self-monitoring. It is through their education that students learn how to work, and it is within this nexus that different selves are discovered, managed and made valuable, while other possibilities for learning and for being are not only discredited; they are undone.

The educated self appeared in all of my interviews with volunteers, but was never uniformly expressed or experienced. However, each volunteer anchored part of their self-knowledge in their education and a quest to find employment. Students were not only volunteering abroad because of a “helping imperative” (Heron 2007); they were also taking up unpaid opportunities out of an apparent need to work. One of the young women I spoke with had an upcoming international practicum in Tanzania, which would fulfill the final “foreign cultural” requirement for her degree in International Studies. She was very critical of volunteer tourism and told me she had concerns about the trip. Still, she was candid about the reality she faces: “We live in a mindset where everything has to equate a job, you can’t just learn for the sake of learning…that’s very much at the front of my mind…how am I going to apply this to make money?”
Students also grounded their self-knowledge in opposition to the imagined other, who was not always found “over there” (Malkki 2015), but instead, came into being through a much more intimate set of interactions with friends, colleagues and superiors at home—that is, through their educational experience. The illusive volunteer tourist constructed in scholarly critiques became a point of reference for participants as they made up themselves in relation to this imagined other. When I ask a volunteer about her upcoming project, she tells me she has “heard people go abroad and do very short-term volunteering in orphanages and things like that,” the “horror stories,” she calls them, and so she is “very cautious about doing this.” She compares her long-term project that is guided by her degree to the short-term unqualified and exploitative forms of volunteer tourism that have been heavily critiqued. For this student, her education and her volunteer trip is, in part, a means to an end—to find employment. On the other hand, it is informed by a deeply critical subjectivity that differentiates and justifies her project in relation to the “horror stories” of volunteer tourism. From unqualified house-builders to the revolving door of orphanage volunteers seeking photo opportunities, students all drew on one of these stories of the other in order to understand their projects and their selves. Even those students who had volunteered in an orphanage or built a school spoke of these horror stories, which seemed to implicate and absolve them all at once because they were able to maintain a certain degree of distance from this kind of volunteer tourist. In other words, while I did encounter participants who had completed seemingly traditional forms of volunteer tourism, they were just as likely to draw a distinction between their selves and those unknowing and apolitical other volunteers who are intent on saving the world. In this regard, their critical education is still taking place within a hyper-competitive institution that shapes workers by legitimizing certain kinds of experience, and certain kinds of people, at the exclusion of others.

**Saving the World is Not a Real Job**

Almost all of the participants I met with had some generic horror story about the narcissistic orphanage volunteer, the unqualified house builder, or the temporary and superficial traveler—these were familiar development stories that I knew well. Through these unquestioned imaginings of the volunteer tourist, the students I spoke with came
to know themselves, which in this case was nothing like the kind of person who does volunteer tourism, even if their placement fell under this category. As one young woman who had just returned from Zambia told me: “You want to justify it because you don’t want to be [a volunteer tourist]... I find myself at times when people are like oh well you did a voluntourism thing and I feel I had to justify that it’s not.” It is true that many of these programs are not “volunteer tourism” because they are not described as such. They are experiential education opportunities, practicums, cross-cultural learning exchanges, co-op internships and an array of other unpaid trips geared towards students who wish to gain hands-on experience in development. Nevertheless, these alternative projects still emerge from development tourism and continue to mobilize development practices, albeit under a new banner of education, skills development, and employability (Tiessen 2014). As Kathryn Fizzell and Marc Epprecht (2014: 112) explain in their study of experiential learning: “The programs cited as most in demand are those that involve travel to less developed countries, most of which include some form of voluntary work.”

I was able to explore this ever-changing landscape of voluntary work a little further in a meeting with the founder and director of an international experiential education organization, whom I will call James. After completing a volunteer tourism trip during his undergrad, James went on to complete a Masters in International Development. While doing his research in Uganda he “saw a lot of these volunteer programs... the short term, temporary, white kids... who build a school for a week then pat themselves on the back and leave and go on a safari.” At the same time, he became involved in the “vocational schools industry” in Uganda that worked with youth on “locally relevant skills training.” As a teaching assistant back in Canada, students would often approach him with their concerns about employment after graduation. Noting a perceived lack in practical training for students, he wanted to create an experiential education program that gave young Canadians a way to live and work abroad that was “not these kind of short-term, save-the-world, hopey-changey things because nobody goes and volunteers building schools as a real job...that doesn’t exist.” The bottom-line here is an educational experience that leads to gainful employment, as it was for the volunteers I spoke with. His organization has since been very successful. What started as a program for international development students has become a much larger
movement, which includes students from every field, all united by their shared desire for unpaid “global opportunities.”

When I ask why he labels the work as interning instead of volunteering, he tells me that an internship suggests it is a “little more professional.” Professionalism was important to many of the volunteers I spoke with. It signifies that they were working and productive contributors on their trips, especially compared to those volunteer tourists who engaged with seemingly less serious forms of feel-good leisure-tourism. One volunteer laments, “people are just not given space just to be somewhere (...) it just seems to always come down to the clock and what you are doing with your life (...) we have always got to be so productive.” James highlights how the “academic component” of his programs stresses the philosophy that students are there to learn, not to impart—one of the many legacies of development intervention. This “global education” separates his organization from volunteer tourism initiatives, which he believes have very different intentions and outcomes. When I ask what those intentions might be, he begins to tell me that students doing experiential education want “hands-on” experience and are “willing to face the challenges facing development communities,” whereas volunteer tourists are often from “extremely wealthy, affluent communities, who want to talk about how much they have done,” but then he pauses and a strange look washes over his face: “I think there is a gap although the more I say it, the more I wonder how big that gap is.” Most of the volunteers I met with also began to reconsider the boundaries their work shared with volunteer tourism, noting the power of this differentiation, and eventually coming to the same conclusion that James does: “We distance ourselves heavily from the volunteer tourism industry because of the negative connotations that exist with it.”

When I attended the Volunteer and Career Fair at SFU at the beginning of this project, I was expecting to find booths filled with volunteer tourism companies targeting students interested in international development work. Instead, I found experiential education organizations that offer “travelling internships” through the university. This meant that students could accrue course credits or fulfill degree requirements for international placements. It also meant that when students returned from their trip, they had to complete some kind of written assignment in order for the university to recognize
their involvement. As James told me, his program requires students to take part in a post-trip debriefing before the university will release their transcript, highlighting the growing interdependency between the academic institution and the global industry for experiential education. When I spoke with booth representatives, they made it very clear to me that they were not running volunteer tourism projects. Likewise, when I received an email from an interested participant, Caitlin, she questioned whether she would be a good fit for the study given that she did an internship, not volunteer tourism. The educational component that participants cited as evidence for this distinction was always tied up in employability—practical experience and skills development. The brochures that I picked up at the Fair also encapsulated these ideas, lending this novel realm of global experience a kind of legitimacy not afforded to volunteer tourism initiatives. Even if the shiny photographs included a generic African village, the words inscribed below them were not the development buzzwords of poverty, suffering, and empowerment I was familiar with and had come to expect.

In addition to the quintessential development photograph of the African village, which is often associated with volunteer tourism websites and advertisements, there were new pictures, ones that highlighted the shifting platform of international development. Photos of rural villages had been replaced by urban landscapes, while photos of volunteers teaching students in a makeshift classroom in Ghana had been replaced by a Ghanaian professor teaching Western interns in a university boardroom. Frequently, the volunteers I spoke with would frame and justify their experience, their intentions, and their selves according to this image of the professional entrepreneur working in a developing city. While caring for others was still part of their subjectivity, the moralized undertones of doing good and saving the world, which had been discredited in their university courses and the critical scholarly articles they read, were relegated to the realm of the apolitical, passive, and uninformed volunteer tourist. Through their education these students were not just imagining the other into existence; they were also making up their selves in relation to, and above, them in a competitive fashion. In doing so, the educated self emerges from a locale of legitimacy afforded by the academic institution, which classifies experiential education programs and the students who do them as more critical, more real, and more valuable to society.
In the story that follows, I turn to the production of authenticity and value within volunteer development work. While authentic volunteer tourism experiences are frequently associated with the distant and seemingly traditional allure of the developing communities that volunteers enter, I found that the sense of realness and legitimacy that volunteers perceive is actually qualified by, if not dependent upon, the sending organization, which is often affiliated with an academic institution. Hands-on experience and unpaid labour are pulled into existence and made valuable through these powerful institutional networks and discourses. In this way, only a small number of unpaid experiences are deemed authentic and worthwhile because they can be measured, observed, and evaluated by some governing institution. Authenticity, for the students I met, was therefore not necessarily about experiencing or surviving impoverishment, and neither was it always rooted in an immersive cultural encounter as some development tourism scholars have suggested. Instead, authentic experience surfaced in relation to the inauthentic, measured by what it was not, and it seemed that this distinction had been ascertained and validated by the education system. Surprisingly, authenticity often had little to do with the actual volunteer tourism experience, which is perhaps why participants often struggled to differentiate between their experience and the experience of a volunteer tourist. Rather, I found that institutional discourses and labels imparted realness and value onto specific forms of unpaid labour and hands-on experience. Authenticity, for volunteers, was thus written into being through the CV, and in this way, could always be traced back to the working or employable self. Students would take up these labels in their attempts to make up their most authentic self. Importantly, as Caitlin’s story will soon emphasize, authentic experience could never be uncritical or uninformed; it could never be found in volunteer tourism. To this end, real and valuable experiences pivot on formal and quantifiable contributions to the economy that can only be enacted by the educated-critical self. They are experiences that, even in moments of apparent contradiction, exist on a platform of untouchable credibility.

Caitlin’s Story: Getting Your Hands Dirty

I meet Caitlin in downtown Vancouver one morning in December. She generously agrees to speak with me over her lunch break at work. As she sits down, I
notice her professional appearance. Most of the volunteers I had spoken with up to this point were still completing their academic studies, and so her business attire left an impression. Caitlin has just turned twenty-three and she tells me that last week she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in International Relations, which also fulfilled the requirements for a co-op degree. Despite her recent graduation, Caitlin is already employed. In 2013, she went on a “service learning trip” to Swaziland through the university where she worked on a “sustainable livelihood project.” Caitlin reiterates that this trip was not volunteer tourism precisely because of the “academic component.” This “component” appeared in almost every conversation I had with volunteers. She tells me this means that:

*You can bring in some of those skills that you have been learning in school...and you can help the organization fill this gap that they have accessed themselves...so it was kind of the perfect mixture where I wasn’t doing something like building a house that I would be totally useless for...and hopefully I would learn something along the way.*

It was important to Caitlin, like so many other Canadian students, to be deemed useful. Every unpaid experience they take up gives students an opportunity to send a message to others and to themselves about their productive capabilities—their employability. Through her education, Caitlin felt she had acquired the necessary skills to assist on this community-based or local development project, which would allow her to learn more about development while she applied knowledge gained in university. In other words, Caitlin’s education and related skill-set created an aura of legitimacy around the work she completed in Swaziland. More specifically, the academic component gives Caitlin a deeper sense of purpose and usefulness that is always positioned in relation to the unqualified, non-academic and ineffectual volunteer tourist. Participants had a need to be of value, to be real, political—knowing. While tourism scholars have explored in-depth the desire for authenticity in travel motivations (Xie 2011, Shepherd 2002, Cohen 1988), I found this desire for authentic experiences abroad was deeply anchored in the desire to be considered authentic at home. It was important for Caitlin to accumulate seemingly authentic experiences in Swaziland precisely because it sent a clear message about her legitimacy to employers, professors, and even her close friends back in Canada. Her work was not only rooted in skill development and endorsed by the university; it was also
defined by what it was not—superficial and inauthentic volunteer tourism. In this vein, Caitlin came to know herself through an imagined other.

Caitlin was familiar with the colonial legacies of international development, but told me that she still wanted to learn how it all “worked.” As such, her trip was motivated by an educational impetus, a desire to learn about and experience development. More specifically, she intended to learn what it would be like to work in development, as so many of the other volunteers I met with expressed. Her degree alone lacked what James had seen as practical, hands-on experience. Without these international experiences and their associated skill-set, students are rendered less valuable and less competitive than their colleagues when they enter the labour market. Caitlin explains:

*It was really about that real life application and I had thought a lot about how our privilege and colonialism and those sort of lasting effects...and the problems and optimism around development...but when it actually comes to living it day-to-day and trying to contribute to something...instead of just reading them in an article, I think it raised my awareness.*

When we talk about the changing narrative of volunteer tourism towards experiential-based programs, she states frankly that she is glad it is changing “from going in and volunteering at an orphanage for two weeks—god forbid that's what I thought I was supposed to be doing.” She laughs, but it is hesitant.

We talk about her past. Caitlin grew up in a small town on Vancouver Island. She played field hockey and volunteered as a coach for many of her teenage years. Other participants spoke about growing up in small communities and the relations of reciprocity and voluntarism that held them together. After moving to Vancouver, she became involved with an advocacy organization and volunteered as the co-president. Almost every student I met had an extensive history of volunteering in Canada. Recalling memories of a parent, church group, sports team, or community event, participants would tell me about the moment that sparked their interest in volunteering. This local volunteer identity seeped into their international outlook, informing their desire to help others both near and far. While this desire is often traced back to colonial representations of the suffering and impoverished other in the developing world, I found
the foundational roots of their voluntarism ran much deeper in the Canadian context. In other words, it was their local helping identity that preceded their international focus, and as these two spaces collided they became intertwined and inseparable. These intersecting forms of voluntarism and care were not always at odds with the desire to make oneself employable. Much like the collision of local and global subjectivities, the boundaries between self-care and care-for-others were overlapping and interdependent.

We talk about the present. She tells me that “if you want a job in international relations you need international experience and no one is going to pay you do it for the first time at the end of the day.” In building her résumé, Caitlin acknowledges the connection between paid and unpaid labour. In order to find gainful employment, she must, like so many other students, take up unpaid positions—opportunities—that are filled with promise and possibility. In other words, students must take up these unpaid opportunities out of a need to find work, and because they pivot on individual responsibility, they are also taken up out of a need to care for the self. Further, the university, which must also assert its relevance under changing global conditions, often encourages, if not requires students to obtain “work-integrated” international expertise. In this vein, even the most critical volunteers must find validation for their project.

With the international experience she gained in Swaziland, Caitlin was able to land a temporary eight-month contract position before she had even officially graduated. I am surprised for a moment when she tells me it is a mining company she works for, managing their relations with communities in Argentina, Mexico and throughout Central and South America. But as she continues, the threads that tie her critical and experiential education—her educated self—to the shifting global market for international development become increasingly clear:

I have to say that the reason I got that interview was because of my experience in Swaziland. It was 100 percent. Like a giant multinational corporation that is a mining company based out of Canada is not the best platform to sit on when you are trying to deal with communities. They were really looking for their team to have people who had international experience, who had some sort of more on-the-ground experience...I have actually talked to community members and I have actually looked at development projects from the other side you know? From the charitable side, which is what they are giving their money to so they are like it’s great to have more of an understanding of how
those things work, so they are trying to put more people who have this international relations experience in and less people who have just have an MBA or whatever. They haven’t really seen anything. They haven’t really gotten their hands dirty.

For Caitlin, real experience is equated with hands-on experience; it is bound up in her desire to not just experience development, but also to be deemed useful through development. Effectively, her “on-the-ground experience” is more valuable than those students who “just” have an MBA, and those students who fruitlessly attempt to build houses or schools. At the same time, it is the academic institution that legitimizes this experience in Swaziland, allowing Caitlin to understand her internship as more valuable and more real than those who do superficial forms of volunteer tourism. Transpiring from a critical development degree and a work-integrated learning trip to Swaziland, Caitlin’s ambivalence towards her employment in the development sector was not an anomaly, and I found many participants reflected this inconsistency. At the crux of this tension is the production of seemingly authentic, valuable, “real life” or real work experiences, which allowed some students to create validation for their projects, while nullifying with expert precision those other forms of unpaid labour considered superficial and inconsequential.

Critical Experts

There is something strange happening in the world of development. Even as the United Nations adopts sustainable development goals as part of its repertoire, the normative language of development is beginning to disappear from the very organizations that mobilize it. This is true of the volunteer tourism industry and its experiential appendages, which is perhaps why their brochures unveiled such an unfamiliar set of images and discourses. It would appear that the moralized buzzwords of development that Cornwall (2007) suggests gain or lose traction through their ambiguity are being rewritten. Words such as poverty, lack, need, and sometimes development itself are slipping away. Even trending words like community, sustainability, and grassroots face increased public scrutiny. This critical eye was palpable in all of my interviews. When I asked participants how they understood words like development or sustainability, most of them laughed or exhaled dramatically, and then there was an
unmistakable calculation: Does she really want to know what it is, or is she asking me what it should be? Most students then went on to tell me what they had learned in their sociology, public health, or international development courses, which amounted to a very negative critique of sustainable development practices. The case was closed. One young woman was adamant:

*Development is not a word that can be reclaimed. Development...I know it’s tossed around a lot and even in the organization I am going to be with, it uses international development. But development, as I have learned from my sociology courses, is very much based on this linear form of upward improvement and the international system of capital and wages, and paid and unpaid labour.*

Although she acknowledges that the organization she will be volunteering for in Tanzania “falls into” this linear depiction, she cautiously suggests that it “sort of” goes beyond “traditional development” by focusing on “soft skills and business skills” for young, local urban populations. Like the shifting terrain of volunteer tourism, scholarly critiques have propelled new development organizations and new development subjects into existence. These deeply critical subjects underline the moral and material pitfalls of international development at the same time that they continue to extend development practices. New images and buzzwords begin to circulate. The urban landscape, the young working professional, the internship opportunity, and the hands-on educational experience were all evident in the brochures I looked at. It was these representations and these discourses that volunteers had taken up as part of their emancipatory project of self-transformation, which also allowed them to affirm their sense of self above those uncritical volunteers who completed development tourism projects.

Good development is thus a matter of individual persuasion, made up alongside the private self, which Rose (1990) has outlined as a series of consumer choices. With the production of these descriptions, we can see how development possibilities and volunteer selves are made up, and also rewritten. In thinking about Hacking’s (1994) looping effect, I started to see how volunteers were not just altering the volunteer tourist label, but also shifting the course of the volunteer tourism industry. By distancing themselves from volunteer tourism and challenging “traditional” forms of development, the students I met with were consciously pushing back against a set of ideas about
poverty, marginalization and underdevelopment. There is nothing apolitical or static about these actions, nor the experiences, discourses, and institutions that inform them. As one student notes: “The whole trying to talk myself into being an intern and that sort of thing is political in nature, because I rebelled very hard against being seen as an expert just because I was white and from UBC and so there is definitely something political there.”

In April 2015, two SFU students launched a campaign against “irresponsible voluntourism” through their website, ‘End Humanitarian Douchery.’ Filled with barbed humour, these students who once did volunteer tourism themselves are committed to their cause:

In case you haven’t noticed, we millennials have acquired a pretty big obsession with changing the world. Aspiring to end poverty, save children and all that good stuff have become essential goals for any good world citizen. And as a scan of anybody’s bucket list will tell you, this mindset has led to voluntourism mania, with millions of eager beavers forking out cash to travel abroad and help out in development countries. We love volunteering too and we think it’s awesome, but the truth is: there’s a darker side to irresponsible voluntourism that is frequently overlooked.

It is not their intention to do away with volunteer tourism completely, however, and they state that there is a clear delineation between “good” volunteer projects and others, which are “deeply problematic.” The latter can be characterized by “framing oneself as a ‘hero’ who is ‘saving’ people” or “doing volunteer work that one is not qualified to do,” or they are doing it for the “wrong reasons.” Instead, the responsibility is placed on the individual to become “self-aware” and choose the right program, which they suggest is found in “Fair Trade Learning.” This “global educational partnership” will inevitably create “a global community.” They assure readers that changes can be made by “harnessing the power of education (...) knowledge is power (...) it’s also a power we can all take upon our selves.” Before university, they saw themselves as Canadian “do-gooders” and volunteered relentlessly. But then, “university came:"

Along with the all-nighters and stress-induced self-loathing, we grew older and wiser. Soon, we began reading how volunteering abroad can lead to troubling outcomes, even when you have good intentions. The more we read, the more we were confronted with questions of privilege, colonialism, and other complexities that most people never talk about (...)
our goal is simple: to ensure that volunteers are more self-aware and critical when going abroad.

Like so many of the volunteers I met with, these students were exposed to critical development discourses during their time at university. To become “self-aware” and “critical” in this space is to become the educated self. This self, they argue, can be assured “of knowing you’re not engaging in humanitarian douchery and that you are contributing to REAL positive change for others and yourself” (emphasis in original). Armed with the “power of education,” these students can differentiate and validate their trips and their selves over others. The critical subject is also faced with a global order where social belonging is almost entirely contingent on productive and “qualified” contributions to the labour market. One volunteer tells me: “It's so hard to advance when you leave school that people are almost fearful. I just have to do as much as I can, and I’ll do anything.” Caught between their critical subjectivity and their need to work—to belong—volunteers push back against a long history of development, only to realize this is the sector in which they must now find work.

In the past, development experts were from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund; they are the discredited and the criticized in development discourse. Although many of the volunteers I spoke with critiqued and distanced themselves from international development and the kinds of people—volunteer tourists—who do its work, they became in “critical-complicit ways” (Muehlebach 2012: 9) new kinds of development experts. With the explosion of international experiential learning programs and co-op internships in developing countries, these agents of opportunity continue to mobilize development not under some moral mandate of poverty alleviation, but paradoxically, through their critical engagement with development studies at the academic institution. Because critical modes of thinking impart defiance and resistance, those critical selves who lurch unexpectedly into the realm of compliance are often not given the space to be both, as if one revokes the other. But as Muehlebach (2012) suggests, opposition and compliance increasingly coexist in the neoliberal order. Upon further examination I found the critical-complicit juncture that volunteers inhabit reveals a great deal about their ambivalence—a muddied line between their need to be critical and their desire to care.
Alexis: The Critical & the Caring

Alexis has a degree in International Development, which, she tells me was “very, very critical.” We talk about these critiques of development and volunteer tourism that make up the bulk of this academic program, and she adds a sharp political analysis, divulging how she misses having critical academic conversations. Even though it is late in the evening after she has finished a full day at work, Alexis is noticeably enthusiastic about the research I am doing, and our interview quickly turns into a lengthy and engaging discussion. Alexis is working for a prominent international development company. She has facilitated a volunteer trip for students to the Amazon in Ecuador. She laughs when I ask her about the apparent irony: “Yeah, a lot of my friends are like you work in development after studying international development?” But, she adds, I “graduated and got thrown into this workforce where there is no work.” Before graduation, Alexis went on two volunteer trips, one during high school and the other partway through her undergrad. When I ask her if these volunteer and development experiences helped her land the job she has now, she replies, “Yeah (...) I would also say my ability to be critical about development, and knowledgeable about development, both on the theory or book-side as well as practical experience.” We talk about the theory and the practice, her critical self and her entrepreneurial self.

The first volunteer tourism trip she did in grade 12 sparked her interest in travel and international development. Then, in the second year of her university degree, she took some time off to travel to India with her sister where she set up her own volunteer placement at a grassroots school for local women. Here, she volunteered for two months—the amount required by the organization. When I asked what it meant for her to volunteer as part of her travels, it becomes increasingly apparent that Alexis has a deep desire to help others in any capacity she can. At the same time, she tells me it was also “exceptionally gratifying personally.” Instead of framing this personal gain in terms of career development or status-making, Alexis reveals a kind of social neediness, a desire for relationships and shared experience:

I think my experience volunteering was exceptionally gratifying personally but more so in the sense of building relationships. I've never felt so... people always laugh when I say this... but I've never felt so alone in a country so full of people as when I was travelling and
realized that even in a country where it’s okay to touch people like if you run into someone on the street you don’t have to apologize, but I felt so isolated. But when I was volunteering it was so gratifying just building relationships with the students and I still talk to them all on Facebook and actually building friendships.

Her need for sociality seems to be equally grounded in her own self-care and in a desire to care-for-others. From a young age, Alexis would volunteer at every opportunity she had. Growing up in a small community, she explains, will do that to you. When I ask her why she volunteered so much, she has a simple response: “I care a lot.” She continues, “I was doing so selfishly, but also using it as an outlet to care.” Alexis admits that being recognized for doing good work in a small community was really important to her because she had low self-confidence. She yearned for recognition, to be of value. She shares a story about playing the violin in an old age home. Her face lights up as she talks about how they would sing along—“it’s the best thing ever.” She smiles. I get the impression that Alexis derives great pleasure from affecting others, whose reactions in turn, deeply affect her. As we talk it becomes clear that caring for others is part of who she is: “That’s why I am here,” she says, “to make a difference in people’s lives.” But this part of her self was not necessarily characterized by an ideal of selflessness. She firmly doubted that that she was saving or even successfully helping the communities she worked in. “The biggest pain in my heart,” she says, “is that we don’t know how to do it. We don’t have it right.”

During high school, it was a teacher who encouraged her to do the volunteer tourism trip. However, her trip to India was born out of a difficult time in university. In reflecting on this, she re-experiences the memory: “to self-reflect and understand why that was important and what I got from it and where I was in my life then...that it was necessary.” But when I ask if she would do another volunteer tourism project today, she tells me that “to be honest, now travelling and volunteering makes me uncomfortable.” What about an experiential education or internship program, I query. She responds: “Critical me has a ton of questions about those.” Alexis explicitly references her critical subjectivity as we talk about experiential education programs and parts of her own volunteer tourism trips. Even still, she remains employed within this sector. Her critical self is present in one moment but shifts in and out of focus. Looking back on her volunteer tourism trip, her view of her self and her experience is in flux: “I think
retroactively looking back on it I’m like…mmm…there are many things that could have been done differently (...) and I still feel that way and I still work for the organization.”

Her critical-complicit self is shaped by the imagined volunteer tourist she learnt about in her critical academic studies, but is also reconfigured through her desire to care-for-others and her need to be of value to her community. Alexis finds herself at a juncture marked equally by opposition and compliance, a threshold where opportunities for self-making are rooted in contradiction and instability. It is an uncertain world in which she must find her place.

I Want To Be Something More Because I Feel Something More

I never found the volunteer who frames themselves as heroic, or who is venturing abroad with the intention of saving people, the kind of person that ‘End Humanitarian Douchery’ and other scholarly critiques individualize as the embodiment of everything that is wrong with development work. Similarly, it seemed that the students I spoke with had never found them either. As a result, the volunteer tourist entered our conversations as a set of ideas, imagined as a kind of person—a classification. Students interacted with this classification as if it were fixed and known with certainty. It was because of this essential individuality that many participants assumed that I shared the same ideas about the volunteer tourist. How then, was this “human kind” being made up?

While critical development and tourism scholars sought to draw attention to the discursive and structural conditions that reinforce development practices, their critiques depended on an essentialist portrayal of volunteers and development practitioners. In tourism literature, the tourist has always been written up as privileged and affluent, that is, the kind of person who can afford leisure after work (Bourdieu 1984). By accruing social capital through their travel experiences, tourists are said to be seeking status markers (Gladstone 2005). Faced with a culture of alienation at home, tourists go abroad in search of an authentic other (Xie 2011). We are left with a portrait of the generic and discredited tourist, which one participant appraised with a laugh: “The tourist is always the obnoxious asshole.” The criticisms levelled against volunteer tourists as self-interested and apolitical are extensions of this entrenched stigma. Not surprisingly,
almost every volunteer I spoke with attempted to position their self according to this imagined other. Even those students whose projects were described as volunteer tourism sought to highlight their divergence from some of the behaviours and attributes associated with this identity. On occasion, a volunteer would acknowledge that there was a time when they were that kind of volunteer tourist, but when looking back with a critical lens, they were able to distance themselves from those others who had yet to experience their critical awakening: “I think a lot of the people,” a volunteer starts explaining, only to pause, adding with a laugh, “this is the cynic in me talking now,” before continuing: “A lot of the people who go on these trips, myself included, like yes you’re there to help but you need to know you are not a skilled labourer. And you want to get the profile picture with you and the cute kid.” She then goes on to tell me about the volunteers all racing off in a “mad rush” to “grab a cute kid” for a photo: “You see everyone going off and grabbing their hands and you’re like I have to find a kid, I have to interact. Almost like a little inauthentic.” As Goffman (1963) posited, the stigmatized tend to hold the same ideas about their identity that we do. Their self-consciousness was entangled in their interactions with institutions, classifications, and others—woven together through an intersubjective need to be of value.

To know oneself is therefore contingent on imagining the other. Sometimes this other was found abroad, but more often, the threat of inadequacy loomed much closer, materializing in the familiar and intimate relationships found within the walls of the academic institution. The interviews I had with students were indicative of this constant pressure to do more—to be more—our conversations becoming sites of identity and stigma management. I spoke with a young woman doing her Masters in Global Development and Education about the motivations behind her voluntary work in Uganda. Thinking back, Rachael tells me:

*I wanted work experience doing international development, I mean I think that is definitely pretty standard (...) and I really liked that it was with an organization that I felt I could trust, because I had also written in my second year on voluntourism and the worries about that, so I really felt that I could trust the people who were sending me (...) I also felt the work that they were doing was important and something I could get behind. It wasn’t like ‘oh I want to go and save Africa’ but it was here is something where I could get valuable experience and I feel I can make a positive contribution (...) I had friends who when I was going...acquaintances...who would post on Facebook or send me a*
message like ‘oh you’re going and doing such amazing work I’m so proud of you’ and I was like ‘no,’ so I don’t think there was a revelation that I was going to save Africa and then come home and be like I guess I didn’t. But I think there were definitely motivations surrounding work.

Here, she is not merely sharing a memory about her experience as valuable and distinctive from the saviour mentality of volunteer tourists. She is asserting her critical self, legitimizing her contributions to me. Often when volunteers recalled memories, they were establishing parts of their self. In other moments, evoking their past altered their perceptions, bringing a different and unexpected self to light. Occasionally, this retroactive experience would lead a participant to question the boundaries between themselves and the imagined other, highlighting the fluidity and insecurity of their self-knowledge—now an object of scrutiny. Rachael continues: “I don’t really think what I did was volunteer tourism and I guess that depends how you define volunteer tourism, but I usually think of volunteer tourism as the two being packaged and sold together, which yes, I travelled, but I see travelling and tourism as diff…” her voice trailing off. “I don’t know,” she says, pausing for a moment:

I did tourist stuff for sure. I went on a safari and I totally did that stuff but it wasn’t sold to me as part of what I was doing as a volunteer. There are posters around my campus right now that say ‘volunteer abroad,’ it’s like ‘build a playground in Uganda and have the summer of your life’ or something. I’ve been bitching about it to anyone who will listen, so I don’t really think what I did was volunteer tourism. Would I volunteer abroad again? Yes. Would I go on a volunteer tourism program? No.

Similarly, another young woman asserts her work and her self under a conflicted lens:

I actually just wanted to understand it in a different way, and that’s something I struggle with for travelling is that you’re so...first of all you’re seen as a traveller and that’s another thing that I’m a tourist, of course I am, but I hate being seen as a tourist. I want to be something more because I feel something more. I don’t just look. I want to be more a part of it, and I actually became a part of my community.

By pushing back against the classification of the tourist, she attempts to manage the stigma by rewriting it. Hacking’s (1999) looping effect helps us to understand her interaction with her tourist label, as she acts both under and against it, transforming her
identity, and so too, the ideas that constitute it. At the same time, the multiple fractures of this self come to light. The tourist self that she reveals is not an essential individuality, but rather, a collection of entities and possibilities that are externally constituted but also reconfigured through individual action and shared experience. These subjectivities are neither fixed nor inevitable, with every moment exposing a different self.

The Good Worker Versus the Bad Helper

All of these volunteers draw our attention to the importance of impression management in making up our selves. In this process of self-making, students endlessly monitor their conduct and the conduct of others. They also show us how the knowing self has no stable content; it is filled with insecurities and contradictions. More than anything, their memories tell a story of need—a need to be real, recognized and valued, a need to be part of something, to belong. While this is partly shaped by the kind of self-affirmation that tourism scholars discern, it is also informed by volatility in the labour market and an increasingly competitive university experience. As one participant notes: “I feel I have positioned myself in the best possible place that I could have (...) like getting volunteer and work experience and getting my MA and I still think I’m really going to struggle to find a reasonably paid job.” It is at the university that students learn how to work, that is, how to be a valued and productive member of society. It is also where students learn what kinds of people are discredited by society, and how the opportunities they take up during their university career can serve to differentiate and qualify them in relation to this other. Despite these efforts to separate the educated self from the well-documented shortcomings of volunteer tourism and international development, many students continued to mobilize development practices, albeit from a new and authoritative place of critical expertise.

However, these volunteers remain intensely political, fractured, and undetermined—their possibilities are many. Meredith presents us with one:

I wanted to get outside of my critical spiral that university had kind of found me in and realize that it was okay to find certain things I believe in and certain things that I didn’t (...) It’s so easy to be critical and deconstruct everything. The hard thing is reconstructing things (...)

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Just saying what’s wrong with something—that I was getting really tired of and really fatigued of in my degree so this I saw as an opportunity (...) to see what I thought for myself and figure out how much of it was me just absorbing everything that I was told and being critical of everything, and how much of it was what I actually believed.

Volunteers like Meredith highlight the uncertainty students face as they attempt to make up their most authentic and valuable self. While the volunteer tourist they imagined was central to this process, participants often struggled to define the parameters that separated their critical-educated self from this imagined other. During a time when identity management and performance are vital to employability stakes, to know oneself is an asset. Yet, the students I met did not seem self-assured or unwavering. While in certain moments they spoke with conviction about the attributes of the professional development intern, contrasting them with the characteristics of the hopey-changey volunteer tourist, they struggled to uphold this distinction as they grappled with their own inner contradictions and inconsistencies. Although it seemed unanimous that working in development was much more valuable and real than merely helping in development, volunteers still held on to their desire to care-for-others. I began to see that even the most critical student seeking to advance their self over others was framed in this conflicted light. The critical-complicit juncture that these students inhabit is not simply an individual contradiction or oversight; it is a product of the uncertainty they face. With every fragile opportunity suspended before them, students have no choice but to find their place.
Chapter 2.

To Lose Oneself & Find Another

Encountering the other—suffering, exotic, traditional—while travelling abroad has a long and dark history that moves dangerously between moral acts of service and Western domination in the extreme. Colonialism, international development, and other imperialist interventions have all been upheld by assurances of progress and modernity, predicated on a division between two seemingly different worlds: the First World was one of power, strength and affluence while the other, the Third World, was measured by its most basic needs, perceived as a basic humanity to be discovered, studied, and finally, saved. While this hierarchy of the helper and the helpless was couched in racist legacies that enabled Western expansion, it was also produced and enacted alongside moral sentiments and religious convictions to help those less fortunate, both near and far. The first missionary excursions to the developing world thus set the stage for helper-saviour descriptions in development and aid work, masking the exploitative and uneven ways in which “progress” materialized.

Though this notion of doing-good by helping or saving others is anchored in values of self-sacrifice, selflessness as sacrifice did not emerge in my interviews. In fact, most volunteers firmly denied it. Having taken critical development courses in university, students associated self-sacrifice with colonialist narratives of the white saviour. Almost every student spoke with familiarity about the white saviour, in order to position themselves strongly against them. Others felt they were the exception to this narrative—that is, white volunteers who were not on saviour missions to the developing world. I never met a volunteer who did not problematize self-sacrifice or altruism in the realm of development work, and consequently I never encountered the infamous white saviour described at length in development literature. Nevertheless, a moral lens has been and
continues to be used to obscure the significant harm found in international development projects, humanitarianism and aid work.

It is for this reason that many tourism and development scholars are quick to dismantle representations of the volunteer as altruistic and self-less, while reiterating that the good intentions of volunteers are never enough to offset the unintended consequences of development intervention. By focusing on volunteer motivations for going abroad as essential representations of self-less or self-centered intent, an entire history of colonialism and development intervention is centered on the individual volunteer, who I found to be very aware that their innermost thoughts and aspirations were under scrutiny. These intentions and the selves they engender are important, but the story they tell goes well beyond the two possibilities projected onto them. Volunteer selves, both past and present, cannot be reduced to a self-less or selfish impulse. At the same time, volunteers do experience these subjective states, but it is important to understand these intentions as interconnected rather than dichotomous, emerging within a specific social context, and more fluid in meaning than a single and unchanging experience.

In scholarly critiques of volunteer tourism and experiential education, the self-betterment motivation is not looked upon favourably. Yet, development critics project this label onto volunteers with such conviction that all other outcomes are left out of reach. Participants echoed these critiques in our conversations. The self-proclaimed self-less volunteer tourists are really just bettering themselves, students would tell me. These students, who saw themselves as deeply critical of volunteer tourism were forthright about their self-betterment projects. Students are not only managers of information; they are also managers of intention. The self-governing and self-critical volunteer subject has taken up and internalized the scholarly critiques of self-betterment, gauging their desires, feelings and actions under this one-dimensional framework. In this way, the portrayal of an essential volunteer self in scholarly critiques is not without consequence for young students, whose diverse and dynamic lives are classified as one-directional projects of self-betterment. These critiques paradoxically reinforce, instead of challenge, processes of individualization. This chapter pushes these boundaries of self-betterment outlined in the literature by exploring the multiple and intersecting avenues for selflessness and
self-interest pursued by volunteers, in order to situate these intentions within both larger socio-economic trends and everyday lived experience. As persons with their own histories, relationships and cultural particularities, volunteers are so much more than a static, isolated intention; their lives and their projects of self-betterment are always in flux, extending well beyond the development projects they take up.

**The Self-Betterment Obligation**

Faced with the criticisms against saviour narratives and the near impossibility of claiming selflessness, almost every volunteer I spoke with elected to label their work and their motivations as self-interested. It was almost as if this had already been decided for them, which, of course, it had. In response to the critical evaluations of volunteer tourism as a colonialisit exercise in self-betterment, the industry has rebranded itself. No longer laden with the morally charged buzzwords of poverty alleviation and self-sacrifice, emergent experiential education programs and volunteer opportunities have attempted to shed historical asymmetries between the helper and the helped by celebrating, instead of masking, the volunteer’s quest for self-betterment. As James told me, his experiential programs in Uganda are designed for students to learn, not to impart, by gaining as much knowledge as they can during their internship.

The educational imperative that organizations and volunteers so frequently cite is thought to shift the power dynamic between the developer and the developing. This is yet another reason why most of the students I met were very critical of the imagined volunteer tourist who perceived their work as self-less or was guided by a moral imperative to save others. For these critical students, it was much better to be seen as a self-motivated worker than to be seen as an altruistic helper reproducing colonial narratives. The need for both industry and volunteer to distance their work from self-less moral sentiments places new emphasis on projects of self-betterment. These projects seem to convey an unfamiliar transparency in development work— a promise of measurable change. The self-motivated worker is made more real and more grounded than the self-less helper who floats unattached and is unable to create substantive social change. Morality, as it is bound up in voluntary work, is no longer the framework for many development tourism projects not just because of the colonial legacy that
academics have stressed, but also because it lacks the global currency of labour. The unquestioned proliferation of work-integrated experiential development programs through the university is an indication of our knowledge-based economy and the educated self therein, illustrating the intimate relationship between the academic institution and the global market for international experience.

The value of employment over other moral inclinations is only one side of this expanding self-betterment industry. Beneath the surface of these public projects of self-betterment, no matter how transparent they might be, a kind of unseen self-governance is at work. Through their public self-betterment projects, volunteers are also fulfilling a private need to care for the self. By placing the self at the core of unpaid experiential opportunities, students are encouraged to harness their transformative process: to self-reflect, monitor and critique their own intentions, to share those private reflections or “personal testimonies,” as one volunteer recalled, with others on their trips, and to endlessly accumulate and assert their value, that is, ultimately to self-govern. This individual responsibility is intimately tied to the scholarly critiques of volunteer intentions, which place individual aspirations under a public microscope. Volunteers and their innermost thoughts and feelings, even during their trips, were on trial. Sometimes it felt as though participants had prepared for our interviews accordingly, ready with a list of intentions and a list criticizing those same intentions. Despite the public appraisal of volunteer intentions, the social conditions that produce these desires are largely unaccounted for. The self-motivated worker celebrated in the public psyche and applauded by experiential education advocates has disguised the private forms of care and responsibility that also depend on volunteer self-motivation. As social services dissipate and other securities become increasingly thin, individual responsibility for care-work grows. These social ramifications can certainly be felt in the Canadian context. Most students I spoke to had a volunteering background in Canada, which meant that they were continuously balancing care-work in both local and global spaces. When one volunteer tells me about her local volunteering in Canada, a pained look appears on her face: “I don’t know the right answers exactly, or how to make the world a better place, or what justice is. But I know that this is to some degree helping or filling some gap that neoliberalism has caused.” She tells me the Vancouver health program she volunteers for was set up sometime during the 1990s after “they noticed a lot of patients falling
through the gaps in terms of their access to different social programs and services.” It is within this neoliberal context of gaps and exceptions that volunteer self-betterment must be reconsidered.

To this end, self-betterment— the very site of neoliberal governmentality—has become the eminent face for experiential learning and international development projects. As Rose (1990) writes, in making up the private self the onus rests on the individual who is obliged to transform and better their self; it is their emancipatory project. This can be seen in the demand for experiential programs and volunteer opportunities among students, and increasingly in the university stipulation for student self-betterment vis-à-vis these projects. But if individuals are never acting alone, then self-betterment is not always a project of individuality or an essential, governing self. By reframing self-betterment as a shared, diverse and inter-subjective experience, this chapter explores another aspect of the volunteer self that is not always made up above or ahead of others, but rather, changes from moment to moment with and through others. Importantly, for the students I spoke with, self-betterment was sometimes about losing, even undoing the private self in order to find social belonging or connection. Malkki (2015: 137) writes that even if the social connections found abroad are temporary, they are still a “vitaly meaningful” form of self-care. Self-betterment, in this light, is not limited to an individual project of governance and social control. It is not uniform, predictable or one-dimensional. Neither does this intention represent a complete dislocation from the moral or spiritual convictions associated with missionary work. Indeed, even after some volunteers dismissed a moral impetus for volunteering, it crept back into the interview, their felt responsibility for others noticeably intact. Perhaps most interestingly, the self-betterment obligation emerged instead as an inter-subjective site of resistance and struggle for volunteers, which upon further exploration, revealed the private forms of care and responsibility hidden beneath its surface.

The Shared Self: Between Loss & Gain

Even if students are encouraged, or sometimes required in their post-secondary degrees, to take up volunteer tourism projects and experiential education opportunities in order to increase their employability, they remain active participants in their process of
self-making. This journey of self-making is not only informed by their need to find work; it is also shaped by the educational institutions in which students learn how to work, legitimizing a certain kind of experience, and a certain kind of person, over others. This particular example of self-betterment thrives on competition, hyper-individualization and neoliberal subjectivities. It is this understanding of self-betterment that scholars have relied on when discussing the pitfalls of volunteer tourism and international development, but without ever explicating its source. Managing and updating a personal identity in the university setting is always at stake for students who must outperform their peers on many fronts, including job experience and international proficiency, in order to maintain a competitive advantage both during and after their degree programs. This advantage aids students in their efforts to find gainful employment amidst a collapsing economy. Self-betterment for students is therefore less of a choice than a requirement.

But what happens when students resist this trajectory? How do we understand their self-betterment if it is not embedded in capitalist narratives, or if it wanders in and out of them? What if selflessness is both entangled and in conflict with their self-interest? I would argue that what constitutes self-betterment, particularly as it appears in the critiques of volunteer tourism and experiential education, is taken for granted. As it stands, researchers are not prompted to ask about the diverse and shared realities facing the students they talk about. It is already assumed that student self-betterment refers only to individual skill-acquisition, job experience, or cultural capital. On a foundational level, what does it mean to say volunteers are merely bettering their selves? Which self? If volunteer tourists are self-centered, where is that center found, and how is it being served? There are no simple answers here, which is precisely why it is so fascinating. Yet, in all of the literature on volunteer self-interest and in all of the advertisements for experiential education, self-betterment is never invoked with these questions in mind. Through my interviews with volunteers, I came to realize that much like their changing and multiple selves, there were many different paths for self-betterment, which were far from one-dimensional and on occasion, far from individualistic.

In her exploration of the humanitarian self, Malkki (2015) asks the inverse question: what does it mean to be self-less, to be without or to lose the self? Following
Malkki’s (2015) inquiry into selflessness as a form of self-loss for Finnish aid workers, I began to consider how self-loss might interrupt or intersect with self-betterment for Canadian volunteers, and at the same time, how this juncture might create a space for others—other people, other aspirations, other selves—to be found. For some students going abroad, motivations are not framed by skill acquisition, employability or cultural capital. Instead, there is an element of self-loss, a desire to lose one part of the self and encounter or become another. This means that contrary to scholarly depictions volunteer self-betterment is not an inherently cumulative process. Rather, self-betterment for volunteers is an ongoing interaction between making and unmaking the self. It can be characterized by both (inter)-personal gains and losses.

I found that volunteer self-betterment as a process of self-making was necessarily relational, bound up in the approval of others, but also deeply tied to the forging of friendship and connection with others, a palpable desire for sociality. One young Muslim woman told me about “the spirit of voluntarism” as an important tenet of her religion: “Well volunteering is a really big part of our community,” she explained, “but I think it’s also partly, not completely, religion-driven, but also socially-driven.” Volunteering is, in many ways, a uniquely social practice that is comprised of both giving and receiving. Most of the students I met with conveyed to me that this idea of reciprocity was a vital component to building communities here in Canada and also in the countries they visited. This value stands in stark contrast to our cultural emphasis on self-sufficiency and individual autonomy. For the students taking up these unpaid opportunities, volunteering was simultaneously an individual project aimed at highlighting their autonomy and a collective, shared project of interdependency—that is, of giving and receiving, losing and gaining. Their self-betterment was enmeshed in this shared need to care for the self and for others. These forms of self-gain and self-loss were never experienced in complete isolation. Rather, the self-betterment obligation was always as much a personal experience as it was a collective and shared one.

This social aspect was often highlighted when volunteers spoke about their placement experiences. For some participants, this was expressed in relation to their coworkers, which as one volunteer remarked warmly, “it felt a lot like family.” But for many others, it was their experience living with a homestay family that produced a deep
and meaningful sense of social belonging. Residing in a homestay appeared to be the most common arrangement for volunteer placements, whether through a volunteer tourism company or an experiential education internship. One young woman described the shock and disorientation she felt after landing in Uganda and being picked up by her host family: “I met my homestay mother and sister and went back to the house not knowing anyone or how to get around and being totally reliant on these people. I think it was an experience that would have been humbling anywhere in the world.” Later in the interview, we return to the topic of her homestay family. When I ask how the relationship evolved from that humbling moment at the beginning of her placement, she responds enthusiastically: “It was fantastic! That was probably the most incredible part of my entire experience. My homestay mother was a retired police officer and she was just such an incredible, empowered woman.” What was she like, I ask. “She was on it,” she says laughing. “She was funny and we had so many conversations about pretty much everything and we would watch the English language news together every night and she would talk to me about Ugandan politics.” Pausing to look at me, she sighs: “We had a fantastic relationship and leaving was the hardest thing.” Even though she was an “intern” on an experiential education trip, she contrasts her experience living with a homestay family to what it could have been like living in a hostel with other interns. It becomes increasingly evident that her social connection to the homestay family was a defining factor in her placement. “Living with a host family,” she explains, “I would not have wanted to do it any other way. I would have learnt and grown so much less if I had been living in a hostel with a bunch of other interns and just going to work and coming back…if I didn’t have that family to be a part of.” Another participant, who completed two volunteer tourism projects, shared a sobering comparison. At her first placement, the volunteers stayed in a hotel, which she said was “quite interesting because we would wake up and have a buffet breakfast next to the pool and the lovely hotel air conditioning and then go on a bus and work at a dump for the day.” She compares this to a different volunteer tourism trip she completed a few years later: “You stayed at a homestay so it was more authentic because it wasn’t a hotel.” Sharing a similar sentiment, a young man who went on an experiential learning trip through his university to Argentina, conveyed a sense of unease around his hotel accommodation: “This is something that would bug me everyday, that we would leave that community that was, for lack of a better word a bit of a shithole, and then we were popping beers on the side of the pool, you know?” I nod.
“So that always stayed with me,” he says, “that contrast, like we were just visiting, we weren’t living there.” I ask whether he would do anything differently. “Being more immersed,” he responds firmly.

From this point of departure, I conceptualize volunteer self-betterment as a social and inter-subjective experience that traverses self-loss and self-gain. It is through their social experiences of the world around them that volunteer subjectivities are altered, taking on new and various meanings, which is how I came to think about their shared and porous selves. The shared self is based on the idea that just as experience is shared, so is subjectivity. It is within this relational context that Kleinman and Fitz-Henry (2007: 64) suggest our “interpersonal processes will increasingly alter our conceptions of the self and self processes.” Volunteers were not just more than the development projects they took up; they were also more than their individual intentions. Their selves and their decisions were always intertwined with those surrounding them, and while in one moment self-betterment was rooted in stigma, competition or personal gain, in another instance, it was shaped by loss and an undiminished desire to care for and create bonds with others both at home and abroad. By examining its plurality, I found that self-betterment was as much a symptom of self-governance—the making up of the private self—as it was an interpersonal struggle against it, revealing the ever-changing and unpredictable forms that volunteer selves take along with the uncertain social and economic conditions that buttress them.

**An Institution of Un-Belonging**

In reducing selflessness to sacrificial acts and equating self-betterment with employability, an entire spectrum of possibilities—both losses and gains—is overlooked. The memories of care that volunteers shared with me illuminated some of these less-document possibilities, shedding light on the socio-economic conditions and material realities shaping them. The university as one of these social spaces is important because this is where students are encouraged to take up paths of self-discovery. It is also where students learn how to work and survive in an incredibly competitive and individualistic environment. It is an institution in which students must achieve their value and prove their worth to society. Inclusion is not given. As one student told me, she
initially became involved with volunteering, in part, “to make friends because university was sort of isolating.” Although loneliness is frequently associated with elderly populations, Malkki (2015: 137) observes that, in fact, it is “an oppressive and painful condition for many.” In the literature on volunteer self-betterment, however, young students are often presented as the epitome of resilience, sociality and strength, a world full of experience and opportunity before them; their self-interest is merely a product of privileged entitlement and consumerism.

But I found the stories that volunteers shared with me often painted a very different picture. Balanced on the threshold of society, somewhere between partial and full membership, students attending university exist in a liminal space of un-belonging. Here, within the walls of the educational institutions they attend, the very basis for societal belonging is contingent on their self-advancement ahead of others. Their self-interest is not always a product of strength; sometimes it is a product of uncertainty. In the endless pursuit of public value and inclusion, self-interest, ironically, becomes vital. This “risk society” Biehl et al. (2007: 11) argue “denies systemic loss and normalizes insecurity, which becomes the basis for new states of exception.” This hyper-individualistic setting came up in many, if not all, of my interviews with students. But sometimes this was for them to tell me that their trips were, in fact, not motivated by this desire to advance the self over other students; they firmly rejected this path and the simulated forms of belonging that it would ultimately secure. These students yearned for something else, something more than their individual self.

In certain moments, most students struggled with the idea that their work was more valuable than those tourists who built houses or volunteered in orphanages. But in some of my interviews, a palpable and tenacious desire to actually escape individualism and competition in the university setting was evident. For these students, losing the private self was an important motivation for going abroad because they wanted to become “immersed,” to break down the walls of isolation and bare their vulnerability, to find belonging in the unknown. Being immersed was not just about being more than a “passive observer,” the volunteer tourist; it was also about membership and acceptance. As one volunteer describes:
I felt the most spiritual when I was there of any other time in my life, which was interesting because I’m not religious. You know it’s a big honour to be invited to go to church so we would be invited by the locals to go to their different churches every Sunday and you know their church ceremonies are four hours long every Sunday morning and none of it is in English, but it was just I felt very grounded when I was there I don’t really know how to describe it. It’s just you take everything out of your life that doesn’t matter and then it was literally like you were surrounded by people all the time.

Another volunteer tells me what volunteering in India means to her:

*I’m really interested in volunteering in general to be a part of my community or communities (…) I do feel a connection when I’m there and actually that was a big drawback returning from India…In a weird way, I felt connected to India and when I came back I almost felt more connected there than I did here.*

Sharing a similar sentiment, a volunteer explained to me that, for her, "*the best part of it was getting to meet all the people and just getting to live there and starting to feel that I was part of it…feeling like I actually belonged. That was a really rewarding experience.*"

This sense of belonging, however, was not guaranteed. One woman looked uncomfortable when she told me that she noticed locals paying more attention to another volunteer, even though she was the "new arrival" in the community. She looked down for a moment and then said, "*My self-esteem at that time was very low and I just got the impression that they were more interested in her than me.*" Without pausing, she starts talking about how she will never forget the smell of human waste in Ghana, a hint of embarrassment rising in her voice. For a moment I catch myself wondering how someone could be absorbed in self-esteem issues while being so occupied by the smell of human waste. They felt like two very different thoughts tripping over each other. But as the moment dissipated, so did my preconceived notions of the self-less and self-managing humanitarian. There was something jarring and unexpected about her desire to be noticed, particularly in her willingness to share this desire openly with me. Even as she tried to abruptly change the conversation, the threads of her self-esteem hung in the air long enough for me to grasp the chance she took in sharing her vulnerability, and the sociality she ultimately desired.
Like their assertions of value, volunteers shared their vulnerabilities not just during our interviews about their trips, but also within our interviews, as part of them. I was drawn to the unexpected intimacy of these conversations, this unconventional space of belonging and shared understanding. In our interactions, I felt a mutual desire for sociality and immersion, my own isolation looking back at me. For a moment, the roles of researcher and participant would fade, as if these conversations were themselves breaking down our private worlds and individualization. It became clear that these students were not always the embodiment of strength, entitlement or resilience. They were fragile and complex, filled with doubts about their future and their place in a society. It has been assumed that students already belong, their self-betterment extending from their membership in an academic institution, when in fact some students feel isolated and alone, their sense of belonging is fraught, and their desire for self-betterment emerges not always, or only, from a place of blind affluence, but rather, from a locale of liminality; a space of un-belonging. Without denying that students attending university are engaging in meaningful social events and relationships, I want to draw attention to the differential experience of belonging and membership in university, and importantly, the struggles and vulnerabilities that are either ignored or are made into yet another individual project for the private self. To this end, I understand the institution of un-belonging as a space in which formal membership is not a guarantee of felt membership, and that as a significant hub of sociality, university experiences are still not exempt from struggle, insecurity, or isolation. Given that volunteer opportunities are often packaged as both a career and mental health boost, it is the student who is ultimately held responsible for their successes and their inadequacies. In this sense, belonging is at stake in university, because this too, is the responsibility of the individual student. To be clear, university experiences are multi-faceted and many. The purpose here is not to dismiss these other possibilities, but rather, it is to demonstrate how they are sometimes interrupted by painful experiences, which have been rendered invisible in the context of experiential education and volunteer tourism opportunities.

When I asked a young woman about her motivations for volunteering in an orphanage in Ghana, she told me she needed “a reprieve from life,” but continued to frame her project as a self-serving endeavour. I found this puzzling, not because the desire for reprieve is not self-servings—there are certainly personal gains involved—but
because her statement also conveys a kind of self-loss. Her desire for reprieve suggests a painful reality that is both suffered and amended alone, in private. Her self-betterment transpired from a private need to care for, to serve, the self. This kind of felt responsibility cannot be understood within the realm of employability and careerism. Rather, her sentiment reflects a cycle of vulnerability and care that always rests on the individual. Even in her suffering, she still felt self-involved, somehow responsible. Is it not self-involved to seek reprieve from a privileged life? Compared to the communities they visited, volunteers perceived their own struggles as insignificant and negligible, reinforcing the idea that they alone were responsible for them. Contrary to the depiction of volunteers feeling lucky in the face of poverty as I had read in numerous scholarly critiques of volunteer tourism in developing countries, the participants I spoke to often felt conflicted about their relative affluence, unable to hide their personal struggles and unable to deny their many privileges. To take care of their own vulnerabilities amidst the suffering they perceived felt impossible. At the same time, students did not want to reinforce the idea that suffering belonged to the developing world. As a result, their self-care was always there, together with their care-for-others, but compared to their public interventions in the communities they visited, their self-care was often private, hidden and individualized.

With no other classification available for their intentions, the students I met with almost unanimously took up the prescribed label of self-interest, an uneasy look of guilt or shame appearing on their faces. Volunteers desperately wanted to be more than an essential, individualized self. They wanted to further their careers and simultaneously be more than their career aspirations. They wanted to be more than the “hopey-changey” volunteer-tourist, yet they were filled with their own moral convictions for a better future. They sought to distance themselves from the selfless-saviour endeavours of the past but their self-interest was never clear-cut, a need to care-for-others clung tightly to even the most self-serving testimonies. They desired sociality but needed to highlight their individuality, their selves always multiple, conflicted, and in tension. By accepting the label of self-interest projected onto them, however, volunteers were forced to understand every action, every experience, even those experiences of inadequacy and isolation as self-interested—a burden for the self and by the self. Their intentions and their selves were reduced to a singularity. It seems a cruel irony that in order for students to find
belonging, a kind of social immersion beyond this individuality, they take up unpaid experiential opportunities designed to set them apart, by giving them a “competitive advantage” over others. On the SFU Volunteer Services ENGAGE Blog, a student writes:

> Often as university students we can feel lost and it can be hard for us to gauge where we fit in and discover our passion. Volunteering and making meaningful contributions can make you feel useful and appreciated. It can give you a feeling of purpose as you use your skills and the knowledge you acquired from school and life experiences, for the benefit of others. It can also lead you to realize undiscovered passions and career paths that you might not have come across otherwise.

One impassioned volunteer told me, her face an expression of hopelessness and frustration: “This is your only way to get your fucking foot in the door and it’s so ridiculous to have to kind of integrate yourself into this but you do!” Noticeably disheartened, she continues: “I’m becoming increasingly disillusioned with the hyper-competitiveness of everything and I’m more and more understanding of the roots of these things and I want to remove myself as much as possible. But it’s so intrinsic to our society.”

The formalization of competitive volunteering opportunities depends on representations of community engagement and social reciprocity, without ever fully being either of these things. One volunteer tells me about her experience volunteering for a local organization in Vancouver visiting palliative patients: “Volunteering as a labour of love is awesome,” but she notes that the demands are too great in the wake of social spending cuts. “The program struggles to find volunteers,” she explains. “It’s hard to find enough because so many people want it...there is a problem here.” So many people want the service she gives, which on the most basic level could be described as friendship. Her visits are social; she is a friend when a patient feels forgotten and alone. Still, these are her “clients” she tells me. This official exchange of friendship is steeped in professional and institutional formalities, which fails to account for the possibility that volunteers might also experience loneliness and isolation. Volunteering becomes a private affair, a social sore masked by individual caregivers. Through this prescribed exchange we seem to forget that both client and volunteer are persons. She and I talk about the socially isolated patients she visits and I ask her about the root of this
“problem.” She sighs, “Voluntarism is a weird thing the more I think about it.” She laughs, furrowing her brow: “The fact that it happens formally. You feel a lot of these things should just sort of happen within the networks that you know…like wanting to help out?” I nod in agreement and she continues: “Where it isn’t that they are signing up to volunteer, they are just part of a community.” At some point, voluntarism became a very “specific” thing she tells me. It replaced traditional community ties and relations of reciprocity, which are “things you don’t think about as volunteering anymore.” With directed precision she explains that we used to have “community events with people socializing,” but that is exactly “where volunteering got appropriated by neoliberalism because that was volunteering.” At first we are talking about how austerity measures impact the isolated patients she visits, but then our conversation shifts towards how they impact the volunteers who work within these formal channels. In the end, both volunteer and recipient are socially isolated, in search of community and belonging. And both are slipping unnoticed through the gaps created by neoliberalism.

In sum, even though students were often adamant in labeling their work abroad as self-motivated for career or employment gains, there were times when this particular kind of self-interest was clearly lost or conflicted. Although stigma and identity management were still a significant part of the experiential projects and internships that students took up, the discredited volunteer tourist was hardly the sole determinant of their motivations for going abroad. Individual particularities and personal histories were always altering this prescribed course of self-betterment in significant ways. Many volunteers often expressed a desire to escape the constant pressure felt in university to advance their self at all costs. One volunteer described her choice to go abroad during her degree: “To be honest, in university you’re very self-centered in a sense, with what you want, you’re focusing on yourself all the time (...) but I always thought it was kind of important to step back every so often.” She observes that many students will volunteer so they can put it on their résumé, but maintains that this was never her motivation. Rather, she sees her volunteering as a way to do something “kind of self-less” amidst an institution that cultivates self-interest. In this way, she destabilizes her sense of self, losing, if only for a moment, her center. Instead of an inward project of self-governance, her voluntarism, in a way, undermines the self-betterment obligation celebrated by the university and its experiential education programs. Yet, it is her sentiments that are often
mocked by other volunteers, and critiqued by scholars; her work in an orphanage is less measurable, less political, and always more exploitative.

In thinking about self-escape, Malkki (2015) describes a kind of self-loss for humanitarians who travel “out there” to escape their Finnish lives, jobs, or identities. Self-escape seems to imply that losing a part of the self is not always pleasurable; it can also be painful. After all, to escape suggests that one has something to escape from. For the students I spoke with, to lose the self, to escape, meant many different things. To rebel against a culture predicated on self-involvement was not just a stance against consumerism and competition; it was also a way to cope with grief and losses of a different kind, and in some cases, a way to lose the private self and find a new kind of associational life. In losing one part of the self, students were often hoping to find another person, another “way of living,” another self. One volunteer told me she wanted to lose her critical self: “I wanted to get outside of my critical spiral that university had found me in and I realized that it was okay to find certain things I believe in and certain things I don’t (...) I realized I could honour both sides of myself.” For other students, self-loss was about challenging a specific part of their selves, a struggle or vulnerability. “When I was at the beginning of high school, I had a really serious eating disorder,” a volunteer tells me. “I wanted to do something meaningful to get out of my own head (...) It really got me out of a bad place in my life,” she says. “So when I was sort of in a crappy place at the end of my first year of university, I was like, oh well, I will volunteer!” In all of these instances, self-loss was accompanied by self-gain in various shades.

It was impossible for me to think about the volunteer self as either self-less or self-interested because they emerged together, their boundaries overlapping. By problematizing categories of selflessness and self-interest, we can see that volunteer selves do not fit neatly into either. Rather, the contours of their personhood spill into both, but almost never in identical or isolated ways. Even if they were deeply personal experiences, self-loss and self-gain always seemed to involve other people and other selves; they were intensely social and relational subjective states. Far from the unchanging depictions of the self-serving or self-less volunteer in the literature, these students and their intentions were anything but passive, apolitical expressions. Often their self-betterment emerged from a silent place of uncertainty and un-belonging glazed
over in academic critiques. One volunteer told me plainly, “it wasn’t just about doing good; it was also about letting go.” Their unpaid projects of self-betterment were not merely products of careerism and information management, an extension of the individualized, educated self. Sometimes their self-betterment was about challenging this private self, their labour an act of resistance. At other times, self-betterment was about losing the self, and finding “an outlet to care.” Just as it is impossible to evaluate volunteer motivations for going abroad without examining the universities that cultivate them, we cannot discuss the volunteer subject outside of the larger realm of unpaid care-work in which they labour.

**Caregivers: Invisible Labour, Invisible Women**

Our cultural celebration of self-motivation, and the experiential education mandate for self-betterment—the good worker—along with the scholarly critiques of this mandate, fail to include the private forms of care that also depend on the individual; they are hidden under its exterior. By changing the one-dimensional view of volunteer self-betterment, these cycles of care and private suffering rise to the surface. In our current socio-economic climate, the burden of care rests on individuals and quite often we find that these are the shoulders of women. Self-betterment, as an increasingly celebrated component of experiential education projects garners its legitimacy through the global currency of labour. This currency capitalizes on unpaid care-work at the same time that it distances itself from less-impactful forms of volunteering often associated with women’s missionary work. The shift away from these moralized projects in development work in favour of entrepreneurial or professional projects is not just because of our colonial past. Nor is it simply because volunteering in an orphanage can be problematic and exploitative. The disdain for menial forms of care-work is deeply rooted in sexism and misogyny, which frames these tasks, and the people who do them, as apolitical, insignificant, and ultimately less substantive than those who do real, critical work (Malkki 2015). Real work and real development are increasingly couched in formal contributions to the public sphere. Volunteering in an orphanage or teaching at a school, on the other hand, are not real jobs; they are left to the morally inclined, the “save-the-world” types.
The private forms of care that exist beneath the surface of experiential education and volunteer development projects must be examined as part of a cycle that simultaneously depends on and disparages women, whose suffering I found is rendered just as invisible and insignificant as their unacknowledged care-work. If some students already exist in a space of un-belonging at university, then women are put in a doubly precarious bind where their societal membership is contingent on both publically recognized labour contributions and unseen acts of care. Their employment never replaces the private care-work that is also required of them. Instead, women must continuously achieve both. When I asked one young woman about her extensive volunteering history both at home and abroad, she shrugged and said: “It kind of felt as if that’s what you’re supposed to do, like you’re part of this cycle and if you don’t give back what about the next group of people?” What this statement underscores, beyond an ideal of reciprocity, is that for many women care-work is not a choice. Most volunteers explicitly referenced a “cycle” to which they felt indebted, framing their volunteer work as their contribution back into it. For the women I spoke with, self-betterment always entailed both a need to care for the self and a need to care-for-others. With this cycle in mind, how can we continue to examine experiential education and volunteer tourism as isolated and apolitical exercises in self-interest?

Almost all of the volunteers I interviewed were women. This seems to be a common finding in the literature (Malkki 2015). In her study of development, whiteness, and gender, Heron (2007) notes that women continue to be the predominant undertakers of development work. Although some critical development scholars have alluded to the underlying gender dynamics found in development work and volunteer tourism, their analyses have largely failed to situate them in lived experience. The story that follows is about one of the women I had the pleasure of meeting. Her history, relationships, and aspirations provide texture to an otherwise flattened portrait of volunteer self-betterment and care-work. It is a story about her life as much as it is about her intentions, the selves that were made and unmade alongside societal changes. For this reason, her self-betterment is so much more than a single development project or self-motivated career goal. She illuminates the private forms of care and suffering that women experience and often feel individually accountable for as they endlessly improve and prove themselves to the world around them. While she attempted to share the
burden of care in the community she visited, her own experiences of suffering and loss were hers alone, somehow always inevitably self-serving. Yet, in our interview she was eager to share some of these more painful stories. In such a competitive environment, where information management is essential to survival, I was surprised by how open she was, as if her stories, and the selves she invoked, needed to be shared with someone else. In doing so, the private self was displaced, unmanaged if only for a moment, and the shared self, understood and accepted would fill the room.

Although self-betterment for all of the women I interviewed had many paths, they each had something in common. They all expressed a desire for sociality and connection with others. Their experiences of self-loss and self-gain therefore did not seem to emerge from a secure sense of belonging or entitlement, but rather, stemmed from a space of liminality, of un-belonging. Self-making for these women was fragile and uneven, constituted within an invisible cycle of care that depends on unpaid labour to fill the gaps created by and sustained through neoliberal practices. These caveats are often invisible to the public because they tend to masquerade under the always-beckoning discourse of “opportunity.” This is especially true for young students who are bombarded with evanescent opportunities to do more and be more in order to become an essential part of their communities. We cannot conceptualize volunteer self-betterment outside of this social context because in doing so we bury all of the gaps, the unseen care-work, and the invisible lives of the women who do it. Often it is women who fill these gaps, and by the same token, it is often women who slip through the cracks.

**Becoming Untethered: Allison’s Story**

Amah was her Ghanaian name she tells me, which means mother. At the beginning of our conversation, I ask if she could tell me a little bit about herself. Most volunteers would list their age, academic program and where they had travelled on their volunteer trip. But when I ask Allison, she immediately launches into her past, her family, and at the center of this story is her mother. Allison is a mature student in her thirties. She has worked in television broadcasting. There is a pause in her story, her eyes focusing on something in the distance: “In 2010 my Mom passed away, complications from mental health and addictions disorders,” she says. I think about responding, but
she goes on: “So that there was one of my motivations for volunteering in Africa, was to sort of pay homage to my Mom, you know, a tribute to her memory.” I nod. Allison looks straight at me with a kind of calm intensity. “She was a caregiver,” she says, “she spent her whole life taking care of other people. She was a registered nurse, a single Mom, took care of her aging parents…” Even now as I read these words, I am struck by her openness, the vulnerability she embodies and shares unbidden. Her mother, the endless caregiver slips unseen through the very same social fissures she was trying to fill. In this tribute, however, Allison is not just sharing a memory of her mother; she is also making visible the cycle of care of which her mother was part, casting light on her contributions, and her will to endure. I am reminded of Biehl’s (2007: 217) work on the “will to live.” The patients he refers to exist on the margins of the health care system, many of which have gone officially unnoticed, their lives unfolding within a “state of apparent invisibility.”

It was not until later, after the interview was over that I noticed how, without being prompted, Allison had outlined her “motivations” for volunteering abroad. She listed them off as parts of her self. As someone who had volunteered in a nursery school in Ghana doing “traditional volunteer tourism,” Allison was fully aware of the critiques against volunteer tourism and had come prepared to our meeting. She had taken notes on a documentary that problematized volunteer tourism. She shared these with me, and at the top of the page, in bolded font, she had typed: “My Motivations/Inspirations for heading to Ghana.” Allison was never trying to defend her intentions, but rather, was prepared to poke her own holes in them. Volunteers know their intentions are under scrutiny. This was clear in my interview with Allison. While I was certainly interested in volunteer motivations, I found the nature of their testimonies much more fascinating. Who was I to categorize or pass judgment on their intentions as self-less or self-centered? Yet, this verdict often felt expected. Although some volunteers were certainly hoping to justify or defend their projects abroad, there was something familiar about their focus on motivations; it mirrored the critiques I found in the literature. Somehow, volunteer intentions have become strangely public, and so participants were always ready to share them in full. From a researcher standpoint this was rewarding, but I could not help but feel troubled by it. I realized that their testimonies to themselves and to others, including myself, were formed from a place of individual responsibility. Not only did Allison share her motivations publically, she also felt the need to critique and
problematize them. She held herself accountable. This inner critic appeared in almost all of my interviews as students had taken stock of literature in this area. Furthermore, this kind of introspection and public debriefing was encouraged during their experiential education or volunteer tourism programs. Even after Allison had told me that her trip to Ghana was a tribute to her mother, she still understood her intentions overwhelmingly as self-serving, and was explicit about the role of her “narcissism, ego.” While she certainly experienced personal gains in Ghana, she was also faced with many losses. Because the literature has constrained volunteers to a single trajectory of self-betterment, she felt obliged to understand and monitor her self within this singularity. Her losses and struggles are rendered inconsequential, along with the cycle of care of which she, like her mother, is part. While her intentions become public property, the complexity of her life goes unnoticed.

Allison tells me that after her mother passed away, she entered “a profound state of grief” and that she was not “thinking healthy.” In one of her journal entries leading up to her trip, she writes: “I’m looking to cure my mind in Africa.” Two days later, there is another entry, not from a place of egoism or self-interest, but from a place of suffering, a place of loss:

Part of me doesn’t care if I don’t make it back to Canada alive...I’m so ambivalent about the trip. Perhaps it’s residual from the prolonged grief, and a perpetual state of apathy. I’ve maintained this stoic composure for so long. Hopefully this experience will help me become untethered.

After Allison returned to Canada from Ghana, she learned that one of the very young children she cared for had been crushed and killed by a podium she was playing on. In her journal, Allison refers to her as “my special baby girl, Harmony.” She is noticeably upset as we talk about her. Allison has a lot of resentment towards her volunteer placement and in one moment she blames the nursery school for Harmony’s death. But in the next moment, Allison questions whether it was her own presence there that might have somehow inadvertently led to Harmony’s death. Allison’s sense of guilt and doubt became increasingly evident, spilling into her stories about her mother, her trip, and Harmony. Far from a project of self-betterment rooted in personal gains and achievements, Allison’s story of self-betterment was shaped by residual loss. Loss as a
kind of self-escape between grief and composure, and loss through its lived experience: to lose a loved one, those who had cared for her and those she had cared for. “Numbness,” she recalls. Numbness was how she felt.

In 2014, Allison tells me she was laid off from her job in broadcasting. She is currently volunteering locally in Vancouver at both a retirement home and a recovery house for women with substance abuse problems while she finishes up her Bachelors degree. I ask her more about her local volunteering after Ghana. She explains: “We are fulfilling a void (…) these are duties or functions that should be filled by paid employees, but because of funding or lack of funding, I think especially anything to do with old people you know they are often overlooked, those duties fall on volunteers.” She contrasts this volunteering with some of the unpaid intern work she did when trying to enter the market for broadcasting:

I almost feel… I don’t want to say I feel maybe a greater burden, but I actually really empathize with the volunteer coordinator that I work with (…) because I can see the needs at that retirement home and their hands really are tied. Now that’s very different from you know anything in arts and entertainment where they are just using volunteers and interns as a façade for free labour (…) At the retirement home there is no empty promise in terms of well, if you volunteer a certain number of hours that means that you have a shot at gaining steady employment.

In her study of voluntarism in Italy, Muehlebach (2012) describes a feeling of non-usefulness for the non-working. For many of the unemployed, this feeling coexists with loneliness. On the SFU Volunteer Services ENGAGE Blog, a student writes: “Have you ever thought to yourself, what am I doing with my life? You are not alone” (emphasis in original). Their article, entitled, “Finding Purpose Through Volunteering,” suggests that navigating the uncertainty of school and a future career can be especially difficult. Volunteering, they say, is the answer. In a similar contribution to the SFU ENGAGE Blog, a student discusses “3 Reasons Why Volunteering in University is Good for Your Mental Health.” As a way to combat the stress and anxiety associated with school they suggest that students volunteer. “Volunteering,” they write, “makes you happy.” In fact, “studies have shown that volunteers compared to non-volunteers live a happier and healthier life.” Finally, they suggest volunteering allows students to “build social
connections” and “develop a sense of belonging.” But even in these suggestions, the emphasis is on individual coping. Mental health struggles in university are made into yet another project for the private self. Volunteering seems to only mask experiences of alienation and un-belonging by providing a “sense” of membership and connection. For Allison, volunteering did not seem to make her happier or gave her a sense of belonging or self-worth. The guilt and anxiety she described were always suffered alone and in private. The unseen care-work that she, her mother, and other women have done and continue to do is achieved with both hands tied.

I heard many different stories of self-betterment, but none of them fit neatly within the parameters of complete self-interest or selflessness. Despite the individual gains experienced by some volunteers, their betterment always involved finding, meeting, and being surrounded by others. Volunteers desired and valued social connections and relationships. In this way, self-betterment was hardly just an individualistic exercise; it was also deeply interpersonal. By exploring the plurality of self-betterment and its movement between forms of self-loss and self-gain, this chapter sought to highlight the porous and shared volunteer self that is made and unmade not just above others, but also with and through others. Volunteers found themselves enmeshed in a tension between their own self-care and their desire to care-for-others. But these tensions and the socio-economic conditions they point to are hidden beneath the surface of our cultural celebration of autonomy and self-motivation. Although volunteers, like Allison, were definitely shaped by a societal and educational obligation to better themselves, they were never passive bystanders to this process. Self-betterment with all its losses and gains is not even, predictable or linear, and at its core there is a consequential tension between autonomy and sociality. In some moments, however fleeting and slight these may be, this friction destabilizes the making-up of the private self and illuminates the unseen acts of care—the gaps and exceptions—upon which it rests.
Chapter 3.
The Precarious Self—Manufacturing Value, Managing Worth

Through their international experiential learning and volunteer tourism opportunities, young Canadian students often hope to globalize their résumés. But after speaking with students about their plans for the future, almost every single one said that they saw themselves working and living in Canada. Similarly, while global citizenship for volunteers commonly took precedence over domestic citizenship, “being Canadian” remained a fundamental tenet of their trans-nationality. When I asked students what it then meant to be Canadian, their responses were always tied to a sense of international responsibility. Their domestic membership encompassed a global mandate, which in turn, fed back into their national identity. This led me to think about the Canadian self not just within, but also as part of the international milieu—that is, a national identity that constructs a global cosmos. In the wake of internationalism, the Canadian self is holding onto its roots, while carving out an essential space for itself within this globalized landscape. As a result, the global subjectivities students took up in their international volunteer efforts also reproduced the Canadian self.

Yet, what constitutes this Canadian identity for volunteers beyond a sense of international responsibility is not easy to discern. For many of the students I spoke with, Canadian citizenship was deemed largely unimportant in the context of their daily lives. For others, Canadian citizenship was a deeply problematic category with few redeeming qualities. These students would explicitly distance themselves from Canadian citizenship. They aimed to problematize the nation-state system and the constraints of nationality by situating their selves and their desire for membership within alternative local and global communities. Comparatively, a small number of students expressed a strong affinity to their Canadian citizenship. Most often, however, students would appear
momentarily speechless when I asked about its meaning, as if Canadian citizenship did not fully apply to them. Instead, these students would cite community engagement and global consciousness as broader expressions of their citizenship. I do not believe that this is merely an indication of privilege or entitlement. Neither does it represent a recession of the Canadian state, its power or influence over citizens. On the one hand, their aversion to national attachments in favour of global and local commitments might suggest that the latter are better suited to contemporary lifestyles and job prospects. Indeed, international proficiency and community involvement are coveted qualifications for new graduates entering the job market. On the other hand, their detachment from the state could be understood as a form of resistance, or at the very least, an unwillingness to take up nationalist labels. However, these alternative forms of membership are not separate from the state, but rather, are directly tied to the state, which fosters and legitimizes local and global labour experiences for young Canadian students. Similarly, these spatial imaginings remain those of the nation-state system. Consequently, the global and local subjectivities taken up by volunteers inadvertently reproduce the Canadian self.

Although some volunteers did not necessarily experience or perceive their Canadian citizenship, they did perform many of its tasks, responsibilities and ideals through their paid and unpaid labour contributions. In other words, while these students did not actively engage with their Canadian citizenship, it was always there in the shadows, not just in a legal sense, but also in their desire to belong, to become a valued citizen, "a productive member of society." This chapter explores these informal politics of membership and worth for young Canadians through another fragment of the volunteer self—the citizen. By tracing emergent symmetries between unpaid labour, global responsibility and community engagement for students, this chapter queries the relationship between international proficiency and the Canadian self, and ultimately asks what it means to belong as a citizen of value in our current political and economic landscape where so many exist on the threshold of full inclusion.
The Citizen Self & the Community

Volunteering, a student tells me, is “a very Canadian thing to do.” The helping identity she conveys runs deep in the Canadian context (Barry-Shaw & Jay 2012). “It is very engrained in Canadian identity,” another volunteer says, “that we think we are helpers going back to peacekeeping (…) the idea that a good Canadian helps out.” This historical and cultural specificity allows us to explore unpaid labour and voluntarism, not just as a performance of employability and care, but more precisely, as a performance of Canadian identity. Therefore, the need to work and the desire to care must be examined as expressions, in part, of the Canadian self. Although certainly not limited to the Canadian context, this national lens brings clarity to the volunteer experience of unbelonging, the threshold where students labour in order to one day surface as a valued member of “the community.” While participants referred fondly to a sense of community membership, it was often unclear to which community they sought belonging.

The language of community they engage seems to transcend space and scale, permeating both domestic and international realms. Anderson’s (1991) “imagined communities” comes to mind as communal spaces and public services thin, while discourses of participation, involvement, and community action proliferate with unprecedented fervour. If it is true that, as one student told me, voluntarism has been co-opted by neoliberalism and no longer refers to community reciprocity, then both the Canadian state and the academic institution have failed to chart its changing borders. Instead, these institutions depend on elusive representations of the community as simultaneously local, intimate, universal and global in scope. Students interact with these multi-scalar descriptions of community engagement as if they stand in stark contrast to the individualistic framework encountered in university or the nationalist tendencies of the state, when in fact these powerful institutions are the very ones who endorse and legitimate an aura of local and transnational community engagement. In order to explore the production and intersection of international proficiency and the Canadian self, Ferguson and Gupta’s (2002) concept of ‘transnational governmentality’ is useful. These scholars suggest that the nation-state stakes new claims in universality by extending its spatial authority throughout global entities. At the same time, the state fosters localities or “communities” under its gaze, thereby creating a power structure that
is simultaneously vertical and all encompassing. Supporting this spatial conceptualization of governance from a distance, voluntarism and unpaid international experiences are forms of community engagement that can be cultivated and regulated by the state, without the state ever being explicitly implicated.

On a brochure from SFU Volunteer Services, a young woman stands dressed in a business blazer smiling. The caption reads: "**HOW WILL YOU ENGAGE YOUR COMMUNITY? VOLUNTEER SERVICES**" (emphasis in original). Another pamphlet asks: "**Why Volunteer? To GAIN experience and meet new people. To DEVELOP and Discover new skills. To EXPLORE career and life possibilities. To GIVE back to the Community.**" Comparatively, the SFU C.A.R.E Global Travel Award for volunteer projects "**aims to promote a global village.**" The language of community, or a village in the last instance, is pervasive precisely because it is vague and undefined. "**Community**" is nevertheless applied generically across space and scale, its wide appeal arising not from its felt presence, but rather, from its marked absence. Most volunteers understood their unpaid labour as a form of community engagement. Not surprisingly, when I asked about the meaning of Canadian citizenship, volunteers once again cited the importance of both local and global communities, and their felt responsibilities to each. They saw themselves as formally Canadian, but beneath that, many volunteers were positioned as hopeful community members. Citizenship, for the volunteers I spoke to was therefore expressed through unpaid labour contributions to "**the community.**" This community was local and interpersonal, or transnational and universal—or both. In either case, volunteers lingered on the cusp of full membership.

Although this study began as an investigation into volunteer tourism, it became increasingly evident that I could not discuss the global realm of unpaid labour without also discussing the local, and importantly, the junction at which these spatial designations intersect: the nation-state. One volunteer told me: "**I think going on this international trip sort of opened my eyes to volunteering and incorporating it into my daily life so now,**" she says, "**it’s easier to volunteer locally and I don’t need to be going off on a trip or something.**" Similarly, another volunteer explains: "**I’m working in a job where I get to deal with both international things and domestic things so it’s sort of where I want to be. It made me really reflect back home and think about how my actions at home**
really affect people who live here and not just abroad so that’s become a really huge part of who I am now.” Every student I spoke to who had volunteered in another country also had a volunteering history in the Canadian context. In Malkki’s (2015: 24) study of Finnish humanitarian workers, she also found an intimate connection between the domestic and international realms, a “home-grown” sense of global responsibility. “When I went abroad to intern or volunteer or whatever,” a volunteer tells me, “I was also thinking about how I don’t want to perpetuate Western stereotypes when I’m abroad. I don’t think Canadians should act that way. I want to go and behave in a certain way and it’s because I was brought up in Canada.” For the students I met, the desire for community membership, both at home and abroad, could be traced back in some way to the Canadian self. The pull of the community was home-grown. Through these intersections, the Canadian state is euphemized into its own kind of community, cultivating and encompassing multiple localities and citizens under its gaze. Most often, students were not describing themselves as citizens of Canada; they were describing themselves as citizens of their Canadian communities, and of course, citizens of the world.

At the outset of this study, citizenship was an important analytical category because volunteer tourism and experiential education require international travel and passports. There are undeniable privileges and colonial legacies associated with global mobility, which many volunteers noted during our interviews. But beyond possessing a passport and having legal citizenship status in Canada, many volunteers struggled to explain how they understood their Canadian citizenship. In almost every explanation, volunteers relied heavily on descriptions of community involvement. One of the participants I interviewed referenced her job working for immigration services when I asked about the meaning of Canadian citizenship:

So part of the PowerPoint presentation we gave (...) was that part of being Canadian is volunteering. It’s a very Canadian thing to do (...) I think that as citizens it is part of your responsibility to care about your community and care about your country (...) the idea of giving back and improving your community, and being involved in your community.
As an intermediary flanked by the Canadian state and society, her understanding of citizenship sheds light on the connections between unpaid labour, community responsibility, and the Canadian self. It is “your responsibility” to “your community.” Echoing the mandate of SFU volunteer services, the responsibility rests on the individual to engage their community, implying not just membership; but also ownership and accountability. Volunteers spoke about “their” communities, but it was never clear what constituted them or how they fit within them, only that they felt “indebted.” More frequently, it seemed that becoming a valued member of society was continuously at stake for young students, belonging always just out of reach. As her comment above suggests, in caring for your local community you are also caring for “your country.” Even when volunteers shrugged off or challenged their nationality, their desire to become valued parts of their communities, and their felt responsibility to others both at home and abroad were still expressions, in part, of the Canadian self. Citizenship takes on a new collective meaning under this community lens, obscuring its exclusionary ties to the state. As one volunteer explained to me: “I feel my citizenship as more of a community citizen. So my role within my community and what I do to give back to my community, rather than as a Canadian.” This led me to reconsider the role of citizenship, not just as a privilege or legal document, but also as an informal and uneven imaginary that alters how volunteers experience and understand their unpaid labour—that is, as a form of community engagement detached from the nation-state, yet still imbued with the ideals, responsibilities and duties of the Canadian self.

**Engaging the World**

Unpaid global opportunities, international internships and co-op placements, volunteering abroad, and international experiential education all rely on the language of community as they produce a global landscape, a world to be experienced. In most of the advertisements for these experiences there are two scales at work: “We care for all people of all ages and all cultures, locally and globally,” the C.A.R.E Society writes. This kind of division and encompassment is common across many disciplines, but in this specific context, the absence of the state is noteworthy. As one student stressed when I asked her about volunteering and citizenship: “It’s encouraged because it transfers
responsibility from the government to the unpaid sector so it’s definitely beneficial to the state.” Despite this relationship, the state seems to disappear when talking about community engagement and voluntarism.

Relatedly, when a student completes an internship in a foreign country, they are said to have gained international experience. However, what constitutes “the international” and who defines it as such are unclear. For instance, one student told me about the confusion she experienced in selecting a “foreign cultural component” for her degree: “They have a very interesting categorization of what counts as ‘abroad,’ which I was trying to investigate exactly what they wanted and apparently it’s anything outside of Canada and the United States.” She laughs a little at this, explaining: “It’s interesting because it assumes that Vancouver is the same thing as Nunavut or something.” On the one hand, as she states, it homogenizes localities, and on the other, it lumps foreign cultures into a single global mound; visiting one country, one foreign culture, is synonymous with international proficiency. The international has become an expertise that can be harnessed and achieved. “I was explicitly told in classes that having some kind of international experience on my résumé would be good,” a student tells me, “no matter what it was.” She emphasizes, “People are trying to make themselves as competitive as possible in this globalized world.” All of this is done without reference to the nation-state system, within which international experience is made valuable, and importantly, made accessible to a select few. Instead, global opportunities circulate as non-state entities, espousing the international community, a space that transcends borders and connects us all.

This is hardly happening behind the backs of powerful state actors. Rather, these ideas and representations are produced by the state and taken up by its citizens. Global proficiency is coveted by the state and encouraged by its educational appendages. ‘International Experience Canada,’ for example, is a new Government of Canada travel and work “mobility program” for youth. “Gain a lifetime of experiences and an experience of a lifetime,” they write. “Work and Travel Abroad!” In a similar advertisement, an experiential education opportunity with AIESEC, SFU states: “Experience the World! (…) There are 110 reasons to go abroad, what is yours?” The 110 reasons they refer to are the countries they work in, but in the description that follows it is the language of the
community they mobilize: “Create a positive social impact on communities.” Students are “Engaging the World,” as SFU claims, but through a community lens that obscures links to the Canadian state, and the exclusionary borders it maintains.

One experiential education organization urges students to “Prepare yourself for an increasingly globalized world.” But for most of the students I spoke with becoming “more worldly” meant globalizing their résumés in order to find future employment in Canada. A common refrain among these students was after having worked in another country, they now knew with some certainty that they wanted to live and work in Canada. Observing this shift, one student told me happily: “I think people are turning more inwards towards community.” Another student explained how her understanding of Canadian citizenship changed through her international internships:

It gave me more of an identity with being Canadian and realizing that part of the reason I am working locally now is realizing the responsibility I have locally (...) I was really focused internationally and now I want to know more about Canada and then I think being able to work and contribute in some way.

These global experiences inversely create a local focus, a sense of community and the desire to work in Canada, which, in turn, feeds back into the global cosmos. What is often conceived as a threat to the institution of citizenship and the power of the nation-state—globalization—in this case actually reifies state borders and the Canadian identity through competitive labour power. After all, it is the state that encourages, regulates and legitimizes international working experiences, and it is the state that creates the incentive behind global responsibility.

In thinking about internationalism, Malkki (2015: 31) traces the historical trajectory of our “global imaginary.” After World War Two, the idea of global peace made its big debut. She suggests that this “global dream space” was predicated on the sovereign nation-state, a “world community” of individual nations. The kind of liberal internationalism she describes surfaced in many of my interviews. Some students were explicit in describing their global responsibilities as an extension of the privileged Canadian citizen:
I love Canada and I’m proudly Canadian, but the only reason I’m not picking garbage out of a garbage dump is because I was born here and someone else happened to be born there. That is not enough of a reason to turn my back on that person, which I think is part of the reason I gave when people would ask ‘why are you going into international travel?’ and I was like ‘because I’m a citizen of the world’ (...) I don’t feel a stronger calling to just help Canadians, so I have just always felt that it was something important to do regardless of where you are from.

Similarly, another volunteer tells me: “My conception of global citizenship is just the effects that my actions, as a Canadian, have around the world.” Echoing Malkki’s (2015: 25) findings, for these volunteers, being a good Canadian citizen meant being a “good citizen of the world.” Development and tourism scholars have addressed the influx of “global citizenry” within their disciplines and also as part of a much larger trend (Tiessen & Huish 2014, MacDonald 2014). These scholars stress the problematic underpinnings of the global citizen who is presented as the epitome of equality and universality, but is based in difference and privilege.

Some students I spoke to were highly critical of this interplay. When I asked a young woman about the importance of global citizenship, she responded firmly: “I think it still connotes the idea of federalism, like federations. We are global citizens but we are all in our own kind of way separate entities like the multiculturalism idea.” I nodded. “So it might be global,” she continued, “but it’s still citizenship, it’s still separate.” Many of these critical volunteers chose to distance themselves from citizenship, framing their ventures in opposition to the regime of nation-states. The alternative global community they envisioned was rooted in social justice. Seeking to escape the popularly condemned kinds of international travel often associated with colonialist states, such as volunteer tourism, these students imagined a world without state intervention and without citizenship. This viewpoint, they felt, was distinct from the imperialist “save-the-world” mentality of other volunteer tourists. While this alternative global subjectivity is often fiercely anti-colonial and anti-racist, it transpires from a place of formal citizenship. These students still return to Canada to live and work because they can. Critical subjectivities represent a challenge to the nation-state system, but just like the purveyors of Canadian world peace, they must also be examined as part of a global imaginary that is fronted by the state.
In the tourism and development literature on volunteer tourism, colonialism is all about Western intervention in the developing world. If, however, development is moving beyond the colonialis Arist helper-saviour imperative towards experiential education and internship opportunities for the working citizen, then Canadians are confronted with a different colonial relationship; one that is no longer constructed simply through their presence in the developing world. Our analyses of colonialism and international development must take into account the flow of labour not just out of Canada into the developing world, but also the flow of labour into Canada from the developing world. In recent years, the Canadian government has clamped down on immigration in favour of low-wage labour imports. These workers are cut off from welfare and social services and are often bound to abusive employers and unsafe working environments (Lenard & Straehle 2012). Their vulnerability is very different to that experienced by Canadians who work or volunteer in another country in an effort to globalize their résumés. Even if students problematize the colonial volunteer tourist, and challenge the nation-state system, their international labour experience is still entangled with the imperialist Canadian state. The colonial legacies of development intervention may be changing course, but the nation-state to which they are bound is not. Canada was forged from imperial and colonial pursuits, both inside and outside its borders, and it continues to maintain its influence therein through both an explicit and subtle global presence, of which Canadian students and volunteers are part.

Today there is an influx in international work and travel mobility, but these movements remain heavily regulated and surveilled by the state. Not only does the Canadian government legitimate the value of international proficiency for Canadian students; it also controls access and exclusion to these opportunities. Engaging the world is not an open invitation. Students who downplayed the importance of citizenship in a legal sense thus failed to see how their desire to belong, to become valued members of society via an unpaid international labour experience, had been shaped and approved by the Canadian state.
Youth Entrepreneurs & Soft Skills: Qualified to do Nothing

As jobs become increasingly scarce and unemployment rises, the productivity risks intensify. A PhD student asserts that the old advice given to graduates—finding their passion and working in an area that they love—is no longer relevant. She states bluntly: “That line is dead.” Students feel growing pressure to find their place in society, and assert their membership in their communities. While some students are able to find paid employment after graduation, current trends suggest that finding employment is much more drawn out, beginning when students enter an academic program. Whether through co-op programs or internship placements, work-integrated learning happens throughout the education process and is more and more global in focus. Through these programs some students are able to secure a paid position, but for the majority, international proficiency comes at a cost. In other words, it is unpaid.

Without any guarantees or job securities, students set out to qualify themselves in any way they can. This means that despite precarious employment prospects, students must continue to take up unpaid positions. As one student puts it: “It’s an ironic paradox. Unpaid internships are obviously going up as a right of passage for university students, and yet the job prospects are going down and student debt is going up.” Sighing in frustration, she looks at me knowingly: “Just this whole cycle.” Still, the language of opportunity is intoxicating. “It would have to be an incredible opportunity,” she tells me, in order for her to take another unpaid position. “The job markets are so bleak that I’m doing as much as possible and as diverse things as possible.” Students must continuously build up their skills and make up their selves in a competitive fashion: “It doesn’t really end, it’s definitely always a worry.” This heightened need to manufacture the self is precarious precisely because there is no end in sight. There are never any guarantees on the other side of opportunity. For many students, there is only the promise of potential. To a certain extent, volunteer selves become as uncertain as the socio-economic conditions they face.

Much like these uncertain conditions, their sense of membership and belonging in society is fraught. When I asked one volunteer about the Canadian job market, she emphasized how the uncertainty takes a toll on relationships: “That puts a lot of stress
on people as well because since jobs are so hard to come by, what does that do to relationships when someone can get a job somewhere and someone can’t? That’s a really big thing.” Similarly, another volunteer expressed to me that while she felt her volunteer experience “opened doors for a couple opportunities,” she was “still competing for them.” Weighed down with student debt, she tells me hopelessly, “I am not optimistic about my job prospects at all.” Both the university and the Canadian government maintain that Canadian youth exist within a world of opportunities, but I came to see this world as a series of fragile realities masked in the distant allure of community engagement, belonging and membership.

International volunteer tourism and experiential education opportunities are sold to students as skill-development projects and a “launch pad.” Over the course of my studies, I have received countless emails advertising “unique international volunteer/internship” positions. In a recent email, graduate students were encouraged to apply for a position co-leading a group of university students on an international volunteer project. These “University Leaders” would be able to “travel overseas for free.” Although this organization definitely falls within the volunteer tourism framework, they espouse an “experiential education” focus. In a different email for another organization, they ask students, “Why Intern?” The first item on the list: “Build your professional and academic profile.” Many students emphasized a perceived lack of qualifications, stressing that an unpaid internship would help them become “more specialized.” One of the volunteers I spoke to seemed conflicted: “There are so many jobs that require experience in the field and many of those experiences have to be gained through internships or volunteer work or unpaid labour, which means that if I want to get a job right away I might have to do an internship.” I ask her at what point she would feel qualified, or deserving of a paid position. She responds hesitantly, “I really don’t qualify for anything.” Despite taking on every opportunity and every promise of experience that came their way, students felt unqualified and unprepared to enter the workforce. Frequently, this manifested as a kind of self-doubt or a shaky sense of self-worth. Without enough qualifications and without a specialization, students were not just questioning their purpose in life and their place in society; they were also questioning their selves: beneath all the professional designations and certifications, who were they?
In the realm of international development, volunteers have long been criticized for working on projects without the appropriate qualifications. While many participants referenced the unqualified volunteer tourist building a house, other participants suggested that even when done through formal university channels, many experiential education practicums and internships are being undertaken without proper certifications. A psychology student, Kim, told me about her uncomfortable internship experience at an orphanage in Swaziland:

*People sort of assumed we were coming as interns and we had been told ‘you’re not going to be doing any psychological work, you’re just going to help out however you can and we want you to write papers on the psychology of development’ (…) But then we got there and they were like ‘Oh, you’re the psychologists!’ and we were like ‘Sorry, what? I’m in my second year of psychology, absolutely not,’ and they said ‘We want you to meet with these women they are depressed, please go talk to them.’ So it was terrifying, we did a month of pseudo-counselling where every night we would come home and be like what the hell, I should not have talked to that woman, I am not qualified (…) We are not qualified and we are not helping.*

While some volunteers used the academic component to justify and separate their development projects from volunteer tourism because they felt more qualified, Kim’s “pseudo-counselling” experience through the university cuts through their illusion of legitimacy. However, the critiques of unqualified development work, including Kim’s, have not stifled the growth of these programs. Rather, the message sent to students seems to convey that they merely need more qualifications, more education, and more critical expertise in order to engage communities and do good development work. The explosion of experiential programs promising skill-development and application seems to be directly tied to the critiques against the unqualified volunteer tourist whose work is deemed superficial and problematic, that is, less real and less legitimate. The issue for many students I spoke to, whose impressive qualifications and practicums made me worry about my own, was that no matter how many experiences they had under their belts, without job openings they felt inadequate; they were qualified to do nothing. Unpaid labour, both at home and abroad, fulfilled their need to contribute back to society while acquiring new skills and experiences, until one day they would have enough, and be enough to become a valued member of their community.
As international development morphs into a professionalizing apparatus for Canadian students, so too, the programs in developing countries become focused around “youth entrepreneurship.” One volunteer tells me she will be working with urban populations in Tanzania, helping local youth build “soft skills and business skills.” When I ask her about the meaning of youth entrepreneurship for this program, she explains:

They have found that urban youth are often graduating from high school and they have much more trouble I guess earning an income and finding jobs and kind of entering into the formal economy. So I think their big mission is to try and equip these youths with skills (...) They also have a curriculum and they do workshops as well so youth can come through and learn skills, gain contacts, and resources. So the focus on entrepreneurship is to give youth the agency to do it by themselves.

The irony of course is that unemployed Canadian youth are helping youth in developing countries find employment as part of their own career trajectory. As she described the “big mission,” I could not help but see the intersections between her own need to find work, and those of the youth she would soon assist. Canadian youth competing to enter the formal economy have realized their degree is not enough on its own; they also require these soft skills, contacts and resources. And the language of “agency” she mobilizes, is the same discourse that tells Canadian students they must continually make up their selves in the most competitive way possible through paid and unpaid positions. At the end of the day, both groups are held individually responsible for their future; they must “do it by themselves.” These novel parallels between the so-called practitioners and benefactors of development pivot on the self-directed entrepreneur and their endless quest for qualifications and authenticity. It is not just about their professional designations, but also their soft skills, their identity management—who they really are.

**Lines on a Résumé: Putting the Life in Curriculum Vitae**

One of the things I found most striking about the Canadian self is its propensity to be made up through documented labour contributions, paid or otherwise. Many of the students I met understood their citizenship as a form of community engagement, a way
of “giving back” through their productive and public contributions. Their working histories, in turn, constitute the citizen self whose value and involvement is constantly measured by the community. This documented history validates societal contributions and assigns legitimacy to the citizen self.

For young Canadians, it is insufficient to say who or what you are, or to give what Rose (1990) has called “a skilled performance.” Self-making is never just the individual management of relations and classifications because it is always dependent on the perceptions and opinions of others. For instance, networking is the phrase most often given as career advice to students. Self-worth is then determined by how well students are able to market their selves to others. Co-op students at SFU are told: “you’re going to get a job and you’re going to develop those skills and later be able to market yourself.” One student remarked that the confidence and independence he gained on his trip were traits that “employers and people in our society view very positively.” He tells me about his experiences applying for jobs: “A lot of them value leadership skills, that adds expertise to my advantage right, so I would speak to being outside my comfort zone and feeling accountable for your project and representing yourself, your university, your country.” As competition rises for entry-level jobs, students take up experiences that can be vetted and qualified in order to send a message about who they really are and why they matter. One student frankly stated: “I’m sorry but if you volunteer you’re a step ahead of those who don’t do any volunteering. It just shows you’re committed.”

Another student spoke about the construction of legitimacy in volunteering through formal observation and documentation. In this way, real qualifications emerge from an authoritative space, whereby “someone can sign off on a form that says you did this many hours.” Someone, she tells me, “is counting those hours.” She then goes on to compare these recorded and therefore legitimate experiences to informal acts of care that cannot be counted and validated. Helping a neighbour put together a fundraiser for their sick child, for example, could never be included on one’s CV, she explains: “There is no way I would ever go up to my family friend and be like I put five hours in, can you sign it ‘friend of Jane’s mother’?” She laughs at the implausibility and says, “It all needs to be counted and calculated and attributed for.” Notably, “Jane’s mother” is not an official authority on her labour contributions, and her charity is therefore not what
Muehlebach (2011: 73) describes as “amenable to calculation and, hence, public valuation.” The state and potential employers publically recognize one contribution, while the other remains a private and hidden form of care-work.

Much like the development programs that foster youth entrepreneurship, Canadian employers are looking for qualifications, professional designations, and increasingly, soft skills during the hiring process. Soft skills—personal qualities, attitudes and habits—are associated with one’s so-called emotional intelligence; they are rooted in social relationships. The shift towards a relational labour regime relies on “affectively laboring citizens” (Muehlebach 2011: 60), who are pulled into the social fabric through both their public contributions to the economy and their production of good feeling. Interestingly, this affective or emotional labour, which was once relegated to the domestic sphere as a kind of non-work, is now cultivated by the state and the labour market as the basis for social cohesion and constancy. The ability to affect is thus highly sought-after not just because it is profitable, but also because it standardizes subjects who are then “governed by reliable forms of affect” (Muehlebach 2011: 67).

It is hard not to connect this demand for soft skills and affective labour in the work place with our growing societal demand for the authentic. Without delving into the debates on authenticity, it is worth noting how our current political and economic landscape revolves on ideas of realness: real experience, real knowledge, and the real self. Being genuine is a coveted trait, as though it can be ascertained or measured by others. Not surprisingly, conveying these soft skills proves to be quite difficult, especially when they must be officially documented. With credential inflation and a wavering job market, however, it is necessary. A degree on its own is no longer competitive. Students must make their selves competitive. One student, rolling her eyes in frustration exclaimed: “The money you spend developing yourself to become a professional!”

The curriculum vitae has become the official, all-encompassing public representation of our selves. In thinking about Goffman’s (1963) concepts of ‘personal identity’ and a ‘biographical life,’ it is easy to see how the CV has become the most efficient way to make up our selves in a competitive and authorized fashion. Goffman (1963) stresses the ways in which identity pegs or social facts are built up, recorded and
attached to an individual, legitimizing a particular kind of public image or representation of the self. In managing this information, students aim to distinguish themselves from others by highlighting their qualifications and cementing their skills through public record.

“I can say, ‘yeah, I worked on this farm for two weeks’ and that from a résumé point of view or even getting into my program, I think it helped that I had agricultural volunteer experience,” a young student tells me. “You could show people that you were truly interested.” For many young students, the CV becomes their biographical life, and it must be endlessly improved. It is not just a representation of their working history; it is also an indication of their worth to society, and in turn, their own sense of self-worth. In this way, entire lives and entire selves are reduced to the lines on a résumé. Noting this, a volunteer became noticeably angry: “I’m sorry,” she said in a non-apologetic tone, “I don’t want my life subsumed under work. There is more to life than that.”

One of the students I met shared her thoughtful insights on the process of self-making vis-à-vis the CV:

When you think about a CV being an indication of you as a person and all the facets of you because now we are not just people, we’re “people.” We are these super people with all of these specific skills and are able to do all these specific tasks in life. So that line shows ‘oh a compassionate person that volunteered’ so it’s meant to speak to these different components of your personality (...) I think it also gives people such an easy way to manufacture these skills that they don’t actually have and that’s what I find so interesting about it too...even if you were like ‘Worked with Ministry of Health in Ghana’ where I actually followed around some dude for four days from the government and saw a little bit of what he did and so it could be ‘Policy Experience’ or ‘Teaching Experience.’ People tick off these things that otherwise would never be possible.

Being a person is not valuable in and of itself. In order to be found necessary, contributing members of society, students must become “super people.” They are denied the possibility to just be. Self-improvement, instead, is the ultimate calling; to become the best version of one’s self. “I think our generation,” a volunteer says motioning towards me, “is sort of bred or conditioned to reach for better, reach for better, reach for better.” Each line on the CV comes to represent a part of our identity, a public record of our selves. International experiences and voluntarism become “skills” that can be harnessed and achieved. When students take up critical development programs and experiential
placements over volunteer tourism, it is an indication of their character, their realness. One student told me of her volunteer trip: “It was like being in the real world (...) so that was very valuable.” These soft skills are somehow quantified and authorized through the CV by the sending organization, which in many cases is the academic institution. Given that most students were highly critical of moralized intentions in volunteer tourism, it seems ironic that their unpaid labour contributions allow them to manufacture not just skills and qualifications, but also, goodness and virtue, an emotional intelligence that supersedes others. Unlike the volunteer tourist, however, their work garners its legitimacy from the “academic component.” A volunteer admits with some reluctance:

*It looks good to say you have been to another country in general and that you were adaptable and flexible. And intercultural communication is a really important thing you know especially in the Canadian context where we are a diverse multi-cultural society. You know it comes up that it’s good for the labour market because you have these skills for intercultural communication.*

Unlike the volunteer tourist, their unpaid labour is not merely a form of privileged global mobility; it is also a form of social mobility unfurling within the education system.

**Idle Hands are Devil’s Work**

Volunteer tourism trips that cost on average $6000 for three-weeks in a developing country have been heavily criticized as an exclusive activity for the wealthy and affluent. But as these programs are replaced by experiential education projects through the university, costs for students are lowered and in some cases become non-existent once scholarships and stipends have been applied. Yet, many of the students I met spoke about privilege and access, highlighting the university as an institution that only some can afford. One young woman noted “the social reproduction of privilege” through experiential education programs: “There is definitely power and privilege involved when you’re abroad, but there is also power and privilege in coming home and talking about it with people who don’t have that opportunity.” Another student mentioned that her program did not offer any funding for her international requirement, “yet, it was mandatory.” Co-op programs also come with attached fees and additional costs. “They definitely feed us stats,” a co-op student explains, “like eighty percent of co-op students
get hired within a month of graduation or something.” Similarly, when I spoke with James about his experiential education organization he told me:

*This is something we often tell our students...when you go into an interview you describe a challenging situation that you have gone through and you can talk about all the things you have done to adjust and succeed in Uganda and that sets you apart from those who have the same degree as you.*

Social mobility is the mandate of these programs, both as a way to move ahead of those who cannot attend university, and as a way to supersede fellow graduates. Paradoxically, James suggested that the kind of person who does volunteer tourism does so from a place of affluence even as his programs promise to move students up the very same socio-economic ladder.

Becoming a full member of society—a “community citizen”—requires productive contributions and continual upward social mobility. “Being a Canadian is definitely about contributing,” I am told. Through their labour, citizens are made valuable and given purpose. As many scholars have suggested, some volunteers who go abroad are indeed just trying to bolster their working profiles. However, this seems to suggest that only Canadian students volunteering in developing countries are engaging in these liberal projects of self-making, when in fact, manufacturing a valuable self resonates deeply across every profession, and every community, including academia. “Making people feel worth their value is important” a young woman tells me, “and I think that is a worry when you are doing unpaid internships where there is nothing given back.” Students undertaking unpaid labour “opportunities” are perpetually trying to manufacture and manage their selves, and their worth to society. When I ask a participant about unemployment and voluntarism, she suggests there is a stigma against those who do not work or contribute. Volunteering, she says, “does become another way to justify that you’re still a productive member of society, doing something other than being lazy.” Another student told me that in her family “idle hands are devil’s work…sitting around doing nothing is not acceptable at all.”

Some students explicitly connected their labour contributions to the Canadian self: “As a Canadian, it’s your job, it’s your duty as a health care worker,” a volunteer
tells me. “This is what you signed up for.” Others sought to distance themselves from their Canadian citizenship status, positioning their selves and their labour within alternative local and global communities. Surprisingly, through their travels and international experiences, locality became more important to most students, but in countless and uneven ways. For some participants, this locality was rooted in the Canadian identity, as one volunteer expressed: “I didn’t realize I identified as Canadian as much as I did until I was in a place where no one was Canadian.” For other participants, locality was equated with the community. A volunteer spoke about her care-work through a community lens: “I could probably put aside three hours and do something for my community.” Similarly, another participant explained what it meant to be a citizen: “I look at my role and duties as more on an individual community basis.” This pervasive language of the community conveyed a sense of social intimacy and reciprocity, but when pressed, students were unable to pinpoint what exactly constituted this community in which they sought belonging. Instead, the community came to represent a kind of alternative to the Canadian self, even when the Canadian identity remained embedded in their desire to care-for-others both at home and abroad. For these students, becoming a citizen of value was detached from the Canadian state, while still being instilled with many of its values, responsibilities and ideals. In effect, their international volunteer experiences produced a form of individualized governance where they began to feel personally responsible to their communities, or alternatively, to their Canadian sensibilities. Even if the Canadian citizen slipped in and out of focus, the good, productive and working citizen remained a strong governing force. A stewardship program through a local university was captioned with the mandate: “Think global, Act local,” a volunteer tells me. “I think the phrase was change yourself, change the world,” she recalled with a laugh.

With belonging at stake, students are turning towards volunteering opportunities as a form of self-making and community engagement. When “there is less of a sense of community,” you end up with “more individual people going about their own business,” one student states, “and so people are leaning more towards social life or social commitments or volunteering.” However individualistic it may seem, through this search for community membership, the potential for new social life is born. The Canadian state fosters and benefits from these unpaid and affective commitments both locally and
globally, which is why many social services repeatedly fall back onto individual caregivers, and it is also why the government encourages and qualifies some forms of unpaid labour and excludes or erases others. Becoming a citizen of value is thus evermore entangled in documented labour contributions, paid or otherwise, as Muehlebach (2011, 2012) has described. For certain groups, like students, who are “only precariously linked to the labor market, hovering at the margins of salaried employment” (Muehlebach 2011: 68), these publically recognized forms of labour are their ticket to a sense of social belonging. Even though some of these students did not actively engage with or readily perceive their Canadian citizenship, its residual was always present. These tensions illuminate the precarity of the citizen-self whose desire to belong and become a valuable and worthy member of society is continuously at stake. The citizen selves I encountered must endlessly manufacture their value and manage their worth, while being observed, measured, and validated through affective labour contributions and qualifications within *their* communities—both near and far.
Conclusion: The Threshold of Belonging

By considering the multiple and dynamic selves that emerged through my conversations with volunteers, I started to see that their stories were not merely testimonies of intention; but a lens into their lives—how they came to be there in that moment. On the one hand, volunteers arrived in that moment from very different places, and the paths from their departures were many. These particularities mirrored the multifaceted volunteer self who shifted and transformed from moment to moment. Like the socio-economic realities around them, volunteer selves were in continual flux. Yet, on the other hand, this is exactly what all volunteers shared in common: a space of enduring uncertainty. Both student and volunteer exist on the cusp of new possibilities. The promises of gainful employment, a sought-after opportunity, or a real experience are suspended before them as keys to a bright future. But it is a future that is unknown and they are promises without guarantees. Still, students and volunteers must navigate the uncertainty they face because it is their future that is always at stake. The anticipation for graduation, a celebration, and the next chapter for students, obscures the risk that punctuates their existence on the margins of waged employment. By a similar token, volunteers and caregivers find themselves on the edge of real work, which is further complicated by the hierarchy of unpaid labour that values some contributions and condemns or ignores others. Both student and volunteer must pass through this indeterminate and in-between space.

Although students and volunteers are often thought to be on the threshold of a new and exciting beginning, their struggles framed as transitional and temporary rites of passage, I found that their experience of liminality was far from ephemeral and did not necessarily lead to an open door. In other words, while a threshold could be seen as a point of entry into a future filled with promise and potential, I understand the threshold that volunteers and students move towards as a gateway that grants access to some while barring access to others. It is an opening that threatens to be closed. Therefore,
much like the unpaid experiences that students compete for during their university careers, future opportunities beyond the threshold are still promises at risk. With their futures at stake, students and volunteers must endlessly assert their value and manage their worth in order to one day cross the threshold and become full, productive members of society. At the same time, their experiences of liminality can be just as fruitful as they are fraught, and it is in this spirit of unchartered possibility that I would like to conclude.

In this thesis, I have argued that volunteers are so much more than an individual and one-dimensional intention, and instead I have traced the fractured contours that make up volunteer selves. These selves were never assured or fixed, but rather, transpired from a series of tensions and insecurities, frequently manifesting as a kind of ambivalence. Contrary to the static depiction of the volunteer tourist in the literature as apolitical and unknowing, I found the ambivalence that many students felt was not as simple as an individual oversight or uninformed contradiction, and nor was it unchanging. Indeed, some participants explicitly acknowledged that they had their feet in oppositional worlds: one that was deeply critical of volunteer tourism and development practices, and the other, which was filled with their unwavering desire to care-for-others both at home and abroad that was reproducing the very same practices they critiqued. These apparent contradictions were embodied by volunteers whose selves were equally multiple, conflicted and in tension. My argument extends from this juncture—the indeterminate space that students lost and found their selves in.

Fragile Opportunities: A Promise at Risk

I have relied on three overarching volunteer selves in order to trace the intersecting discourses, aspirations, and material environments that make and unmake some of their possibilities for personhood. Students, caregivers, and citizen-workers all tell us something unique about volunteers and the fragile opportunities that they take up in order to manufacture their most valuable selves. These three aspects of the volunteer self also delineate the threads that run back-and-forth between the academic institution, the Canadian state and the international setting. Importantly, these overarching selves capture different tensions felt by volunteers, and in so doing they illuminate the dark corners of the threshold where volunteers find and lose their selves. Cutting across
these worlds was the recurrent language of opportunity. Students, caregivers, and citizen-workers must all contend with this discourse when considering their future, which ironically includes future opportunities—that is, opportunities beyond the threshold.

In Muehlebach’s (2011: 68) exploration of affective unpaid labour in Italy, she writes about “the magical translation of the crisis of work and social belonging into what appears as social opportunity, the sublimation of new forms of exclusion into a fantasy of good feeling.” For the students and volunteers I spoke with, opportunities were social and economic, cultural and commercial. The unpaid labour that participants took up at home and abroad was always draped in a veil of opportunity. The opportunity to network, the opportunity to meet new friends, the opportunity to give back to your community, and the opportunity to get your foot in the door were cited by volunteers and the organizations that sent them. When positioned on the boundary of gainful employment and full societal membership, endless opportunities become the hopeful and necessary ways in which one can manufacture their value and manage their worth. Even the most exasperated volunteer who felt they had done their time and were now deserving of paid employment, stumbled when confronted with the promise of opportunity if it was deemed potentially rewarding. Others who felt isolated and alone stood behind opportunities for community involvement and friendship. The more I thought about the intoxicating appeal of opportunity as an emergent theme in my conversations with students, however, the more I could not ignore the language of risk that was hidden beneath its shiny surface. As Muehlebach (2011) stressed, the need for work and belonging have been turned into fantasies of opportunity and good feeling. There are few guarantees and fewer social securities, yet students continue to take up a myriad of unpaid experiences in the process of making up their selves. In this way, opportunity disguises risk. Opportunity places the emphasis on individuals who are then held responsible for their future under the pretence of inclusion and equality.

For students, caregivers and citizen-workers competing for access, employment, or valuation, the prospect of belonging beyond the threshold is always at stake, and for some, always outside their reach. Every opportunity is thus a promise at risk. This instability and uncertainty is quelled through unpaid and affective labour contributions—more opportunities and more risks. In this state of limbo, somewhere between partial
and full membership, precarity creates new tensions and new possibilities for being at the time that it unravels others. The different forms of self-loss and self-gain experienced by participants in their projects of self-betterment are a testament to this fact. They needed to highlight their autonomy and individuality, but were torn by their desire for social ties and community. Their fragile experiences of liminality, however uncertain and precarious, also bare their changing, fractured and relational selves.

**Volunteers: Unseen Selves**

Looking past the highly public attribution of intention in volunteer and development work has uncovered a correlation between these public appraisals and the direction of the industry. New experiential education programs and international internships separate their placements from the exploitative and apolitical realm of volunteer tourism by making student self-interest explicit, instead of masking it behind the helper-saviour imperative. What was striking in many of interviews with students was their complete and swift acceptance of this narrative. That is not to say that career development and résumé padding are not self-serving aspirations. Rather, it appeared that every other aspect of their selves, including struggles and insecurities, had been subsumed under this label. Students became responsible for their vulnerability. When confronted with their immense privilege, their losses were rendered insignificant, which made their interventions in the developing world a matter for public scrutiny, while their inner struggles remained private and hidden. In effect, by focusing on the individual and one-dimensional intentions of volunteers, many scholars have taken the self for granted, and reinforced the very same forms of self-governance they aim to disrupt.

While volunteer intentions become part of the public domain, their private care-work slips unnoticed through the same social cracks they must fill. It is often women who feel indebted to this cycle of care, and in the same vein, it is often their work and their lives that go unseen. In the past, unpaid and affective labour belonged to the domestic sphere, a place of assumed non-work (Muehlebach 2011). Increasingly, however, these relational forms of labour are celebrated by governing institutions. Yet, it is the *kind* of volunteering that determines its worth. Students made up themselves in relation to inauthentic voluntarism and the other kinds of people who did it, which were deemed far
less substantive to their own. Through their documented qualifications, students were able to uphold the value of their work over others. While volunteering is often considered a kind of compassionate charity, I began to see volunteering as a formal and professionalized institution that documents certain unpaid contributions and erases others. This erasure is important in the context of the threshold where students must make up their most competitive selves in order to secure opportune risks on the other side, and importantly, it is where their liminal experiences of un-belonging are already going unnoticed.

The invisibility of volunteers and the care-work they take up has been exacerbated by scholarly critiques that reduce volunteer selves to individual intention. When I actually met with volunteers I was struck by the many tensions and contradictions they embodied because I had never encountered their multiplicity in tourism or development literature. These students and volunteers were complex and deeply political, much like the social worlds they emerged from. Caught between their critical subjectivities and their need to be of value, many students were pushing back against a long history of development intervention only to realize this was the only sector in which they were now qualified to work. Like the ambivalence they felt, fractured volunteer selves are products of their existence on the threshold of belonging. However, volunteers experienced this gateway in diverse ways, and their liminal positions were many. Although many students shared the critical-complicit tension between education and employment, other junctures were equally apparent. Volunteers often moved back-and-forth between their own self-care and their desire to care-for-others, their need to work and their desire to help, their autonomy and their sociality. They wanted to further their careers, but simultaneously wanted to be more than their career aspirations. They saw themselves above the hopey-changey volunteer tourist, but remained attached to their own moral convictions for a better future for all. Many were torn between their privilege and vulnerability, their public and private selves. Lastly, they established simultaneous claims in global and local communities. They were students who were also caregivers and citizens on the borderline of belonging—their selves always multiple, fractured and in tension. Notably, volunteer selves were as indeterminate as the liminal space they lost and found them in.
In conclusion, this thesis challenges the essentialist portrait of the individualistic and unchanging volunteer self with two overlapping claims. First, that the uncertain threshold that volunteers attempt to traverse through their unpaid labour experiences actually produces many of their inner tensions, and in turn, the fractures of their selves. Secondly, that existing on the cusp of societal belonging creates a strong desire for both autonomy and sociality, which volunteers engage in different and unexpected ways when making and unmaking their selves. In other words, this thesis argues that the tensions encapsulated by volunteers, upon closer inspection, effectively reveal their fluid, relational and multiple selves, while shining new light on the unseen and uncertain liminal space that has rendered their lives—beyond an intention—invisible.

As I have previously stated, the intent of this thesis is not to dismiss the undeniably problematic and exploitative underpinnings of international development and volunteer tourism. The colonial legacies and deeply racist currents embedded in these industries are well documented, and certainly require further attention. As the demand for volunteer development tourism and international experiential education grows, however, so does the need for a new direction of inquiry. While it is my hope that this research contributes in some way to the expansive literature on development and volunteer tourism, this thesis is aimed at shifting the lens most often used in scholarly critiques away from the one-dimensional understanding of the volunteer self by somewhat paradoxically refocusing on the volunteer, but in such a way that highlights the socio-economic realities within which volunteer selves are made and rewritten. From this point of departure, the tensions and uncertainties that volunteer selves experience and move between come to the fore, redirecting our attention to some of the underlying conditions and discourses that reproduce development and volunteer tourism industries. The incredible students and volunteers who gave me their time and shared their stories ultimately shaped this research, and it is their lives that cast light on the gaps and exceptions—the threshold—where their unpaid labour unfolds. Lastly, by positioning volunteer tourism and experiential education within a larger discussion of unpaid labour and unseen care-work, this thesis contributes to theoretical studies of voluntarism, social belonging, and citizenship in the neoliberal context, while rooting this exploration in the lived and felt experiences of volunteers.
References


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