International Volunteers at a Costa Rican Organic Farm: Sheepish Volunteers, Proud Tourists and Unwitting Developers

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes the practices and experiences of two groups of Canadian volunteers who visited the organic farming and “alternative development” project of Finca la Flor (FLF) in central Costa Rica. Using both participant observation and in-depth interviews with volunteers and other people involved with FLF, I examine volunteers’ understandings of their involvement with the farm. I argue that three discursive formations are instrumental in shaping this particular volunteering encounter. Specifically, interpretation of these Canadian volunteers’ experiences inspires the argument that the emerging practice of international volunteering (or voluntourism) exists at the intersection of discourses of development, volunteering and tourism, all of which both reflect and maintain problematic North-South relationships. The analysis shows that in spite of FLF’s construction as an (alternative / sustainable) international-development project, and in spite of volunteers’ initial conceptualization of their trip as “volunteering,” volunteers tend to act and describe their time at FLF in ways that look more like tourism than like volunteer labor or international development. Likewise, although FLF claims to principally be focused on alternative development, and merely to open up this authentic development space to volunteers for their participation, the organization in both practice and discourse seems primarily to construct a tourist experience and cater to the needs of foreigners as tourists. Discourses of development and volunteering do inform the practices of farm personnel and volunteers at FLF, but they become subordinated to the more dominant discourse of tourism as the volunteers’ and farm management’s ideals of development and volunteering capitulate to become focused on satisfying volunteers’ (perceived or “real”) touristic desires. The FLF participants I studied may have entered the encounter as volunteers, but they departed the site having been tourists.
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CHAPTER ONE
Introduction

Situating the Research: My Involvement with International Volunteering

The story of my involvement with international volunteerism is also a story about how I have come to understand and study international volunteerism within the context of development, tourism and volunteerism in general. It is epistemologically important to acknowledge my own location in this research and how I came to occupy a particular position where I have been simultaneously a mediator and a critic of volunteerism.

After finishing my undergraduate degree, I felt a desire common to many graduating students; I wanted to travel, to see and understand more of the world, to take a “gap year” between school and (for me) more school. I spent my year off working and trying to save up enough money to make a trip to “somewhere” in Latin America, and started searching for the right location. My criteria were simple: I wanted to be learning, helping, working while I was there. I knew I would feel guilty just traveling around as a tourist. Apart from that, as a first venture traveling on my own, I wanted to be associated with some established infrastructure to ease me into a different culture. There were hundreds of organizations with very polished web-pages advertising volunteering opportunities, and I discovered that for a good chunk of money I could go wherever I wanted, adopt whatever cause struck a chord with me, and stay there from two weeks to a year, at my leisure. Volunteers could, for example, live in a Tibetan mountain community helping with “children’s centers,” teach health classes in Peru’s highlands or “save” the rainforest in Ecuador. The organizations whose websites I browsed shared common discourses about development (that it was good, needed, and that more rich Westerners / Northerners like me were somehow helpful to poor “Others”) and presented similar constructions of what constituted worthwhile travel, communicating that it was best to see a place
“authentically”, helping and living with local people in one place for an extended duration, rather than quickly visiting multiple locations. The world was a young (wealthy) person’s oyster, with hundreds of volunteering options available to me.

Eventually, an e-mail from a friend led me to an organic farming and conservation project in Costa Rica called Finca la Flor which hosted international volunteers and involved them in community work, organic farming, forest regeneration and sustainable development. A new and very small Canadian NGO called Compañeros was organizing round trips to the farm for Canadian volunteers. I knew nothing about agriculture, farming, forest protection and the likes but felt a strong philosophical commitment to these activities. When I discovered the website for Finca la Flor, I was sold on the project. It offered everything possible: work with medicinal plants, in regenerating unprotected rainforest, with animals, in organic agriculture, Spanish lessons, work at a local school, or a course in sustainable development. On top of all this, the farm was run by two women (appealing to my interests in woman-centered projects) and had a committed vegetarian philosophy. I signed up for a month in August (all I could afford, even after a full year of working), and enrolled in the farm’s sustainable development course.

The farm, although beautiful, was nothing like I had anticipated. I arrived with a large group of Canadian volunteers (fifteen people, mostly in their early twenties), but was separated from them both in lodgings and in my daily tasks, while I took the sustainable development course (as one of only three students) and they worked as laborers and took introductory Spanish lessons. I enjoyed my time at the farm immensely, but with a more critical perspective by the end of the trip than when I had arrived.

After I returned to Canada I continued to develop my connections with the farm by maintaining long-distance friendships with some of the Costa Rican people I had met in la Flor.
Several months later, Compañeros, the organization which had led my first trip to Costa Rica, offered me a long term position as a group facilitator for future trips to this site. This offered me a perfect opportunity to return to FLF, to conduct thesis research which would allow me to develop some further understanding of how international volunteerism was understood, and played out, at this site. I decided to focus my investigation on the experiences and understandings of other Canadian volunteers at FLF. I returned on two occasions, eight and twelve months later, each time with a separate group of Canadian volunteers who agreed to consider participating as interview participants in my study after our formal (guide / volunteer) relationship was dissolved at the end of the trip.

Over the course of my three visits to FLF I became increasingly aware that volunteers came to this place with particular motivations related to “helping” in an “exotic” location where people were “worse off”, learning about nature and another culture, and also teaching things to local people. I noticed that my fellow travelers felt a large degree of pride (or comfort?) in being labeled a “volunteer” and not a (traditional) tourist. It was commonly understood that to be a tourist is a dirty thing, implying wealth and privilege and a lack of concern for local communities. Volunteers were often eager to point out that they knew one place well and that they were here to help, not to consume a touristic experience. But the behaviour of volunteers did not always reflect this. Neither did a more critical look at volunteers’ position in global circuits of power, money and culture.

The farm’s projects often involved more toil than reward. Volunteers did not do much to “save” the rainforest or demonstrate to locals the “better way” of organic farming. Instead, much of our time was spent feeding animals, cleaning their stalls and cutting food for them in the fields. After initial disappointment that volunteer work was not as glamorous as anticipated,
volunteers seemed to come to understand (or rationalize?) their work as necessary to the maintenance of the project (which was, at least, itself "helping," in their understanding) and would put in their volunteering time before relaxing in the evening and traveling on weekends and breaks away from the farm. The volunteering experience followed a similar pattern for many volunteers. They initially constructed the farm as an idealistic place to participate in a grand environmental project, but by the end of the trip had come to use it mainly as a (relatively) cheap travelers' base where volunteers would meet other foreigners, and then voyage out together in something much like backpacking tourism (e.g., see Murphy, 2001; Adler, 1985). Some volunteers (often those most closely self-identifying with counter-cultural ideals) showed strong philosophical allegiance to the project and the people involved, as evidenced in their choices to stay longer and to interact with locals instead of other travelers. In general though, volunteers rarely formed friendships with local people, preferring the company of fellow Northern travelers. Volunteers seemed to be eager to see more of the country than this little community, but while in la Flor tended not to leave the farm to venture into the town and interact with the local people they had supposedly come to meet and engage with in some cross-cultural experience. Although labeled as "volunteers", many acted more like "tourists"; bringing cameras out during work time, being disappointed when they had to work in the rain, and complaining about some of the more rugged elements of the farm (insects, cold water, and rainstorms among them).

Volunteers also started to question how useful their work was to the farm. Often, local workers would spend most of their time trying to explain how to do the task to the volunteers, waiting for volunteers to complete the task, and then correcting volunteers' work. It was often obvious even to the volunteers that the job could have been done better by the local worker in a fraction of the time. I shared with a number of other volunteers the suspicion that the "helping"
we were supposed to be doing seemed staged. Even as beasts of burden, lugging grass and soil from one place to another, were volunteers a help? It seemed that much of the time, our only “real” help to the project was the 15US dollars a day we paid to stay on the farm. In return for that payment, we could feel that we were helping, maybe learn something for ourselves about a new place, a new language, perhaps a new skill, could eat well and have a place to sleep. But in terms of volunteers’ original goals of “helping”, I wondered if we really were. As time went on, I began to understand FLF as a touristic destination disguised as a “volunteer project”. Ecotourism and agritourism are becoming more prominent and popular forms of tourism (Holdnack & Pennington-Gray, 2000), a response of the tourism industry to the egos of more self-reflective tourists. Interestingly, the farm’s owners did not seem to be offended by representing the farm this way, at least partially and occasionally.

Finca la Flor is, in many ways, a rural development project, owned by outsiders and designed largely to benefit the surrounding community by showing local people new and better ways to live and farm. Volunteers’ aspirations to “help” by teaching in local schools (even with very little Spanish-speaking ability) and participating in educational events for local children and adults about responsible farming techniques and the dangers of biochemical use in agriculture, correspond with this development ethos. Here we were, wealthier Northerners with little or no agricultural experience coming to “help” by teaching and modeling agriculture to people who have farmed all of their lives, and whose ancestors had farmed for many generations. While some volunteers were explicitly against large scale government development, even this group saw no problems with instructing locals in “proper” agricultural techniques. Rather, FLF was seen as a sustainable development project, an alternative to the government schemes which compel farmers to use dangerous chemicals and to monocrop. Still, FLF frequently seemed to me
increasingly like a little neo-colonial project composed of a constant stream of vacationing (mainly urban) Northerners coming into a remote rural community and telling locals (once again) how to run their community. In addition, the project failed to meet several of its own most important goals: it was not self-sufficient; it had problems maintaining consistent employment for locals because labor demand is dependent on volunteer numbers; and the farm itself seemed to be largely ignored by the community it was supposed to be helping. The fact that volunteers did not generally present (at least to me) any ambivalence about the intentions of the project in the face of these flaws confused me and made me interested in how volunteers understand what they were doing there, and how they understood volunteering in relation to development and tourism, the two other things that seemed to be part of what they were involved in at the farm.

Investigating International Volunteerism at Finca la Flor

My goal in this thesis is to investigate the practices and experiences of two separate groups of Canadian Volunteers who visited Finca la Flor in the summer of 2003, through a program of the Canadian NGO “Compañeros,” which is affiliated with the larger umbrella organization, “Volunteer Abroad”. Through participant observation and interviews with people involved with FLF, I investigate how volunteers understand their involvement at the farm, and how discourses of development, volunteering and tourism play out at this site and structure volunteers’ experiences. My data consists of four separate components: 1) interviews with Canadian volunteers, 2) interviews with local people from La Flor, and full time staff of the farm, 3) my own self-reflexive field notes, and 4) eight weeks of participant observation with the volunteers in Costa Rica.

The information I have collected on the experiences, practices, opinions, motivations and reflections of these Canadian volunteers inspires me to argue that we can understand the
emerging practice of international volunteering (or voluntourism) as existing at the intersection of three discursive formations, which, not incidentally, have been central to the construction of the North’s relationship with the South in the post-colonial period. These discursive formations are international development, tourism and volunteerism. The first is well-described in academic literature as a discursive formation (Escobar, 1994; Ferguson, 1990; Crush, 1995), the second increasingly so (Mowforth & Munt, 2003; Butz, 2002), and the third is a new area to be described as a discursive formation, and my particular contribution to this field of research. I argue that international volunteerism, as it is practiced at FLF, and understood by my research participants, is built around these three sets of discourses which structure participants’ practices and experiences. What my analysis shows is that in spite of the volunteering site’s construction as an explicitly development-focused project and volunteers’ initial altruistic conceptualization of their activities abroad as “volunteering”, the farm space and the volunteers themselves tend to move towards acting out something that much more closely resembles a form of alternative tourism. The discourses of development and volunteering do inform the practices of farm personnel and volunteers at FLF, but give way to the more dominant discourse of tourism, as the development and volunteering ideals capitate throughout time to become focused more on satisfying volunteers’ touristic desires. This movement towards tourism and away from volunteering and development seems consistent at this site: these FLF participants enter the encounter as volunteers, but leave the site as tourists.

See Appendix A for a description of my research design.

For the purposes of this paper, I will use the term “the North” to refer to the post-industrial countries with an unequally large portion of global wealth and privilege (also known as “developed”, first world, “the West” or “the First World”). I will use the term “the South” to refer to countries with a disproportionately small amount of global wealth and privilege (also known as less developed nations, sometimes called “the rest”, or “the East”, undeveloped, Third World etc). I object to imposing a hierarchy of “worlds” (thus refuse the first/third division) and the linear notions of “progress” from worse to better, implied by “developing”. Finally, this distinction also makes sense, since the geographic region I am examining (Costa Rica) is comparatively South of most of the volunteers I discuss (Canadian, American, German, French and Belgian are the majority on the farm).
As indicated above, the argument I make in this thesis relies on understanding development, tourism and volunteerism as discursive formations. Therefore the remainder of this chapter will be devoted to a) outlining what I mean by the terms discourse, discursive formation, and discursive analysis; b) illustrating my understanding of these concepts and their relation to material reality through a brief discussion of Edward Said’s Orientalism (1979) and c) sketching out briefly how these three practices can be understood discursively. In Chapter Two I introduce the contextual details of Finca la Flor and the volunteering organization “Compañeros,” which I worked with and through which the volunteers I study came to visit Finca la Flor. Throughout the core data analysis chapters (Three through Five) I integrate critical literature on development, tourism and volunteering more thoroughly to argue how a discursive examination of each is productive to an investigation of international volunteering.

Chapter Three begins the discussion of my primary data with an examination of discourses of volunteering. I examine participants’ practices and discussion of volunteering, while simultaneously integrating critical literature on philanthropy, concepts of justice and volunteering. In each of the three analytical chapters, starting with Chapter Three, I look at a key discursive formation by situating an understanding of the discourse in my own personal experience, layering in those of my participants and integrating these primary accounts with critical literature on that particular discourse. In such a way, I will build a story of what volunteerism, and particularly international volunteerism, is understood by FLF participants to be, and how it is constructed by the practices and discourses surrounding it at this site.

An analysis of international volunteerism is complicated by the difficulty of differentiating it from other activities (Uriely, Yonay & Simchai, 2002); it is not only a story of volunteerism, but also one about tourism and development (undoubtedly amidst myriad other
Discourse

Discourses are “prevailing ways of thinking about or interpreting social experiences that in themselves are neither true nor false” (Hale, 1995, p.34). They can also be understood as sets of rules that govern the thoughts and behaviour of social actors in a given situation. These rules are not static, but rather change dependent on the historical context of the social sphere. Thus discourses are well described as “temporary permanences” (Harvey, 1996). The positioning of a particular means of representation over other possible ones reinforces established hierarchical power relations in a social field. Discourses are in fact manifestations of power, identity, and social relations which are negotiated, are legitimated, and are contested towards political ends (Apple, 1996, p.130). Discourses are not neutral, but serve particular interests and intents (although their construction may not be itself intentional).

Michel Foucault argued that any systemic ordering of concepts, of connections between objects, or regularity in themes could be called a “discursive formation” (Foucault, 1972). The shared understanding found in a discursive formation is communicated through the actions of people, the operation of institutions and (more generally) in the ways people think and act in relation to a phenomenon. The more a particular discursive formation is embedded in the thoughts and practices of a group and the institutions around them, the less likely it is to be challenged, and the more likely it is to be taken-for-granted as natural. By operating mainly as a naturalized “common-sense,” discursive formations become hegemonic, and are re-created by the social world in which they are embedded, and which they help to create. As Bourdieu states, there is a censorship of possible thoughts in the division of “the universe of things that can be stated, and hence thought, and the universe of that which is taken for granted” (1994, p.165).
By challenging the authority of a discursive formation, by tracing its history, and indicating the interests it serves, it is possible to dismantle some of the hegemonic thought that serves to dominate marginalized and other groups of people and ways of thinking. Thus, examinations of discourse can be understood as political tools in their potential to disrupt and “denaturalize dominant forms of knowledge and expose to critical questioning the practices that they enable” (Milliken, 2001 p.145). Often in post-structuralist research, it is necessary to trace the genealogy of these taken-for-granted, shared ideas about “truth” and “reality”; to investigate the processes that led to the establishment of meanings or understandings of particular concepts. Discourse analyses focus on the truth claims that exist in a given historical social sphere, how they have come to be accepted, how they are contested and how they may change. A relevant example of this put into practice exists in Sara Mills’ (1991) study of women’s travel writing and colonialism, in which she uses the concept of discourse as an organizational tool to examine the experiences of her participants. She says, “...it is not necessary to read travel writing as expressing the truth of the author’s life, but rather, it is the result of a configuration of discursive structures with which the author negotiates” (p.9). Similarly, my investigation of FLF volunteers’ experiences at the farm through listening to their words and observing their practices, can be understood not as a tool to ascertain the “truth” of their experience, but to examine the discursive structures that help them to organize their complex experiences as international volunteers.

A post-structuralist framework rejects the humanist assumption of a unified, rational and knowing subject (Johnston, Gregory & Smith, 1994). Instead, subjects are understood to have constantly changing subjectivities, which make these people (subjects) sites of contradiction, change and (in the sense that it is difficult to pinpoint a stable subjectivity) chaos. From a post-
structuralist perspective, there is no monolithic reality, and no static subject. Subjects are the product of the discourses they encounter and adopt in understanding their social world. Thus, post-structuralist study examines the processes that produce the subjectivities and actions of people, in order to get at how concepts of reality come to be taken for granted as "real" and "common sense" and are produced and reproduced. This approach is called discourse analysis.

This thesis investigates one particular encounter with international volunteerism through the experiences of a group of Canadian volunteers at an alternative farming project in Costa Rica, in order to demonstrate that discourses of voluntarism, development and tourism are intertwined and complicate each other, and that by investigating each, their influences on the construction and practice of international volunteerism can be better understood. Discourse analysis enables an investigation of how international volunteerism is understood by those involved with it and what additional discourses complicate the conceptual and practical aspects of international volunteerism. A discursive approach is applied in this project to interview data, participant observation, and my own field notes (autobiographical data).

Power is a process, rather than a "thing" and can only existing in relationship between agents (Cheong and Miller, 2000). Through complex and dynamic networks of power, particular "voices" are afforded the more weight, and particular persons afforded more legitimacy in the social creation of a discourse. If these explanations become widely accepted, the discourse is considered hegemonic. However, the rules of governance that discourses set out are never completely enforced or internalized. Rules governing a subject's social understanding are subject to resistance and contradiction.

Discourses will shape the positioning and practices of individuals in an institution (Barnes & Duncan, 1992). A person's position within a social field (here in the international
volunteering site), or in any social setting, will strongly influence the discourses that he or she adopts and how this choice is played out in practice in the social world. The dynamic and changing subject is constituted by and reflexively, he or she constitutes the field of discourse. Discussing post-structuralist and Lacanian concepts of discourse and subject, Marshal Alcorn writes,

Within each singular human subject, however, discourse can become uniquely configured, produced and repetitively expressed by local conditions (the conditions of subjectivity) that are particular to each individual subject. Because of this situation, resistance and conflict between local discourse and global discourse are frequent and ongoing. (1994, p.32)

Thus, the subject and the social field are both sites of contention, of contradiction and change as discourses and subjects are (re)positioned. Discourses will be adapted based on the field of discursive possibilities available to the individual in question and these discourses’ relevance to the social actor.

Discourse analysis can be used as an analytic tool for social justice by illustrating the power structures in particular claims to “truth” that marginalize certain populations and views. Foucault’s understanding of the use of discourse analysis encompasses this:

These pre-existing forms of continuity, all these syntheses that are accepted without question, must remain in suspense. They must not be rejected definitively of course, but the tranquility with which they are accepted must be disturbed: we must show that they do not come about of themselves, but are always the result of a construction the rules of which must be known, and the justifications of which must be scrutinized... (1972, p.25) Ideas present in discourse do not simply remain in the sphere of thought, but are materialized in behaviour and action. This is “practice” (Johnston, 1994). Post-structuralists think that practice is intimately entwined with discourse, that practice is produced largely by discourse, can change discourse and can be reflective of discourse. Further, practice itself can even be understood as discursive in that it communicates certain ideas about “reality” in a social field, while
simultaneously reinforcing shared meanings. Material conditions do not create a single, inevitable social reality, but discourse itself shapes understandings, experience and definitions of what material reality is.

Post-structuralist writings tend to focus on discourses produced around or about a phenomenon being studied, and this is the discursive strategy I use in this project. Analysis of the interviews with participants and my own personal narratives, as well as the social landscape of the farm are examined here and contextualized with discussions of how these ideas are constructed through discourses of volunteering, development and tourism. In such a way, this thesis creates a story of international volunteerism at this specific site of Finca la Flor, and describes how it can be informed by discussions of discourses on volunteerism, development and tourism that may both constitute and be disrupted by these volunteers’ experiences.

A well-known discourse analysis of a trans-cultural phenomenon is Edward Said’s (1979) work, Orientalism, in which he investigates the ways that the West came to understand, imagine and control the East through discursively constructing it as a very particular type of object to be known and mastered. Orientalism is perhaps the best example of a discursive treatment of trans-cultural relations of domination. The final section of this chapter provides a brief summary of Said’s thesis in order to illustrate how a discursive understanding such as the one I use in this thesis can illuminate cross-cultural relations of power and knowledge.

**Discourse Analysis in Said’s Orientalism**

Said defines Orientalism as: “A way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience” (1979, p.1) and understands the firmly established and surprisingly static image of “the Orient” to be a discursive formation in the sense Foucault used the concept in his more ‘micro’ scale interrogations of cultural
Institutions. In this section, I will describe three relevant aspects of Said’s Orientalism: a) how Said understand the concept of a discursive formation, b) the three constitutive practices that establish Orientalism as the dominant way the West deals with the so-called “Orient” and c) how a discursive investigation of cultural imperialism (whether in dealing with the Orient or with other cultures in general) disrupts oppressive colonialist/imperialistic thought and why this is necessary. I will end by arguing why Said’s general approach can be applied more generally (i.e. beyond application to the Orient), and is particularly relevant to an investigation of the practice of international volunteerism.

Said uses the notion of discourse, understood as a systematic and consistently constructed “cultural-political formation,” (Clifford, 1980, p.212) to examine the West’s understanding of and relationship to the East. Said’s examination is “a discursive formation in the Foucauldian sense” (Butz, 1995, p.54) extended outside of the institutions that Foucault examined (such as prisons and schools) and into an examination of cross-cultural constructions of the Other. Said argues that the durability of the discourse of Orientalism is largely a product of how systematically and with what consistency the West would retell the story of the East as inferior, lacking, and infantile (Clifford, 1980). Through the systematic academic study, imagined construction and treatment of the Orient as statically inferior, the West “created” their exoticized Orient as a reality for them. Said says,

“...without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period.” (1979, p.3)
The West was able to create a “field of representations, produced by the discourse” (Clifford, 1980, p.212) which came to define and describe the East, for the West and with material and discursive implications for the East itself.

The discursive formation of Orientalism constructs a binary ontology of the East as opposite to the West, serving to (re)enforce and (re)create the discursive field of global power in which the West is always positioned above the East in terms of rationality, maturity, degree of “humaneness” and overall superiority (Butz, 1995). The binary “Othering” process (creating concepts of an objectively different “Us” from “Them”) of differentiating the West from the Rest, serves to justify and maintain the West’s position of privilege: “The Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” (Said, 1979, pp.1-2). Orientalism materializes and communicates the uneven exercise of global power, and the interests of the West as “…it not only creates but also maintains; it is, rather than expresses, a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate…” (Said, 1979, p.12). How the West has come to know the Rest of the world is largely through its own institutions, descriptions and academic study of the Other, all which exist in and are products of the specific historical position of the West in relation to its counterparts. The West has created “a cultural order…defined exclusively, with respect to others” (Clifford, 1980, p.213) but in doing so, has firmly established a naturalized hierarchy of subjectivity, with the West situated firmly at the top.

For Said, discourse is not simply a set of ideas, existing with no practical or material effects. There is no pure scholarship and all knowledge is entwined with power and position (Clifford, 1980). In fact, Said argues that a framework of cultural imperialism determines how the West operates politically with and participates in any form of cross-cultural contact with the
rest of the world. Specifically, Said argues that Orientalism is composed of ideologies of imperialism and Western authority through a) an imaginative framework for understanding the East, b) academic disciplines devoted to the investigation of this concept of “the Orient” and finally c) institutions and bureaucracies created to manage the East. Each element works to support the validity of the others and maintain the practice of Orientalizing the East. Or, as Butz says,

> on their own, none of Said’s three central designations adequately explains the scope, strength, and durability of Orientalist authority. However, together they constitute a *discursive formation*, a conceptualisation which Said thinks does justice to Orientalism’s formidable and pervasive influence" (1995, p.59)

First, Said shows how Orientalism is a general concept “based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the occident’” (Said, 1979, p.2) which “pervades popular understandings” (Clifford, 1980, p.208). Said suggests that “the Orient” is an imagined category. To Said, Orientalism is a style of thought. Again, this serves reciprocally to support the academic practice of studying the Orient, because there is an established notion of real difference between West and East. If there is a shared way of thinking about the East, then the West is likely to base not only discussion, but action towards the East, on its concept of the Oriental: “Therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West” (Said, 1979, p.5).

Second, Orientalism can be understood as an academic activity: “what Orientalists do and have done” (Clifford, 1980, p.208). This prong of the triad understands Orientalism as an academic project about a particular object of study. The Orient as a “knowable” and ontologically distinctive category is lent great authority and confidence by the sheer number of
"legitimate" Western academics who study and describe the Orient with confidence. Whether there is a unified and knowable place and people that can be understood as "Oriental" is not questioned by this group: "(t)he point is that even if it does not survive as it once did, Orientalism lives on academically through its doctrines and theses about the Orient and the Oriental" (Said, 1979, p.2). The discursive formation of Orientalism is confirmed by the West’s studying the Orient as a "natural" category.

Finally, Said understands Orientalism as being practiced through corporate institution(s) dealing with the Orient. These create authority-over, knowledge of, and an ability to describe the East. Orientalism is thus also "a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient" (Said, 1979, p.3) through government and non-governmental institutions. This iteration of Orientalism is made possible by the previous two formations. Academic Orientalism provides the "knowledge" necessary to build Orientalist institutions, while imaginative Orientalism provides the taken-for-granted construction of the East as an appropriate object to control and dominate.

As discourses of Orientalism become taken-for-granted as a "true" description of how the East and West are in relation to one another, they inform policy, writing and cross-cultural interactions. Thus, "the relationship between the Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony..." (Said, 1979, p.5). Orientalism gains strength and resilience as its descriptions of East and West become more and more hegemonically accepted. Thus, "in quite a constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him (sic) the relative upper hand" (Said, 1979,
Said’s critical discourse analysis counters and calls attention to the taken-for-grantedness and implicitly racist and Othering content of Orientalist (or culturally imperialist) thought.

While Orientalism deals with (mostly) different geographical areas than those that are the places of international volunteering destinations (many of these in Latin America and in the Central and South of continental Africa), neo-imperialist thought and Othering can be located within the practice of international volunteering and the bodies of thought and academic study that support it. The institutions and people which study and create categories of “under-developed” nations are similar to academic Orientalists in their constructions of the South as a project for improvement. Practices of cultural imperialism create the South as “in need” of Northern aid and knowledge and exoticize it as a destination to be consumed by curious and “compassionate” travelers. Said identifies “a ‘discourse’ which dichotomizes and essentializes in its portrayal of others and which functions in a complex but systematic way as an element of colonial domination” (Clifford, 1980, p.216) that is equivalent in many ways to that of “undeveloped nations” in general. At issue is another case of the most privileged and powerful nations telling a story about the rest of the world, and consequently engaging with these Others as if the West’s description of them is unquestionably true.

Arguments for Understanding Each Core Concept as a Set of Discourses

Said’s discursive analysis is an excellent example of how different groups of humanity “imagine, describe and comprehend each other” (Clifford, 1980, p.209). In my project, I hope to dissect international volunteerism as it is played out at the site of Finca la Flor, and to delineate the competing discourses of volunteerism, tourism and development which help to shape the practices at the farm. I argue that while international volunteering seems on the surface to be built upon discourses of volunteering and development, these two discourses lose prominence as
the practices and discourses at FLF shift towards more touristic ones. What remains for this introductory chapter is to begin to make an initial and brief argument for how each of international development, tourism and volunteerism can be examined as discursive formations, by discussing what allows me to call each a discourse, what is gained by doing so and what the discursive characteristics of each are. This argument will be developed in more detail in the substantive chapters (Three through Five).

**Development as Discourse**

Generalizing beyond the scope of Said’s Orientalism, a number of theorists began to question the effects of the North’s representation of so-called developing nations. They argue that a “regime of representation” (Escobar, 1994, p.10) was created in which poor countries became described and then managed by the South in a systematic program ostensibly aimed to “help” less developed countries (LDCs), but all the while only helping to further establish the North’s superiority in the global hierarchy of power. By creating a body of knowledge and a group of development “experts”, the North was able to maintain domination over these countries, in many ways continuing and expanding the work of colonial-era Orientalism into the post-colonial period, and across the globe. Due to the systematic and static representation and treatment of the South, much contemporary critical development work understands international development as a discursive formation, which is how I wish to discuss development throughout this thesis.

A “colonization of reality” (Escobar, 1994) has taken place around discourses of development. By representing the need for development as a taken-for-granted “social reality”, only the strategic details of how to implement development programs are left for development “experts” to argue over. It was not until there was a questioning of the actual concept of
development, solidified with the emergence of critical development studies in the late 1980's, that the "naturalness" of development began to be questioned. As Escobar says, "Thinking of development in terms of discourse makes it possible to maintain the focus on domination...and at the same time to explore more fruitfully the conditions of possibility and the most pervasive effects of development" (1994, p.6). Conceptualizing the push for development as a discursive formation allows it to be evaluated within the social context in which it came to dominate the imaginations of the West (and often of the LDCs who are the targets of development), rather than presenting a decontextualized development drive as objective truth.

To the extent that International Development is constructed on the notion of a clear separation between the advanced West and the backward Rest, it has been criticized as an "othering" discourse, in a similar way that Said characterizes Orientalism as an othering discourse. Much postcolonial theory follows Said in explaining how colonial discourse constructs an objectively different type of person in non-Western cultures (Loomba, 1998). The prerequisite construction of difference (ethnic, "racial", geographic, cultural etc.) provided discursive legitimation for (mis)treatment of people living in the South in forms ranging from slavery to "cultural tourism," and indeed colonization itself. Establishing an inherent difference between the West and the Rest was a discursive means to "confine and silence" (Loomba, 1998, p.138) the colonial subjects in addition to other material means of oppression and exploitation.

A discursive treatment of development insists that development strategies and solutions are constructed in a social realm of inequality that informs and creates them. They are not able to "save" LDCs from some current or impending doom of overpopulation and "underdevelopment" as development intentions state. Instead, any problems that may exist, in "Other" target-nations of development projects are largely tied in with more complicated global /
local phenomena of poverty, unequal distribution of power and structurally caused inequalities. It is the “naturalness” of the discourse of development that makes it so difficult to identify as a discursive formation serving particular interests. The targets of development are not naturally occurring objects with clearly discernable problems; instead they are products of the discourses that create them. Identifying development as a discourse allows a critical examination of the interests and perspectives represented in pushes to develop, and explodes the “naturalness” of international development.

Tourism as Discourse

Like International Development, tourism can be understood as a loosely-configured set of discourses which are contested and negotiated by various groups, with particular discourses carrying more “weight” in a global field of representation. The dominant discourse of international tourism, reproduced by development agencies, hotel franchises and tourists themselves, is that tourism serves a variety of functions for Westerners, including high-class leisure, a learning opportunity and more recently as an activity potentially helpful to local people. Dean MacCannell explains that tourism is the “effort of the international middle class to coordinate the differentiations of the world into a single ideology [which] is intimately linked to its capacity to subordinate other peoples to its values, industry and future designs” (1976, p. 13). Tourism is a discursive formation which serves the interests of international capital and the maintenance of the power and privilege of an elite group.

International tourism’s ability to create a coherent, unified and homogenizing picture of non-Western places and people locates it as a powerful discourse. This representational power positions tourism brokers, proponents and industry people as the mediators of the images of

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3 For the purposes of this project, my discussion of tourism is focused on International tourism in LDCs (the “new tourism” [Mowforth and Munt, 2003]).
LDCs that are portrayed to Westerners (and to some extent tells this story internally, to the local people of a tourist destination) (see MacCannell, 1984; Ford-Smith, 1995). Particular representations reinforce and even celebrate the power imbalance between people in LDCs and those in Western ones who come to LDCs to visit (Adams, 1997; Urry, 1990; MacCannell, 1984). As a discourse, tourism shapes understandings of foreign people and places, and maintains relations of domination and subordination between Westerners and non-Westerners (Mowforth & Munt, 2003).

Identifying tourism as a discourse challenges the taken-for-granted premises of travel, for example, that it offers authentic access to “otherness,” benefits travelers (and possibly local hosts), and that it can in some form be a “good” practice. Non-discursive critiques of tourism may focus on particulars of exploitative tourism, but examining tourism as a discourse is valuable in addressing the basic assumptions of the practice itself.

Volunteerism as discourse

Volunteering is, for the most part, socially agreed-upon as a “helpful” activity. In fact, it is this very taken-for-grantedness that is the best indicator of its status as a dominant and relatively unchallenged discourse about responsibility to “less fortunate” others. The pervasive acceptance of volunteerism as a useful and even necessary activity makes it very difficult to unpack and critique. To critically examine topics like helping, charity or generosity may seem severe, threatening and counter-productive. Are there not bigger social ailments to dissect, like corporate greed and institutional racism? Yet, volunteerism can be examined as a practice that fails to challenge structural injustice, confirms actors’ social positionings and can be critiqued as impotent as a vehicle for social change in volunteering’s inability to identify and work against structural causes of inequality and domination.
At best, efforts to help as a volunteer or through philanthropy are damage-control, dealing with the casualties of established global structures of oppression, and at worst, they discursively obscure systemic structures of oppression. A discursive treatment of volunteering allows the concept and practice to be “unpacked” in the socio-historical context it developed in, and to examine the fields of power at play within it as a discursive formation. The discourse of helping hides within it assumptions of who can exercise power over others (even if it is used for “good”) and serves simultaneously to valorize the volunteer and further establish the lower social position of the recipient.

My argument for examining each of international development, tourism and volunteerism as discourses is fundamental to my project. Having made this argument in brief I can now begin to introduce how these three discourses are played out in the particular context of Finca la Flor; an international volunteering farm project in Costa Rica. In the next chapter, I will introduce the empirical context and description of the farm and community, as well as the Canadian organization which I worked with in bringing volunteers to Costa Rica. I move to a discursive treatment of the primary data in Chapters Three through Five.
CHAPTER TWO
Empirical Details: Finca la Flor and Compañeros

This chapter describes the empirical context and setting for my analysis of short-term international volunteerism at the site of Finca la Flor. The chapter deals first with a discussion of Finca la Flor, the destination and volunteering site of my project, and then describes the volunteering organization, Compañeros (Volunteer Abroad) that was responsible for bringing the two groups of Canadian volunteers being studied to the site, and in many ways constructing and mediating the volunteering experience off and on the farm.

My goals for this chapter are to present the “players” in this volunteering project as well as to describe the social and environmental context of the FLF endeavour. Locating the Canadian volunteers I study within the organizational structure facilitates a sense of the complex community context surrounding the volunteers’ brief experience there. It also provides context by showing the amount of effort that the farm staff devote to creating the “volunteering experience” for my participants. Further, by establishing how the farm and the volunteer host organizations represent the practice of international volunteering in their promotional materials, I can demonstrate volunteers’ pre-trip exposure to discourses surrounding international volunteering and set up the discursive context that helped them to organize and understand their later experiences at FLF. In sum, this chapter situates the context of this project and establishes the site as a suitable one for examining cultural imperialism and discourses of development, tourism and volunteering in the context of international volunteerism.

Introduction to Finca la Flor

Finca la Flor lies above the Orosi valley in central Costa Rica in the small village of la Flor, one hour and fifteen minutes South-east of the capital city of San Jose (see Figure One). An “agroecological” farm with community and educational programs for local people as well as
international travelers, Finca la Flor’s stated purposes include modeling sustainable development, education on organic agriculture, and the regeneration of ten hectares of unprotected rainforest land (Finca la Flor website, 2004). This “modeling” is intended to be a process in which the farm can demonstrate the potential success of organic sustainable projects to the local community and to international volunteers through instruction on the farm and through the example of Finca la Flor’s continued viability (economically, socially and agriculturally). Further, the finca (farm) aims to support Costa Rican environmental initiatives, aid in the creation of social programs for women and children in the community, and foster “cultural exchange”. The farm itself is run by a non-profit organization, ASODECAH (the Association for the Development of Environmental and Human Consciousness), that was created by the owners of the farm in November 1998. ASODECAH’s mandate is to “complement the environmental education of the country and to strengthen the relationship between society and the environment” through the activities of the farm (Finca la Flor website, 2002). The association seeks to integrate the surrounding community with international volunteers in work on ASODECAH environmental and social projects operating from the finca.

Physical features

The farm is a 14 ha piece of partially cultivated, mountainous land with various crops, grazing land, buildings for farm animals (sheep, goats, chickens and horses), as well as land devoted to lodgings, meeting areas, and buildings housing composting and organic fertilizer production. A ten hectare area of unprotected rainforest, previously damaged through clear-cutting and subsequent use for coffee plants, is also included on the farm and the farm owners would like to rejuvenate this as an agro-forestry permaculture area. In some areas, initial steps have been made to cultivate sustainable shade-crops of coffee plants and banana trees. A large
medicinal garden with herbs supplies traditional medicines and is used in the farm’s cuisine, as are the crops grown on the farm. Animals are kept on the farm, but are used only for milk, eggs and labor because of the organization’s vegetarian philosophy.

The community and its environmental context

The rationale behind the founding of Finca la Flor derives from the particular environmental problems occurring in the community of la Flor, in the Orosi Valley (which it lies above), and in Costa Rica’s rural areas in general. The country of Costa Rica is rich in natural resources and bio-diversity, which has helped to shape its status as an ecological “haven,” a popular destination for eco-tourists and a global identity as an “environmentally conscious” country (Wearing, 2001). However, despite of having the world’s highest percentage of land devoted to conservation projects, Costa Rica’s unprotected areas are in severe crisis due to deforestation, pollution, destruction of the land through pesticide use and through the urbanization of tourist areas (Isla, 2002).

Finca la Flor lies in the town of la Flor (population 1,000) above the Orosi Valley, in the province of Cartago, in the central valley of Costa Rica. The town has a Catholic and a much smaller protestant church, two small variety/grocery stores, a public school, an internet café run by the farm, a soccer field and a pub which is currently closed down. Costa Rica is one of three countries (along with Japan and Chile) with the highest incidence of gastric cancer worldwide, and Costa Rica has the highest mortality rate from this type of cancer (Sasagawa, Solano & Mena, 1999). Farm workers at Finca la Flor and local people report that this province has the highest frequency of stomach cancer in the world (personal communication, 2003). The people who live in the area understand this to be a result of the high rate of agro-chemical and pesticide use combined with the geography of the area. The scribed circle of mountains make the Orosi
valley a funnel for winds arriving from the Caribbean coast (bringing agro-chemicals with them) and "swirling" around in the end-point sink of this valley. Local people report that the U.S. government insists on these (U.S. produced) agro-chemicals being used, in order to qualify for export status, while in the U.S. itself these products are illegal (personal communication, 2002). The loss of local control of agricultural decision-making is pervasive throughout Costa Rica. Ana Isla writes that, "Sustainable development / globalization suppresses the human rights of local communities and the rights of nature in favor of the rights of corporations. In this frame, bioprospecting plunders local community means of livelihood while it criminalizes the use of biodiversity..." (2002, p.32). Local workers report other local agricultural problems including dependence on these non-organic means of maintaining crops, monocropping and the resulting low fecundity of soil, and difficulty in sustaining crops in their early stages due to the massive erosion of topsoil that results from the combination of daily, heavy (and frequently torrential) rain and the steep, mountainous land. The current practices result from the transition in the 1980's "green revolution" from growing crops for subsistence and local distribution to Costa Rica's inclusion into the global capitalist export market. This has led to a lack of sustainable farming practices that would ensure the land's continued fertility (Diaz, 2002). Cheyote, (a small lime-green squash) is grown for export and is the monocrop of most families in the area.

Social and infrastructural problems also exist in the community, but these are not explicitly addressed in the activities of Finca la Flor. Roads are in poor condition, making driving dangerous and roads prone to mudslides. Problems with litter and water contamination are significant as well, due to the fact that there is no garbage disposal system and thus garbage is left out, burned or thrown in a local river. For this reason, the Orosi Lake (fed by local tributaries) is not safe to swim in, and the la Flor River is not suitable for drinking water
A health clinic operates only one day a week in the village of la Flor. For additional health care, people from la Flor must go to the nearest city centre of Paraiso (population 33,000 in 2004 [World Gazetteer Population Figures]), a 30 minute bus ride. Education is public and free (although students must pay for uniforms and books, which can be prohibitive) and there is a local school for elementary grades. However, if a teacher is ill or leaves their position, the children have no classes for long periods of time until a replacement is found. Rural unemployment and poverty is a large problem, and social services in general are more difficult to access in such rural areas as la Flor.

As an area in “need,” in the ways mentioned above, the farm aims to help local people and the environment through agricultural reform. The farm owners also aim to address some additional community problems of la Flor by providing paid employment for some local people, running an internet café and offering courses on environmental issues. While the community faces a variety of struggles, it is arguably the interventionary policies of the North that encouraged farmers to adopt their current chemical-dependent agricultural practices. Accordingly, there may be some resistance to a group of Northerners again entering the community with agricultural “solutions” – particularly when neither of the farm owners had agricultural experience prior to this project.

The Farm’s Stated Objectives

The founders of Finca la Flor and ASODECAH state as their aim the amelioration of environmental degradation in la Flor and surrounding communities by introducing sustainable agricultural techniques (Finca la Flor website, 2004). Further, the farm owners attempt to intervene to some extent in global-scale negative repercussions of “green revolution” environmental techniques, by teaching and using organic, “natural” practices, and by
demonstrating the feasibility of organic agriculture to international visitors. In the process, the organization also hopes to improve the health of community members, facilitate cross-cultural exchanges and provide employment for locals. The latter is achieved only intermittently: when there are few volunteers, many workers are “let go” until another group arrives and help is needed (in cooking, leading volunteer work projects, etc.). Without the monetary contributions that volunteers provide during their stay on the farm (15U$ a day for the first two weeks and 12 U$ after that), FLF is not able to maintain its operations and thus must lay-off workers in “off season”.

Staff on the farm are hired based on an extensive knowledge of one or more activities relevant to the farm: regenerating rainforest, organic agricultural practices, construction with local materials etc. Staff are intended to share their knowledge with local and foreign visitors who come to the farm. Typically, locals work as “laborers,” although a few also sit on the board of directors with farm owners, a group that makes decisions about farm activities, hiring, firing etc. The farm owners and often a foreign person (European / North American in the role of volunteer coordinator) occupy the managerial and decision-making positions.

The creators of ASODECAH believe that many of the environmental problems of the community and the country as a whole stem from a lack of environmental education. Finca la Flor and ASODECAH try to propose “practical solutions for the environmental and social problems of the community” (Finca la Flor website, 2002). By combining the activities of an instructional agro-ecological farm, environmental school, alternative Spanish language institute and agro-ecotourism destination, all of which include local (la Flor community) and global (international volunteer) participants, the farm aims to provide a comprehensive set of solutions to local environmental problems and a larger program of environmental education. To meet this
educational goal, the farm has attempted to provide environmental education classes for children, sustainable development courses for adults (local and foreign), and operates under an open-door policy inviting local people to come and learn from the successful practices of the farm. However, local people have not attended the offered courses, and currently very few school groups come to visit the farm.

The people involved / organizational structure

One German woman and one Costa Rican woman (from outside of the region) own the farm. These women live on the farm some of the time, in their own cabin separate from the communal volunteer areas. They employ two to four people from the community to attend to care for one of the women’s ailing mother, who lives in a “modernized” and comfortable home on the farm property, markedly different from the rest of the farm buildings.

The owners express an interest in turning some formal control of the farm over to the local Costa Rican people. They have made efforts to include Costa Rican people (although rarely locals) with some higher education in the management of ASODECAH and all of its projects on the farm, as well as engaging them to teach sustainable agriculture courses to foreign volunteers. At the present time, the owners run these initiatives on their own as they have not been satisfied with the work of the people they have hired to manage the association in the past. On two of the three visits I made to the farm in 2002 and 2003 there were European people (first, a British man and woman partnership and later a Greek woman) working for room and board as international volunteer coordinators / facilitators. The farm has, for various reasons, had a hard time keeping these foreign workers for the full term of agreed upon labor. In one case the coordinator was asked to leave by the farm owners and in the other they left of their own volition.
The farm is hierarchically organized, but with some attempt to reach decisions collectively amongst the board of directors. Long term volunteers and workers are consulted on farm-related decisions but the final decision ultimately lies with the farm owners. Foreign volunteers are “officially” at the bottom of the hierarchy, following direction from local laborers and having almost no say in farm decisions (with the exception of some volunteers who stay for longer durations of a few months or more). However, foreign volunteers’ satisfaction is a primary goal of the farm, so their tasks are often more enjoyable, they will be offered more breaks from work and in general have freedom to choose the type of labor they wish to participate in on any given day. Local workers do not. They are assigned to particular tasks, and will lead the foreign volunteers in helping the locals to carry these out. Varying numbers of local people are employed by the farm. About four core workers are continuously employed, and up to six additional workers are employed at various times depending on the number of volunteers present and the financial situation of the farm. Local men are involved with physical labor, including the construction of new buildings, care for animals, care for the regenerating forest, agriculture, and cultivating natural fungicides and fertilizers. One local person is “in charge” of each of these projects (when they are in operation), and will lead the international volunteers when the volunteers choose (or are assigned) to volunteer in this area of the farm. Some of these same local men, and occasionally some of three additional available local people (two men and one woman), aid with Spanish lessons when volunteers request this. The local women employed in the farm work as cooks (one employed stably and two others occasionally), with the exception of one woman working as an occasional Spanish teacher. This gendered division of labor is reflective of that of the larger community of la Flor and of rural Costa Rica in general. All
employees are paid by the farm. Local employees do not live on the farm, but in their homes in the village of la Flor in which the farm is situated.

The farm can house up to 40 volunteers at one time, but numbers in the high-volume months (May to August) usually remain at about twelve foreign volunteers at any given time. The average stay of foreign volunteers during this time is three weeks. In the off-season, there may be only a few volunteers at the farm, and they tend to stay for periods of three months or more. Volunteers pay US$15 per day for food and lodgings, with reduced rates for stays of longer duration and if they are members of the global association Willing Workers on Organic Farms [WWOOF], although very few of the FLF volunteers are “WWOOFers”. Unlike local employees, there is no gendered division of labor evident in the tasks undertaken by foreign volunteers; a woman is just as likely as a man to be placed in a construction project, in animal care, shoveling, etc.

There is also a group of “permanent” volunteers (approximately four) on the farm; young (mid twenties) Costa Rican men from urban areas who have come to the farm as an expression of their aversion to capitalism and a belief that people have become too distant from “nature”. Many are philosophy students on hiatus, and all knew each other prior to coming to the farm. They live and work at the farm for no charge, and are treated more as workers than volunteers (for example, they may lead foreign volunteers in projects and be assigned regular areas of “expertise” on the farm).

In summary, various groups of people involved with Finca la Flor are positioned differently in terms of power and “role” within the organization. Chapters Four through Six investigate the ways that the practice of international volunteerism, at this site and in this project,
lower prices. Compañeros itself is a small organization run by a married couple in Kingston Ontario, running trips to Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Guatemala once or twice each year. Both partners work outside of this endeavour, and because of the difficulty in securing volunteers, trips are often cancelled due to lack of enrollment. The volunteering trips to Costa Rica that my participants participated in cost about $2,500 Canadian for two weeks (including airfare). These trips are divided into three components: a rural one consisting of six days at Finca la Flor volunteering in organic agriculture; a weekend “outing” to the Caribbean coast to see the “jungle” animals via riverboat tour; and finally six days in an urban setting near the capital, working on low-income housing projects, in daycares and on a variety of other projects. Many participants choose to extend their trip beyond the official two week duration of the Compañeros trip, to return to the farm for a longer duration, to volunteer in the urban setting for longer, or to travel independently around the country.

Compañeros reports that:
Our programs are safe, modest, mindful of local initiatives, and designed to encourage personal growth, community development, global education, and spiritual inspiration. We believe that bringing people together to live, work, and interact with one another in a cooperative way challenges participants to improve their understanding of themselves and others and inspires citizens to contribute positively to the betterment of the world. (Compañeros website, 2004).

This quotation anticipates the sorts of discourses my participants articulated when talking about international volunteering: ideas about service to others, personal growth and self-knowledge and the ability to improve or develop distant others through a brief encounter with them.

Consequently, Compañeros advertising helps to establish Finca la Flor as a place where discourses of development (whether of community or of “alternative” development) play out, and where notions of “volunteering” are negotiated alongside tourism or traveling. Finca la Flor and the volunteer organization of Compañeros are “typical” and representative of the new reduced rates for their stay (WWOOF website)
volunteer tourism. The encounters are premised on helping, involve aspects of tourism and development, and last a short length of time (from a couple of weeks to a couple of months). Volunteers who come to FLF spend large sums of money to help and travel ethically. How do they understand their volunteering experience? What discourses do they draw upon to develop that understanding, and how, in the course of negotiating their experiences with their self-conceptions and expectations, do they reconstitute their understanding of the volunteering experience? In the chapters that follow I will attempt to answer these questions in order to create an in-depth look at the experiences of international volunteers at FLF and to understand how they negotiate the discourses of volunteering, development and tourism while on their stay at the farm. My analysis is based on interviews with volunteers, farm owners and locals, as well as my participant observation experience and textual analysis of farm documents. In the following chapter I discuss how volunteering abroad is understood, “played out” and represented by volunteers, by focusing specifically on discourses of volunteerism. Chapters Four and Five are devoted to unpacking discourses of development and tourism that arise at this site of Finca la Flor, in order to lend some additional depth to my analysis of international volunteering.
CHAPTER THREE
Volunteerism as a Cascade of Concessions: from Altruism to Self-interest

...international philanthropies... also displayed discursive complexity. They often accentuated a difference between philanthropist and recipient, rescuer and needy, affluent and dependent; this difference could reinforce American feelings of exceptionalism and superiority. Yet these philanthropic traditions also often took shape within discourses of the universality of human experience, emphasizing respect for cultural variety...Far from being univocal, in short, philanthropic efforts often both inscribed and erased difference; they often claimed both special national virtues and a larger universalized vision. (Rosenberg, 2003, p.242-243)

As Rosenberg argues in her review of historical American philanthropic endeavors abroad, international philanthropy (and by extension to my argument, international volunteerism) is discursively complicated. The intentions of its contemporary proponents are purportedly “universalizing.” Offering an ethic of care across borders, international volunteering is understood to hold the potential to challenge and explode borders. On the other hand, international philanthropy and volunteering may be understood to remain fundamentally entrenched in power differentials between the benefactor / volunteer and recipient. Stephen Warren (2003) defines philanthropy as “an exchange relationship motivated by the desire to transform the recipients of the exchange according to the material and cultural ideals of the philanthropists themselves” (p. 110). Such practices of offering “help” to change lifestyle or livelihood in the direction of donors’ liking are laden with cultural imperialism, which Young defines as “how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one’s own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one’s group and mark it out as the Other” (1990, p.59).

International volunteerism is a growing enterprise: the United Nations volunteering program alone sends over 5,000 volunteers abroad each year (United Nations Volunteer website); the popular Cross Cultural Solutions sent 1,500 volunteers to less developed countries in 2003 (twice the number they sent in 2002); and Global Volunteers estimates that they would
send out over 1,700 volunteers in 2003; the small group Global Citizens Network saw a 30 percent increase in enrolment in their programs boosting their numbers up from 100 people the previous year (Link, 2003). In spite of the increasing popularity of volunteering vacations there have been few investigations of this international practice. Those which have been undertaken have tended to adopt one of two opposing positions, saying international volunteering is either hegemonic of empire and domination or one of a set of practices which serves to break down cross-cultural binaries.

Stephen Wearing is one of the few researchers to investigate the emergent practice of international volunteerism, in his study of Youth Challenge International volunteers at the Santa Elena conservation area in Costa Rica with a group of young volunteers who did conservation work for between two to six weeks, but who were in the country for about three months overall (2001; 2002). Wearing argues that international volunteering’s effects are mainly liberating, citing an ability to rupture the self-other division. Wearing claims that volunteer tourism presents a solution to the problem of the international traveler selfishly ‘consuming difference’ in the form of culture. Instead, he found that international volunteers at Santa Elena engage with the Other and argues that they successfully break down the division between subject and object. His evidence for this claim comes from volunteers’ discussion of concern for and understanding of locals’ plight, volunteers’ claims that they feel a connection with locals through their work and Wearing’s assertion that their experiences at the volunteering site foster a de-centering of ethnocentrism. Engaging with and “caring for” the other through volunteering is proposed as a novel and significantly different way of encountering a novel culture and people. Wearing insists that what is important is the “expansion and re-affirmation of en-cultured selves” in volunteers, through their perceptions of having an authentic experience (2002, p.254). He
suggests that traditional metaphors for the tourist-- the flaneur, gazer, consumer, wanderer or escape artist (Munt, 1994; Urry, 1990; Cohen, 1979) -- are not applicable to the volunteer tourist, who actively engages with the people and places s/he visits, rather than simply gazing upon them.

This interpretation of the volunteer tourist is predicated on a number of particular conditions which do not seem to be relevant to my study. First, Wearing understands a highly idealized form of volunteer tourism, where volunteers interact with locals in some depth, get to know the place they visit for a long period of time, and are a relatively independent unit from other “volunteers”. This is not the case at Finca la Flor, and I suspect it is not the case in much volunteer tourism. Volunteers more often travel in groups, associate with one another more than with locals, and re-create an “us-them” binary in their practices. Even in much longer term volunteer work, as investigated by Cook (2003) in her study of Western women working for one or two year durations in Northern Pakistan (mostly in education), the tendency is for volunteers to re-create pockets of Western-life at the expense of forging meaningful inter-cultural dialogue and intersubjectivity. This tendency may be stronger at volunteer sites where participants stay for short periods of time, or visit multiple sites rapidly as is popular in many of the global-exchange volunteering programs (see for example: http://www.volunteerabroad.ca; http://www.crossculturalsolutions.org; http://www.volunteertravel.com; http://www.unv.org ).

On weekends and breaks, volunteers leave their home bases to participate in more ‘traditional’ practices of travelers, visiting local sights while still being able to comfort themselves with their identity there as “volunteers”. Wearing boldly states that “under volunteer tourism, no longer is culture consumed, photographed and taken home as a memento of the tourist’s brush with difference.” (2002, p.250). This argument places great faith in the ability of international
volunteering in LDCs to escape the consumption-oriented, oppressive and staged nature of other forms of cross-cultural travel. In this chapter I will argue that volunteers at Finca la Flor do not trouble the self-other binary through their actions and experiences as volunteers in la Flor, thus challenging the generalization that Wearing makes from his conclusions based on his Santa Elena volunteer data.

Assertions that volunteer tourism subverts the colonialist practices of confirming cultural stereotypes and recreating the Other by making the Other “part of the self” (Wearing, 2202, p.249) is at best an interesting way to problematize self-other binaries. At worst, it is the ultimate colonization of the Other: literally making him/her part of the self in the most extreme domination. Further, the goals of volunteer travel as Wearing lays them out, only allow for a one-sided benefit: that experienced by the volunteer. Intersubjective understanding, David Butz (2001) argues, may be approached only through communicative action between two parties, in which they arrive at a shared understanding and each comes to make themselves understood to the other party in the way they wish to represent themselves. In such a way, they “colonize” one another’s autobiographies (ibid.) through the strategic representation of the self (Butz, 2001, p. 154). Wearing suggests that helping as a volunteer for a short time allows Northerners to overcome the most fundamental division of themselves from the (Southern) Other, but this is based on the assertion that the volunteer comes fully to “know” and understand the Other, while offering no discussion of the needs of the Other in terms of representation and access to an equally colonizing knowledge of the volunteer. While changes in volunteers’ understandings of the world seem more plausible in altruistic-work vacations than in other types of tourism, it is unlikely that such a carefully constructed and one-sided business of helping can allow the tourist
to dissolve the barrier so far as to 'consume the Other' (as Wearing suggests) in order to have an in-depth, barrier-free understanding of the host site and people—a goal questionable in itself.

My own research suggests a different and more wary conclusion than Wearing's. While volunteers at FLF report entering the volunteering encounter with understandings of "bridging connections" and providing service to others, they also report ongoing series of concessions in which their ideas of pure altruism capitulate into ones of mutual benefit (as in the attitude of "killing two birds with one stone"). Ultimately, as we shall see, FLF volunteers come to capitulate even further in this construction of helping, into an experience where the encounter is constructed almost exclusively as beneficial to the (volunteer) self. At this point, goals of overcoming difference and forging intersubjectivity are no longer tenable. While my participants do feel that the volunteering experience facilitated friendship among volunteers, most participants do not feel they established any degree of intersubjective understanding with local Costa-Rican people. Throughout the course of the trip, the purity of the ideals around international volunteerism transformed into ones more focused on self-oriented motivation and benefit.

In this examination of volunteerism, I identify some limitations that the discourse and practice of volunteerism place on confronting systemic oppression and examine how oppression can be understood as a structural concept that is reinforced even in some "benevolent" social structures like volunteering. The particular nature of cross-cultural volunteering carries with it notions of nation-building and cultural imperialism (as seen in government led volunteering programs and independent agencies), which also need to be addressed.

Critiques of philanthropy (charity or voluntary giving and serving to others beyond one's family) are similar to those I wish to apply to volunteerism. Both political economy and post-
structuralist critiques focus on the need to look at underlying causes of oppression rather than “treating the symptoms” of oppression. Philanthropic practice and discourse limits the consideration of more radical alternatives and limits examination of the sources of oppressive systems. Gomberg states that “Chronic and pervasive problems – because they are chronic and pervasive – cannot be intelligently addressed without discovering their causes and assessing which practical approaches best address them.” (Gomberg, 2002, p.47). Although my perspective leaves me questioning our ability to “know” the causes of social problems like poverty, I agree that philanthropic efforts narrow the discourse about oppression and inequality, and present a false sense of change and hope through practices that stay within the confines of a system which creates certain actors as privileged and others as marginalized.

The fallacy of philanthropy says ‘feed the hungry,’ presenting liberal politics (do-gooding) as an ethical duty. It short circuits political discussions of large scale causes of poverty...philanthropic responses detract from a revolutionary political response that might end poverty. (Gomberg, 2002, p.30)

Volunteering is generally accepted to be a socially useful activity, and is most often celebrated by those who discuss it. It is this taken-for-grantedness which makes volunteering an interesting practice to investigate, while also rendering it difficult to question and dismantle. Examining this social practice discursively allows a look at the less obvious interests it may serve and the set of ideas communicating a particular version of social reality which it is built upon.

Iris Marion Young (1990) conceptualizes oppression as structurally embedded in a culture and in its practices, and communicated through often ostensibly apolitical or relatively innocuous institutions (evoking Foucault’s [1972] discursive analysis of education, prisons and other regulatory bodies). The persons targeted and regulated by these institutions are created as “deviant,” breaking culturally agreed-upon codes of appropriateness. Such a control of vulnerable populations is also seen in bodies aimed to ‘help’ those in need, for such “altruistic”
organizations exercise power over the marginalized in deciding who needs help, identifying the problem, and deciding the type of aid to deliver.

Such is the case with volunteering, where there is an established power differential built into the volunteering encounter. The volunteer is able to 'help' because he or she is in a position of privilege relative to the recipient of volunteer aid. Young (1990) describes "five faces of oppression" (exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence) which are useful to my conceptualization of oppression as a structure which can be acted out through policies, institutions and social phenomena. One of Young's "faces" of oppression is particularly applicable to a critique of volunteering and the discourses surrounding it: this is the "face" of power(lessness), in this case dealing with the South's unequal access to resources etc., which may be seen as reinforced by the volunteering discourse and encounter. In addition to institutionalized oppression due the exploitation of working people's labor, Young calls attention to the added dimension of institutionalized powerlessness due to commonly accepted social practices:

...domination in modern society is enacted through the widely dispersed powers of many agents mediating the decisions of others. To that extent many people have some power in relation to others, even though they lack the power to decide policies or results. The powerless are those who lack authority or power even in this mediated sense, those over whom power is exercised without their exercising it: the powerless are situated so that they must take orders and rarely have the right to give them. (Young, 1990, p.56).

The volunteer encounter is one of these situations of mediated cultural power, in which decisions are largely made for the recipients of aid, whether it is in the form of money or volunteer labor. Northern donors decide what type of aid should be given, how much to give, and which people

\[5\] My conception of power is of a different type than Young's. While her research discusses power as a thing that can be possessed, I use Foucault's understanding of power only as being exercised, resisted etc.: an act and a relationship. However, her conceptualization of structural powerlessness is valuable to my discussion.
are "worthy" and which are "unworthy" of aid. Volunteering affords status and cultural capital to volunteers, but usually only temporary or marginal benefits to recipients. In the exchange, "respectability" is assumed in the volunteer but needs to be proved by the recipient. A further division between volunteer and recipient comes in the form of deciding who plans (or decides) and who executes the action (Young, 1990). The hierarchical structure of volunteer organizations allows volunteers and brokers of volunteering to decide the type of activity or help that will be offered to the recipient. The recipient, if s/he accepts this help, is left to simply follow suit with their prescription for betterment.

In many ways, the discourses specifically related to volunteering abroad are ones introduced first in the context of the U.S. Peace Corps (PC) during the Kennedy presidency (Fischer, 1998). Although non PC international volunteering projects may not have such explicitly stated nation-building goals as those of the PC, the discourses of international volunteerism include ideas about nationhood and progress implicitly. The very desire to bring in young volunteers to a LDC to help them, confirms the idea of Northerners' ability to help, by license alone of their being Northern (as no official training or knowledge is normally required in international volunteering). Somehow, college students are supposed to be qualified to lead countries into the dream of modernity and development.

Volunteers' practices often promote notions of linear economic and industrial "progress", and construct the volunteering site as a new frontier for volunteers to develop themselves as the early colonial Northerners supposedly did through hard work and struggle in "the wild" (Fischer, 1998). One popular volunteer organization, i-to-i, places an emphasis on the exotic destination while promising security and meeting other "like minded" volunteers:

Volunteer travel helps you to enjoy an authentic adventure with like-minded people in exotic locations, as you make a real difference at vital humanitarian and
preservation projects. You’ll enjoy i-to-i’s flexibility of projects and our 10 years’ experience in managing all the details of supporting our volunteers, giving you security while you discover a new culture and revitalize yourself. (i-to-i website)

The discourse of international volunteers creates them as hearty, hard-working, problem-solving and young: above all, showing the success of the American / Northern way. Volunteer Abroad’s website constructs this notion of adventure and excitement:

Imagine being a part of a movement that helps improve life for porters in the Everest Region, that develops micro-business plans with rural communities, that places teachers in remote areas, that aids street kids, that gathers scientific data, that protects endangered habitats or that assists the Red Cross in disaster relief and community reconstruction programs. Our global staff are ready to manage all of the details of your adventure ...If you are interested in finding a way to make a difference in your world, we can help you make it happen. (Volunteer Abroad website)

Notions of volunteer adventure and building the self began with the Peace Corps, whose primary stated purpose was to win over LDCs with the friendly, youthful faces of its volunteers in the belief that the stereotype of the “ugly American” could be overcome with these good public relations (Fischer, 1998). While other volunteering projects may not explicitly state this diplomatic role of the volunteer, there is often talk of nationhood, cross-cultural ties being forged and acting as a good representative for one’s home country. Volunteers abroad are tied into promoting international development through their presence and participation in projects, whether the projects are explicitly labeled as “development” or not. There is, of course, a simultaneous discourse about self-improvement through volunteering in which youth are supposed to go through a rite of passage in which they have to “work hard” for something (the specifics are not important) by abandoning their own culture of comfort and leisure. Yet, the volunteering vacation becomes one of developing the “Other”, a point of self-reflection, personal growth and alternative leisure. As with the PC, volunteering internationally is supposed to provide volunteers with a global perspective and a purpose: being a part of developing the “new...
frontier”. The volunteers’ self-realization occurs through a neo-colonial project in which the Other is only relevant in relation to the development of the Western “self”. Ideas of international volunteerism have always focused on personal development as much as international development. It is through a critical discursive analysis of international volunteering that the interests served and the power embedded in the exchange can begin to be located.

Data Analysis

In this chapter, I introduce FLF volunteers’ shifting ideas about being a volunteer, examining their motivations, ideas about self (volunteer) and other (local Costa Rican people) expressed in discourses surrounding the encounter. I will follow by explaining the practice of international volunteerism: describing how what starts as a focus on helping others (and building intersubjectivity) transforms into a focus on self-development, learning and forging friendships with other Northerners. The chapter examines the discursive constitution of the destination (and its people) as a dramatic backdrop of difference on which the FLF volunteers play out Northern discourses of self-betterment and self-knowledge, often through favorable juxtapositioning and comparisons of their Northern Selves to Southern Others. The insular nature of volunteers as a social group serves to more firmly establish discourses and practices of self-other and re-creates the Other as object. This chapter’s argument establishes how volunteers start out with (a) idealism about volunteering as a general concept and as a practice they wish to act out and how (b) throughout their experiences at FLF, progressively move towards ideas of mutuality in international volunteering encounters and (c) eventually concede that volunteering serves mostly as a form of self-benefit. Throughout, I have attempted to overlay a second organizational framework in which I examine how volunteers describe other volunteers and local people (often as “foils” to one another), discuss how work and leisure is re-conceptualized in the volunteering
experience and finally describe how volunteer travel serves as a means to accumulate cultural capital. I trace the dissolution of the idealistic volunteering encounter into one of paying for pleasure (which will lead into the next chapter’s examination of tourism). I will start with a discussion of volunteers’ general understandings of volunteering abroad.

**Conceptual Idealism**

Although the temporality of participants’ changing understandings of volunteering is not in itself demonstrable through interview material alone, I was with them through the entire volunteering encounter and witnessed and discussed with them their changes in understandings while in the field. The temporality I describe is confirmed by participants’ own responses which chart a dynamic process of engaging with discourses of volunteering in terms of altruism, selflessness and also of benefit to themselves. Most volunteers talked about entering the volunteer encounter with notions of altruistic giving. The following exchange with Julia is exemplary of this:

Julia: I think that volunteering is someone giving something of themselves, not expecting anything in return; just giving it because they can, because they’re able to, because they think that it plays into some bigger good.
Interviewer: OK, good. And why do you think that it’s important to volunteer, then?
J: I think that it’s important because people have skills that they can bring to people in ways that... there are organizations and things that need people’s help and they can’t pay for it. You know, people have talents, people have skills... they just give because they can, you know.
I: Right
J: And because you get-- you feel affirmed from volunteering

Volunteering as a concept divorced from a particular space and activity, is constructed idealistically by FLF volunteers. They understand it to be about sharing talents to help others in need, while expecting nothing in return for their labors. One volunteer constructs an

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6 see Cook, 2003 for a discussion of similar trends in longer term volunteers in Gilgit Pakistan
understanding of volunteering that locates people in a cycle of privilege and need at various
points in their lives. In her understanding,

... everybody has a responsibility to give back to the community, whether it’s the
community that they live in or in a community or population abroad. We all go
through different times in our lives where we require assistance from other people
and when we’re capable of offering assistance to other people. So, I guess I see
the volunteer work as being a period in your life where you’re able and willing to
offer your assistance to other people with the understanding that you may at some
point in your life need the volunteer work of somebody else. (Julia)

The sense of responsibility to others is tempered with the notion that any person being helped,
may one day be in the opposite role (of being the volunteer his or herself). This seems unlikely,
not just in an international volunteering field, but in most volunteering situations, as they are
premised on people in positions of privilege helping less powerful people who are positioned this
way (somewhat) permanently. It is certainly difficult to imagine the local people of la Flor taking
a volunteering vacation to Canada to help these same Canadian volunteers later in life. The
participant’s understanding of the equity of this relationship shows an engagement with the
concepts of differential power situated within the volunteering relationship, although her
assertion that these roles could potentially be reversed may be an unrealistic portrayal of power
relationships as easily reversible.

Another thing that becomes evident are feelings of responsibility to ‘help’ in response to
volunteers’ positions of privilege, which they see as being addressed and made more tolerable
through ‘giving’ in volunteerism. Luce expresses a sense of obligation to volunteer in response
to the Northerners’ positions of privilege:

I think that it’s really important and I think that it’s important that especially in a,
in a... position where I am in the world-- I’ve had a very, you know, easy life in
many ways, compared to other places and I feel that it’s important to kind of, give
back to your world. (Luce)
She goes on to suggest that volunteering itself is a way for (Northern) people to feel like they are active in the global. Rather than “passively” watching world events and injustices abroad, she feels that this is a way of choosing to care and participate in a different “local” which signifies the global to volunteers:

    I think that it gives people a sense of belonging, of doing something GOOD and actually taking some action, rather than, you know, sitting at home and complaining about how the world is, or, you know, when you go out and you actually DO something, it’s, it really makes you feel a lot better about maybe having some control over what’s going on in the world. (Luce)

Thus, volunteers feel they have an opportunity to exercise some participation or control over global processes by acting kindly to others far away, although the specifics of place and project may not be of primary importance to the volunteers. Research on volunteering has argued that decisions about which spaces and projects are undertaken are largely a result of donors’ / volunteers’ “pet projects” or attachment to particular places (Fyfe & Milligan, 2003) rather than due to a distribution based on “real need”. Thus, volunteering projects are often distributed unevenly across global and local (community) spaces, which may serve to reinforce inequities rather than to reverse or improve them. Volunteers reported some consistent reasons that they chose the Compañeros / Finca la Flor program: they felt that Costa Rica was a “safe” country, and that the program offered a wide range of volunteer activities for them to try out. Julia said

    I think we saw Costa Rica as being a safe country to visit and you know really limited concern about our health and our safety while we were there in comparison to some of the other countries. And then, the program, too. What attracted us to the program was that it did give you opportunities to try different areas of volunteer work, which was important for us since neither of us had done that before.

The Compañeros program visits both rural and urban locations, with a weekend “jungle boat tour” separating the two volunteering components. Within each volunteering site (Finca la Flor and in San Jose) volunteers had some freedom in choosing the type of work they would like to
do. For example, they could choose to work at the local school, in agriculture or construction at various times throughout the trip, although during their farm stay, most options were limited to the farm space.

**Describing Volunteers and Local People**

One of the important attributes of international volunteerism, according to its proponents in the literature, is its ability to break down the barrier between self as subject and the other as object (Wearing, 2001; 2002). If this is so, I would expect volunteers' descriptions of other volunteers and local people to reflect this in a respect for the autonomy and subjectivity of these others that they come to know. However in my attempt to elicit both positive and negative stories about volunteers and locals, volunteers described these two groups very differently. Volunteers at the farm were portrayed idealistically as open-minded cheerful folks seeking an alternative lifestyle. Any problems which occurred were seen as related to particular volunteers' refusal to be open and friendly (usually in respect to other volunteers), but were not understood to be indicative of volunteers as a group. Good experiences with local people were discussed succinctly and in very general terms (e.g., as "kind" and "humble"), but descriptions of negative experiences with local people tended to be in much more detail.

Mary discusses the character of the international volunteers she met at FLF:

I think, generally, if I were to travel the normal touristy way on the resort or in the tourist locations or whatever, I generally get annoyed with other travelers that I meet and that we don’t share the same ideals or that we don’t agree on a lot of things and that I generally find that they’re not being, I don’t know, good travelers, I guess, if they don’t care what’s going on around them and they’re spending their money on stupid things or things like that. But at la Flor, it's a lot of the same people who have similar ideals to mine and so when I was there I remember I had incredible discussions with other people and even if I was just listening to other people speak, it was never like, a conversation I got annoyed with, it was always something that I admired people for or that I was getting something from. And it seems that, people who go to institutions like an organic
farm are generally there to learn about the culture, they’re there to give something back to it and it just seems to be— I don’t want to say, good people and “people more like me” in the same breath, because that seems kind of like, a little too egotistical, but at the same time—it seems like the type of people who would go to something like this seem to me to be good people and people I admire, and so the kind of volunteer that would go there is generally someone that I would get along with better.

Mary is confident in her assessment that the type of person who volunteers is categorically different from the type of person who would visit Costa Rica through more mainstream avenues.

For many participants, the nature of the farm itself becomes constituted by the volunteers and their relationships to each other there, rather than by their relationships with the land and the people they ostensibly came to encounter. The farm becomes a meeting place for interesting counter-cultured young people from different Northern countries.

This representation of fellow travelers exists in stark contrast with some of the general comments participants made about local people and the relationships they formed with them.

Julia says:

I think that you have to be careful when you’re meeting – like on the farm, there were lots of other volunteers – like the guys that were volunteers there from CR or from surrounding countries, and I think that to an extent you need to be cautious of your relationship with those people and keeping it on a friendly basis but a professional basis as well. And at the same time, too, with some of the kids that you meet, the children that we met, it’s nice and it’s good to open up, but at the same time realizing that you are going to have to leave and that can be stressful on you and on the people you’re meeting as well… Being open, but at the same time, understanding that you are going to be leaving and being [unclear]. I mean, it’s kind of a fine line I think, to kind of hold yourself off from developing friendships, but at the same time, especially with the children, that was the one thing I found difficult.

In other words, volunteers should keep a “professional distance” from locals (“Those people”), invoking fear in the justification of this. While it is not considered important to keep a distance from other volunteers whom are met solely for the duration of the trip, it is considered a problem to establish such connections with local people. This failure to enter into sincere friendships with
locals (but not other travelers) does not bode well for the goal of intersubjectivity that volunteering abroad aims to establish. Instead there is an expression here of a need to “be careful” with locals – notions of danger and of false connections being made. Instead of forging friendships with local children (although this may certainly have been a limited understanding of friendship), the volunteer feels that it is important to not get too close (emotionally) to the children. Other volunteers describe their interactions with locals more positively, but the lack of in depth-contact with locals emerges from their general comments on local people, based largely on brief public interactions with them. Simone had the most extensive experience with local people of all of my participants, eating with a la Flor family for suppers over a span of two weeks, and working in the public school for a day. Even as the volunteer with the most contact with local people (and the best Spanish skills of my participants), her experience was limited to brief and arguably superficial encounters. She says:

Well there were the people who would come onto the farm. You know, the workers in the community and you know, we would work with them every day. As well the family who I went to eat with. I would go to their house for, I think, two weeks had dinner with them and I would just talk to them and hang out with the kids and talk about my family, talk about Canada, ask questions about Costa Rica. I did spend a little bit of time at the school, so I got to interact with the kids. Again, I did a brief lesson in ESL, English lessons. I talked about Canada, I talked to the kids. I got to talk to the teachers and the administrators, so I got a bit of an understanding about the school, and the education system in Costa Rica... Again, I would meet people on the streets and say hi. At the internet café, volunteers who would come in, we would meet them. You know, just like, local, like interactions, everyday interactions going to the store to buy a popsicle, you know. You’d say hi to the cashier. Going to the bar at night, you know. We met some people there. So just everyday interactions, you would see local people if you were off the farm.

Her interactions were brief, and access to local peoples’ lives, although greater than other participants in this study, was limited to casual greetings in public spaces or in formalized dining arrangements. In her description of the use of community (la Flor) space by volunteers, one of the farm owners acknowledges that volunteers do not interact much with locals:
Not many volunteers will go and walk around. Some of them do, but they sort of come and just stay on the farm. That’s why we have the [internet] café [in the town]—so they can go out and meet some other family – only not here on the farm. So [the café] is a way to make better contact between the community and the volunteers. (Ana)

The farm owners have given up on locals voluntarily coming into the farm space to have an intercultural experience with foreign volunteers and to learn some of the agricultural ideas that the farm wishes to spread. Instead, they have begun an extension of the farm out into the space of the community, simultaneously forcing volunteers to interact with locals, and locals to engage with the activities and people of the farm within their own town.

The farm has become a space for volunteers which is largely de-contextualized from the surrounding cultural environment: a place not directly related to the people who have inhabited the area for their entire lives, but instead a mere backdrop for the vacation and personal fulfillment dramas that volunteers carry out there. It becomes a place that may foster some commonality and intersubjectivity, but not as anticipated. Instead of occurring between volunteers and locals, this happens mostly amongst volunteers themselves. One participant’s description of developing a friendship with another young Canadian woman with whom she was unlikely to have much in common (or even to like much) in their home town, illustrates the point:

“Monique” [a Quebecois volunteer] for example, I never would have known anything about her-- she is somebody that I probably wouldn’t get along with in Quebec, but because of the place that we were in, I got along great with her...I don’t know if that confuses more, or explains more, but it just seems that we realized that the type of people that we were rather than the language that we speak back home or what our ideals would be back home kind of thing and so, it was interesting to me as it was to my friends and my family, that I was really good friends with someone who was – put them in a Montréal context – a French separatist who hangs out in St. Denis and that I would never normally see because she doesn’t go to my school kind of thing...That was interesting to me and I realized she was like an incredible person. And not to say that I’m prejudiced
towards French people, because I’m not, but I just normally would never have crossed her path as far as I could tell. So, that was very interesting to me.

The farm serves as a place for different types of encounters than its owners intend, and than volunteers imagine when they plan their trip: fostering friendship and togetherness between volunteers, while volunteers do not forge the same type or intensity of alliances with local people. The ideals of intersubjectivity and cross-cultural exchanges seem only to be successful between foreign North American and European volunteers, as the farm and Costa Rican people become less and less the focus of volunteers’ time and attention once they are at the volunteering site.

Transition to Mutuality

These volunteers are self-reflective about themselves and about their positioning as volunteers in organized volunteering. Mary questions how some types of help are legitimated by being called “volunteering,” noting that these types of helping are useful for resumes, and as job experience, while other forms that may be more spontaneous and altruistic are not considered “legitimate” because they exist outside of the recognized volunteering sphere:

I don’t know, I guess I’m kind of skeptical of what is termed ‘volunteering’ and what is not. Like, is volunteering if you’re working in a hospital but you’re not getting paid for it, but if you’re like, I don’t know, helping random people on the street—you know you can’t write stuff like that on your CV, so it’s almost as if it isn’t recognized as really volunteering... Yeah, you know, there’s a lot of things that seem like, you’re either supposed to do them out of the basic goodness of your heart or not everyone is expected to do them and so it’s just like, not that important.

Other volunteers echoed Mary’s sentiments, suggesting that the decision to enter a formal volunteering encounter, mediated by particular institutional brokers (even though it may also maintain components of altruistic motivation), is one that volunteers do recognize as personally beneficial. The need for recognition for their “good work” influences choices of the type of volunteering to undertake.
In the course of interviews and in informed discussion at FLF, volunteers are able to question the altruism and benevolence implied in international volunteering. They are aware of the benefits of the volunteering encounter to them, and often frame their discussions of different volunteers’ motivations along a scale of altruism which places volunteers receiving personal benefit (for example, in official school credit) as “less valued” than those volunteering just to help and learn. Mary says:

I think the danger is more that people do things like that either for *experience* or for *credit* and for like school credit or something and that it generally doesn’t end up usually being *actually* for someone else. It’s usually like – I don’t know it just seems like a problem with me – like people won’t do it unless they get something out of it anyway, and so, it kind of like, takes the goodness out of volunteering because people do things for it to look good on their CV, they do things to like, give them school credit. And you can’t even blame anyone for that, because *why should* someone give up such a significant amount of their time when they could be working, or they could be in school or they could be *actually* doing something to improve themselves or to help or anything like that...

Volunteers are able to criticize each other, but do not blame one another in the end for choosing to volunteer in order to benefit themselves. It is costly to take time away from work, and necessary to build up a strong CV, and without these added benefits, it may be that the bare altruistic motivations alone would make the volunteering encounter a bad *personal* choice for volunteers, even causing them some financial and other losses by entering the encounter.

A common refrain of *mutual benefit* was thus sung by most of the volunteers:

At the same time, one of the most important factors of it is that even if you *are* getting something out of it, for example you’re getting experience, or you’re getting something on your CV, it’s like hitting two birds with one stone, because you get something for yourself and you get something for other people. ...we even said they were kind of dependent on our monetary (laughs) funds. So yeah, at the same time, even if you are doing it for selfish reasons, at least two people are getting something out of it as opposed to just one. (Mary)

Thus, “everyone wins” in the encounter. At this phase of volunteers’ experience with international volunteerism (in the field), volunteers still retain the notion that their actions and
activities there at the volunteering site are useful to local people, therefore identifying and legitimizing the personal gains they receive from participating in the volunteering program. Hélène adopts this position when she suggests that a brief trip to volunteer abroad is more helpful than never going in the first place:

At some points I did (feel conflicted about being in Costa Rica as a volunteer) because I know that we have a much higher standard of living than they do, and although you are coming to help, you can only help for so long, so I mean, at some point you think, maybe how much help can I actually offer in two weeks, or a week or, you know. But in the end, I mean three weeks was better than no weeks at all. So, in the end I think it’s beneficial for everyone involved.

Simultaneously re-confirming the privilege (higher standard of living) of the North in comparison to the South and the genuine helpfulness of volunteering, Hélène expresses dominant discourses that confirm and recreate the North and South in stereotyped ways. International volunteering as a general practice is not challenged by most participants. This makes sense as the time and money volunteers invest in the project, in addition to the original claims of “going to provide help” predispose volunteers to readily adopt the positive discourses surrounding international volunteerism, rather than simultaneously participate in and reject the ideals of international volunteerism. When I asked Luce if maybe volunteering was just a way to reduce tourist guilt, she expressed both a confidence in her activities as being at least marginally useful and a humility in not feeling heroic about her actions:

Um... I don’t know. I would say, maybe [volunteering is just a way to reduce tourist guilt]. That might be, but hey great, you know. If I can do anything, like that’s great. That’s better than nothing. And I know that it’s incomparable to what many other people do, but I don’t feel like I’m martyred or anything. I don’t have any moral superiority, but I do feel that it’s better to do something than to just sit by a pool and drink and eat.

While Luce does not deny that international volunteering offers real help, she does reject what she sees as unreasonable accolades (or cultural capital) for her work.
Re-inventing “Work” and “Leisure”

In volunteering, the work relationship is re-worked from that of the usual experience where one labors for pay. Instead, there is no exchange of funds for the labor conducted. However, international volunteering diverges even further from the traditional “volunteer” work-compensation tie, because in this unique situation, volunteers PAY to work – a complete reversal of expectations for the work relationship. This work is constructed to be part of an enjoyable experience of difference and of participation in an “alternative” life. For the international volunteers in my study (sometimes called voluntourists) work is seen as a somewhat recreational activity, complementary to and part of their recreational experience. International volunteerism is built around the assumption that “by living in and learning about other people and cultures, in an environment of mutual benefit and cooperation, one is able to engage in a transformation and the development of self” (Wearing, 2001, p.3). Participants in this study often justify this inversion of the usual work relationship to themselves and others around them:

And deciding to go was a bit of a battle with my parents – you know, financially, how are we going to come up (with) the money and it was difficult to convince them—and myself a bit too—that you know I was paying to go and volunteer and to you know they thought to go work, well “you know, you’re paying for me to go work?”. But you know, we, we got over that. [laughs]. Julia

There is some tension for volunteers in negotiating this new work / pay relationship and justifying it to others. The work itself (even though it is often physical and arduous work) gets constructed as enjoyable and refreshing, rather than exhausting and a chore. As Mary says:

Um, well I know the basic thing about working on the farm that I absolutely loved was the fact that we were outside and that even when it was raining, it was just gorgeous to be outside all the time, and especially with the view that they have there, just being able to look out at this gorgeous scenery of mountains was incredible...
The place (the farm, Costa Rica, the mountains) is experienced as “different” and thus the labor itself is a spectacle to be enjoyed and consumed. Volunteers liked to have pictures taken of themselves working at the farm: carrying loads of grass, leading one of the horses or spraying homemade insecticides with the fumigation gear on. On numerous occasions, volunteers at FLF took a break from their work to comment on the “strangeness” of the experience to them, as in “I can’t believe I’m in Costa Rica building a goat house, and all of my friends are home working in offices!” Similarly, the value of the labor is transformed, coming not through fiscal compensation, but instead through social rewards:

Julia: I think for me, at first I felt that I wasn’t really doing a lot, because, how could weeding a garden or stuff like that, really make a big difference to anybody? But I think a lot of it really relates back to not just the work that you’re doing, but the social experiences that you’re getting out of it and that the people you’re working with are getting out of it. And really sharing different cultures and different beliefs and stuff like that. The conversations that you had while you were doing—
Interviewer: the weeding—
J: yeah. Had more importance than the actual work itself. Julia

Although volunteers have very little contact with local people they do have some, as they occasionally work alongside local workers (although if there are other volunteers present, they often associate mostly with them). However, a lot of value is placed on this work exchange with locals. The practice of farm labor is re-worked in this cross-cultural context, reflecting again the position of the volunteers – with more money and privilege, who work as a form of leisure alongside locals who need to work to be paid.

Management asserts that the farm is based upon volunteers’ labor and contribution to farm projects. Ella, one of the farm’s owners is emphatic about this: “The workers give a little bit of help. But the most creativity and energy is here by the volunteers. Everywhere you go in the forest, or in the botanical gardens, or in the houses, you see the work of the volunteers. And the
whole atmosphere is the atmosphere of the volunteers!” This does not fit with my observations that local workers carry out most of the farm work, and spend additional time instructing inexperienced volunteers in how they can learn to do the same tasks, usually with limited success. The volunteers seem to share my evaluation of the “practical” value of their labor to the farm. They admit they are often not as adept at manual farm skills (being new to these tasks) and aware that their participation often slowed down the amount of work being done on the farm, as workers would have to demonstrate, direct and train the volunteers constantly, with new groups of people constantly arriving and needing introduction to the tasks again. Simone says:

Volunteers were paired off with the hired workers and to an extent they would work with them as far as their abilities [those of the volunteers'] would permit. I mean, I did construction with Isa [a local worker] for a couple of days and while he was nailing and hammering and sawing, I couldn’t do it as quickly or as professionally as he could. So, I did as much as I could. So definitely the hired workers did the majority of the work, and the harder work, while the volunteers were there more for the experience. You know, I had never nailed something and I had never sawed something before, so I did what I could, but... I don’t know. I know a lot of other people loved it and thought that they were really contributing. I thought that it wasn’t really what I was there to do. I thought, you know, it’s going to take me three times as long to hammer down this nail as it would take someone else to hammer it in.

Volunteers often saw their own work as only marginally useful, and therefore had to gain satisfaction not in contributing to a grand goal (“saving the rainforest”) as they had originally envisioned, but in re-conceptualizing their activities. I asked Julia what was different about the tasks she did at the farm from what she had expected:

I don’t know if it was so much different. I mean, those were the types of things that I expected to be doing, really, but I guess once I got there, it was initially harder to see how little projects like that could make a difference, you know. I think maybe I was expecting to do things on a larger scale, but then really what that is I can’t really pinpoint for you exactly what. What I expected -- to be making a big difference. So I think it took me a couple of days to really reflect on it and think what we had done to see the importance of it. And to realize that those little jobs—somebody has to do them—and if a bunch of little things like weeding don’t get done, then they all add up which would make it really difficult for the
farm to function. So I think that it took a bit of self reflection for myself to say that things we were doing didn’t need to be big-scale projects to make a difference, because all of those little things pull together to make the farm – just the bigger project – successful.

While volunteers enter the encounter with visions of their abilities to help “make a big difference” to locals and the environment, the volunteers re-work this into an understanding that their labors often turn out to be menial but largely supportive to the farm itself. This is understood most positively by framing the experience in terms of being important because “somebody has to do it’ and maintaining a faith in the goals of the farm project itself. The volunteer work, it may turn out, is not going to save the rainforest, but volunteers can hold onto the idea that the farm itself may. Similarly, the experience can be reworked in terms of purpose: often shifting from ideas of aid and charity more to ones of self-development and learning.

Hélène is typical of other volunteers in reframing her experience at the farm into one where she is seen as student, rather than worker or development worker:

I felt more isolated because I don’t have a background in agriculture and I’ve never been on a farm before. I didn’t feel that I was that much of a – I had that strong of a role in actually farming, so I guess my role would be like a student, like learning. I was just someone who came to learn as opposed to someone who came to really lend a hand.

Thus, in encountering the specifics of this particular volunteer project at FLF, ideas of international volunteering work are shaped into ones of “learning” rather than being helpful or useful, as the original constructions entailed. The farm itself is constructed by owners and management much in this way, so that activities are often planned in a way that the emphasizes a rewarding experience for volunteers at the expense of attending to the goals of a fully functional and successful alternative organic farm. One Costa-Rican worker says:

We need to have the organic agriculture working sufficiently because in reality, this is a farm. And everything tells me that everything focuses on the international volunteers as the principle source of resources and it is really good to have foreign
volunteers for an intercultural exchange, but it seems to me it shouldn’t be the primary goal. In my opinion, the principle goal should be the productivity and efficiency of an--- acting like a farm. (Joel)

The focus on volunteer-satisfaction is further evident in the farm owners’ propensity to assign “enjoyable” tasks to volunteers when they seem discouraged, bored or if the weather is too wet. While hired workers are expected to labor outside in all weather, volunteers are frequently moved under shelter for easier jobs in order to maintain the “fun” of the experience. Thus, it is not only the volunteers themselves but also Finca la Flor management that shifts focus from help of others to one of volunteer self-development.

Volunteering can be considered a type of “serious leisure”, similar to hobbies and amateur enthusiasms (Wearing, 2001). Here, leisure is found not outside of work as it is in the volunteers’ Northern home-culture, but instead it is found within the work of volunteering itself. Encountering and “helping” the other is constructed as enjoyable and admirable. When volunteers’ activities do not fit in with this idea (for example when they vacation away from the work site on weekends), the incongruity is often critiqued (as an undesirable part of the program) by the volunteer:

[M]aybe like, the whole “boat ride weekend excursion” type thing, was a good experience, but then I felt like “I don’t feel like I’m volunteering so much right now”. I was kind of, maybe a little bit confused about that trip, because it ended up being so expensive and I was like “yeah it’s a great weekend but … (Mary)

Interviewer: What things were a little bit different than what you expected, even outside of work, for what it looked like, or how your days were spent, or whatever?
J: Well, yeah, all those little excursions we took, was far from what I expected.
I: So you expected more working?
J: Yeah, I kind of did, actually I’m disappointed. (Judith)

Leisure time in the scheduled volunteering trip is sometimes understood as a disappointment, perhaps due to the juxtaposition of “pure leisure” activities such as sightseeing alongside the
“serious leisure” of volunteer work. Confusion about which discourse best explains / structures their experience (“Am I a volunteer? Am I a tourist?) is negotiated by volunteers throughout the trip, and forces a confrontation of their positioning in relationship to local people, who labor for pay and cannot afford to vacation. Mary goes on to explain that having “breaks” from volunteering is in fact necessary for its restorative purposes and in order to reward volunteers for the “hard” work they are doing:

Well, I think that [the work relationship] has to be [a bit different], for the general population, because otherwise, for a lot of people, there is no incentive to go. If you have to be a slave, you’re not even getting paid, obviously it’s not going to be the most appealing trip in the world. And like, they’re advertising trips at my school and they’re making them sound like you’re being such a good person by going, but really, it’s two weeks of volunteering and then two weeks of adventurous like whatever, wild water rafting, blah blah blah – so they have this like, package deal where you get to do fun things and – I was very skeptical of it. I was almost annoyed because people were like, “Isn’t that what you did?” and I’m like, ”No, I didn’t go like, parasailing in whatever ocean at the same time as I was volunteering”. You know, that didn’t come with it, you know? It’s like as if they had to provide the incentive to do two weeks of good work and then you also get to get school credit for those and I was kind of skeptical about that scenario, but—yeah, they have to provide some type of incentive because the general population is not going to do a trip like that where you’re slaving for someone that’s not paying you. You could spend less money and go to somewhere where you can lie around on the beach all day. Yeah, so I guess it’s just: it’s sad, but most people need an incentive to do anything like that.

Mary understands the need for extrinsic motivations to volunteer for most volunteers, and why it is advertised this way. This is fairly typical of FLF volunteers, as is her pride in the lack of official leisure time or “pure leisure” activities on her volunteering trip. She is frustrated when others imagine her in the pursuit of leisure and pleasure rather than volunteering and working.

Self Benefit

Ostensibly, volunteering abroad is about helping distant others through Northerner’s labor, and the primary goal is in this “help” for others. As detailed above, this general formulation often shifts towards a focus on mutual benefit when discussed in terms of this
specific volunteering at FLF. When discussing their actual volunteering experiences at FLF, benefit to the volunteer self is at least equally as important as the goal of benefiting the “in need” others, describing the general concept of volunteering as a selfless gift to others. While giving a “gift” is often thought of as a benevolent action demanding no reciprocation, this may in reality be impossible to attain (Godbout, 2003). In spite of their altruistic descriptions of the general idea of the “gift” of volunteering, when my participants were asked why they themselves choose to volunteer their responses most often related to benefits afforded to themselves; through work experience, pleasure or any number of other benefits. This encounter is premised on a rupture between the giver and the recipient, and this division is based on power and ability to “gift”. The gift-giving of volunteering not only establishes a power difference, it is tainted by volunteer expectations to benefit themselves from the encounter:

(Volunteering) helps you learn better skills, learn about yourself and about others and later on in the future it helps you get better jobs because they know you’ll be more experienced and stuff... I figured it would be a great opportunity to get experience and to learn about cultures, it’s something I always wanted to do, see how other places, how other people live in different places, and relate to us and stuff. (Judith)

Notions of benefit to self are admitted openly by volunteers when asked about a specific volunteering encounter such as this one at FLF, sometimes completely replacing the emphasis on connectivity and aid to others which is prominent when volunteering as a concept is discussed more generally.

Volunteers’ attention to difference and their apparent belief that the South is categorically different from the North, speaks against the universalizing claim of volunteerism, and often evokes the exoticization of the Other. Many volunteers reported an interest in participating in international volunteering because of this chance to encounter difference. While this goal can be positive, as in the pursuit of understanding and appreciating difference, it is more problematic if
difference is devalued and used as a foil for showing the “better way” of the North. On one particular occasion, because our late-morning work shift was late starting, when the local worker to lead our group was busy with another task, leaving our group waiting for instructions, one FLF / Compañeros volunteer explained that we were on “Tico time” (a popular expression with Anglos in Costa Rica) and that the Ticos “hadn’t yet evolved to using watches and clocks as a rule.” Most often, however, difference was celebrated by the volunteers. Luce exemplifies this:

Well, I think there’s a sense of adventure involved, like, I definitely love to learn about different cultures and everything. You know, I know there are places in Canada that probably need volunteers and help, but there’s--the type of the thing in Costa Rica, on the farm--working outdoors--Stuff like that. I just wanted to learn about a whole DIFFERENT community. I felt, you know--you learn so much more about--you learn about the-- whatchamacallit--the plant life, flora and all that--the fauna. It’s just much more enriching for me...

The ideals of helping seem to morph into ones of consuming difference, of experiencing “difference” firsthand and of learning interesting things (another benefit to volunteers only). The fact that the specifics of what was learned are lost (Luce cannot remember any plants and animals specifically) further suggests that what was learned was more about difference than botany, agriculture or language. This is in line with research indicating that ecotourism trips, popularly thought to be educational, are often more about hedonistic pleasure than learning (Ryan, Hughes & Chirgwin, 2000). The focus on spectacle seems to subordinate goals of learning.

Volunteers encounter some guilt about stating that they volunteer for their own betterment, but understand the volunteering encounter as a situation of loss for volunteers otherwise (e.g. losing paid labor time, money, leisure time). Therefore, the focus on the self in choosing to volunteer is seen as necessary and not a fault. Julia rationalizes the motivations of volunteers:
I think that a lot of people are hesitant to say that they choose to volunteer because it makes them feel good about themselves. I think a lot of people want to—not “hide” it—but are not comfortable saying it. But I think that that is a really strong component because, when you’re volunteering your time and not getting paid in return, there has to be something driving you to do it. And especially as a student, when you have school work and other things that [unclear] to be higher priorities, just in terms of your time, I think that there has to be something that’s driving us to do it and I think a lot of it comes from—initially—comes from the benefits that you get about yourself, and feeling good about yourself. And I think that that is just sort of an initial thing and I think once you sort of experience that, then you start to see all the other benefits that come along with it. And for me personally those are now more of the driving force, than what it would have been initially I think.

According to Julia, self-benefiting motivation often transforms into more helping-others motivated volunteering, once volunteers are a part of a specific project to which they feel some allegiance. In such a way, self-motivated interests are rationalized by their importance for getting good works done and eventually fostering less self-focused motivation.

Volunteers also encounter difference / dissonance between the “ways of life” they encounter at FLF and those at home. While volunteers appreciate the difference of the farm, in its “natural and rustic” beauty and in the philosophies of organic agriculture and communal living, they often re-confirm the need for an urban (and as they understand it, Northern) style of life. There is a lack of coherence in volunteers’ opinion on ideal social-worlds. I asked Luce what she felt she learned from her time on the farm. Her reply surprised me:

Oh definitely, I mean, you know I see the way that we sort of, consume and waste products here, and it’s such a disposable society. And on the farm, it was such a--it was geared towards, you know, sort of a sustainable living, and it really changes, you know—it’s very eye-opening. Because you sort of realize that if you were living, if you were actually living in a sustainable world all the time, it would be a lot less--you know there wouldn’t be as much variety and stuff like that. We were eating a lot of the same foods every day.
What starts out as a critique of Northern culture ends as a reflection upon the weaknesses of less consumptive lifestyles: there is less “choice” in living sustainably, confirming her preference for the style of life she experiences in Canada.

**Cultural Capital**

International Volunteerism, as any social practice, has symbolic meaning that can be used strategically by volunteers to construct the identity they desire to portray and to differentiate themselves from others. In other words, it is a source of cultural capital: a concept introduced by Bourdieu (1984) to describe non-material assets that provide people with prestige and social position. The so-called middle class are described by Bourdieu as seeking ways to intellectualize their activities and become “experts,” and demonstrate their “good taste” in order to build up their social capital. The classes are involved in struggle not just in the ways Marx suggested (over material capital) but over how they will be classified in their culture. In such a way, “This predisposes tastes to function as markers of ‘class’.” (Bourdieu, 1984, p.2). Munt extends Bourdieu’s argument specifically into the realm of tourism: “There is an attempt to distinguish themselves by using education, experience, where they live, their occupation and through commodities they possess... including experiences consumed, such as tourism activities.” (1994, p.106). Volunteers’ choice to participate in volunteer tourism rather than the more “gauche” mainstream tourism, may be interpreted as an attempt to classify one’s self with good taste. Bourdieu says, “Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed” (1984, p.6). The linguistic similarity in the previous quote to the critiques of mainstream tourism is striking. Tourism is often disparaged for being exactly those
undesirable things such as "vulgar" and "ugly," while volunteer tourism is afforded status as "ethical" and "compassionate". Choosing volunteer travel can be used to assert and legitimate social class position and accumulate cultural capital.

My participants spoke about their volunteering activities in ways that evoked ideas of cultural capital: they were proud of what they did, and felt that this distinguished them positively from peers in the same social class. Simone says:

You know, most people planning a trip would want – wouldn’t want to say “I actually want to do volunteer work”. I think it takes a special kind of person who says “I want my trip to have to deal with an aspect of volunteering”

Interviewer: Right
S: So, while volunteering did make me feel good about the other tourists being tourists, it’s not an option that most people take.
I: So do you think a different type of person is drawn to this type of a trip than somebody who would choose, you know, a two week package trip kind of traditional—
S: I think so. I think definitely it’s a different type of person in the packaged tours, because, otherwise, you know, it [volunteer tourism]would be a bigger industry.

The self-concept of the volunteer is thus built up through her volunteering activities. While volunteers question the "actual" help their labor contributes, they do feel that something is accumulated, even if it is in building the volunteer self. Through volunteering, the locals are not afforded the same opportunity to show "worthiness" through their participation: they are only "in need" and in fact may in some cases have to prove their worthiness for support and participation in the program (e.g. agreeing to change agricultural techniques, or to be "welcoming" to volunteers) before they are invited in. Volunteers' participation is based on economics (they must be able to pay to work) and they come into the encounter already constructed as positive, benevolent figures.

Mary explains the scope of the cultural capital phenomenon associated with the popular international volunteering programs, suggesting that not only people who actually go on these
trips feel pride about their “accomplishments,” but that their friends and acquaintances use their associations to people who volunteer as cultural capital as well:

[When you tell someone that you had an experience like what I had in CR, you hope that they get from it that — you hope that they think of doing something similar themselves in the future, whereas, now it’s almost as if, they have a friend who’s done it and that’s close enough for them. Because, now they have a subject of conversation to use if ever they’re in the situation where they need it. Like, “Well my friend did this” you know. Well, “that’s great”, you know? Like, they can appreciate it so it’s almost—I don’t know, the way I’m speaking, I feel like I’m talking as if what I did was an “incredible thing for humanity” or something and it so wasn’t. You know, it was- I guess it was a selfish venture in a way, anyway, but I’m not trying to — you know what I mean. It just seems that if people can do something in a more sustainable manner and learn more about the country that they’re visiting while they’re doing it, why not do it like that?

Mary is unimpressed by others telling volunteering stories of friends of theirs who have done similar things to her, as she feels that they do not have the right to claim access and privilege to things they themselves did not do. She wants to be an inspiration to them to “do something similar in the future” and is frustrated that they feel placated by already knowing someone who took a similar trip. She claims this pride is only appropriate for the person who volunteered abroad: she owns the experience and the associated cultural capital.

Cultural capital “wars” are also played out on the farm amongst volunteers about which are the most “authentic” volunteers. During my fieldwork in summer 2003, the farm’s volunteers, led by the ideas of the foreign volunteer coordinator, were particularly pre-occupied with Spanish-speaking ability as “revealing” the worthiness of volunteers. Those that attempted to speak in any language other than Spanish, even if prior to the trip they spoke not a word of Spanish, were shamed publicly by other “core” (long-term) volunteers, and instructions were often given completely in Spanish, without any attempt to explain to those new to the language exactly what was expected of them. While a respect for and interest in the host language seems appropriate, proficiency in Spanish was used by long-term “core” volunteers to decide which
new volunteers were worthy of spending time with, and used to discredit new Spanish speakers’ right to be at the farm. Thus, foreigners claimed authenticity through their “ownership” of the Spanish language.

Pay

By the end of their volunteering trip, FLF volunteers come to a largely shared conclusion about who benefits from their practices at FLF and what those benefits are. Volunteers shift from their original ideas about helping Costa Rican people and building intersubjectivity with them, into feeling that the benefits are to be found more in self-development and meeting other interesting volunteers. What does their presence do for local people? Volunteers re-evaluate what it is exactly that they offer the people they visit, and seem to decide that it is their *payment* for pleasure that validates their choice. Volunteers believe that their choice to “wisely” spend their money on this trip is the most beneficial part of their vacation. It is in paying a farm with “good intentions” or choosing “ecologically friendly” weekend nature voyages, and ultimately through the money they pay to volunteer, that they feel they have contributed.

Volunteers choose to volunteer for themselves (to *see* and *experience* difference) while investing their money to do so as a form of philanthropy with benefits to themselves:

So I guess I see it as, I could give money here to different organizations or I could donate money and have the experience to sort of work with the projects that I’m donating the money towards so, I think – well, I can’t say that my financial situation is good—[laughs] is at the point where I am able to donate money, but my parents, we’ve been fortunate and so they’ve sort of instilled in me and it’s important for them, to be donating some of their money to different projects and so I just think that this is sort of the best of both worlds; we get to donate the money and you get to go and work on the project, yourself, so you’re really seeing where your money’s going and how it’s affecting the people that are benefiting from it. (Julia)

Volunteers thus get to participate in philanthropy and to gain an experience that is enjoyable for them and builds their cultural capital (adding to their prestige and social power). Several
volunteers from one trip recounted the same story; one that brought to light the fact that the money they were spending on leisure was the money providing sustenance for the local workers. Here, Simone explains:

And I guess, too, on the farm, I remember once, [an American volunteer] was going to pay and [the two farm owners] were like, “Oh we have to get you guys to pay. You have to pay. You have to pay”. And [a local worker at the farm] was sitting outside the office, waiting to get paid, and [the two farm owners] didn’t have the money yet to pay him, and that was... that again made me feel like, oh my gosh, we’re so privileged. Because he works so hard and I guess I hadn’t really realized before that that it was the money that I was giving to the farm that was his salary, and that was sustaining him. And he had a family, you know and the money that I was spending on my trip was his livelihood and so that too, was hard to—was like that.

Volunteers experience some stress when they realize how their vacation money is subsistence money for locals. Later they come to use this example of unequal access to resources to illustrate how very necessary their funds, and therefore, their trip, actually is to locals. The farm does depend on volunteer money, through their room and board fee, and through their payment for Spanish classes. The farm owners told me that this money provides the large majority of the funds they use to keep the farm running. In addition, school groups from nearby cities, including the capital of San Jose, come on day-trips to tour the farm, providing another substantial amount of money, but still not comparable to the funds gained from international volunteers. The farm does not sell any products, as it is not yet even self-sustainable. Vandana understands the significance of volunteers’ financial contribution and explains what volunteers were told their role at the farm was:

I guess they said, they [the farm owners] told us we were kind of like the foundation for the farm. Without volunteers they wouldn’t be able to run the farm, and we help pay, with our stay, we help keep the farm going, I guess. I guess it could be kind of seen as a touristy thing too, cause we come to visit their farm and we pay them to stay there, and they can keep it open. We also help them, but I guess our money goes a long way as well.
Volunteers at FLF have undergone a series of re-evaluations about what it means to volunteer abroad, and what their actions at the farm site actually produce. A transition from ideals of benevolent help to ones of mutual benefit and eventually to more self-oriented attributes of volunteering show an active engagement and questioning of the international volunteering experience by these participants. While I am critical of the processes that these people participate in, and some of the discourses that they themselves play out, these volunteers are often self-critical and open to questioning the processes they participate in by being international volunteers. Their dynamic and complicated descriptions of motivation, experience and reflection upon volunteering are a testament to the thought and care they put into evaluating their own participation in this new global phenomenon.

I argue that the shift in perspective which I have demonstrated in participants from other-, to mutual- to self-benefit is primarily a reflection of their "actual" change in viewpoint throughout their encounter at FLF. I witnessed this movement as a general trend during my participant observation work at FLF, but participants' own descriptions of and reflections upon their experiences at the farm are very important in substantiating this perspective-shift in their own understandings. It is significant that the participants themselves describe the meaning they attributed to their experiences and actions, and that they report changes in their ideas about volunteering throughout their experience at the farm. Certainly, discussion of a change in position may also be partly an artifact of the exercise of reflecting and evaluating their experiences within the interview discussion, particularly as questions moved from abstract discussions of volunteering to ones specific to participants' experience at FLF. However, these shifts within the interviews are in line with my observations of the discussions of participants throughout their time at the farm, and these trends were generally seen across the entire group
(with very few exceptions). The consistent shift towards disillusionment with volunteering in the context of their particular experience at FLF, may be related to the specifics of this site and experience. The type of work (farm labor) and volunteers' perceived incompetence at this may mean that the dramatic shift in perspective, from concept to experience, is more extreme than it might be in other volunteering projects, or unique to sites like FLF. However, this research does serve as a useful counter-example to the claims of intercultural communication and volunteers' feelings of accomplishment that Wearing (2001; 2002) reports with other volunteers at a similar environmental project in Costa Rica.

As a case study, this examination of FLF is a productive one, particularly in this projects' investigation of the constitutive discourses surrounding international volunteering, and how participants themselves struggle with, negotiate, and through their own experiences, accept or reject particular elements of volunteering discourse. The examination questions some things about international volunteering generally, namely in its proponents' clams that it consistently creates experiences of intersubjectivity with local people and that volunteers feel they are making a contribution to local people's lives through volunteer labor. While I do not argue that a failure to achieve these goals is always the case in international volunteering, I do suggest that the experiences of FLF volunteers may pertain to some other volunteering encounters as well.

Participants entering the volunteering site of FLF were already thoroughly exposed to the discourses surrounding international volunteerism. They were familiar with the ideas via promotional and "orientation" materials from the farm and Compañeros / Volunteer Abroad, through their search for the ideal volunteering program which took them to literature from other volunteer tourist organizations, media representation of the topic, and through the ways they have heard their friends and acquaintances talk about international volunteering. The FLF
volunteers came to FLF with notions of providing altruistic and substantial help to those in real need, of visiting an “exotic” place very different from their homes, of being closer to “nature,” of making new Costa Rican friends and learning about themselves as they traveled. Such high expectations help frame how volunteers understand their experiences and describe them later to others. However, each time there is a tension between what discourses construct international volunteering as and how it is experienced by FLF volunteers, they re-frame their experience or engage in another strategic response to the tension, sometimes even rejecting parts of the international volunteering discourse. Through this we can see how experiences and subjects themselves are discursively constituted, and also how discursive formations are subject to reconstitution – they are only temporary permanences.

At the end of their examination of the experience of international volunteering, these participants have come face-to-face with a realization that they are essentially paying to have an alternative traveling experience abroad. This “volunteering” sounds similar to the most basic definition of tourism: paying to experience pleasure in a novel environment. The altruism and idealism of the endeavour fall away as the relationship becomes represented in terms of a fiscal exchange for the goods of pleasure. In the next chapter, I will follow this new thread of tourism discourse by outlining how these participants’ experiences with international volunteering can be seen in relation to tourism, and understood as “voluntourism.” This re-working of the volunteering encounter in my analysis, and less explicitly in volunteers’ own description of their volunteering experience, is based on the similarity of international volunteering to tourism and in international volunteerism’s vulnerability to the same criticisms that international tourism has been subject to.
CHAPTER FOUR
From Volunteerism to Voluntourism

In the previous chapter, international volunteerism was examined in the context specifically of discourses and practices of volunteering. I argued that international volunteering at the site of FLF seems to not contest ‘othering’ practices, but instead efficiently re-creates a self-other division. This division is sustained as the “helping” exchange is progressively re-conceptualized into one of monetary exchange, where volunteers pay for an enjoyable encounter with “difference” and trust that their money goes to a “good cause”. In this chapter, I extend this discussion by identifying international volunteerism as a form of (alternative) tourism. I look at how volunteering participants may give up on the ideal of really “helping” the other, through disillusionment with their labor, (as shown in the previous chapter) but hold firm to the belief that they have had an “authentic” experience of the other through a touristic consumption of “culture”, “nature” and an experience with “difference”. I examine tourism as a discourse which shapes people’s imagination of volunteering and the social world, here particularly of the South, LDCs and global “others” in relation to the Northern self. This chapter makes the argument that discourses of tourism so dominate as a framework organizing the experiences of FLF volunteers (and in how the farm itself is run) that they subordinate the discourses of volunteerism.

While participants are often self-reflective and critical about their experiences as volunteers (for example, in questioning their ability to help) they seem to be very un-critical of themselves as tourists. Instead, they understand their short (two to five week) visits to multiple volunteering and tourist sites, as a successful evasion of tourism’s worst evils. Volunteers seem to believe that the form of travel they participate in does not exploit local people or cause destruction to local and global environments, and that it genuinely offers an “authentic” look at Costa Rican culture. When these volunteers were asked to evaluate their trip in terms of helping
(volunteering) they were inclined to see it, and their work as volunteers as unsuccessful. However, when volunteers were asked how they felt about themselves as tourists, they described their actions un-critically and with definite pride. The Finca la Flor volunteers in my study feel they are poor aid-workers but excellent ethical tourists.

International tourism is understood to serve the needs of wealthy Northerners’ leisure and curiosity. For example, Dean MacCannell’s influential book *The Tourist: A Theory of the New Leisure Class* (1976) details the processes of pleasure-seeking through travel that have become available to those with the economic means to “systematically [scavenge] the earth for new experiences to be woven into a collective, touristic version of other peoples and other places” (p.13). Christina Joseph and Anadam Kavoori (2001) discuss Western tourists’ consumption of local Hindu religious festivals in Pushkar, India and the complicated resistance of locals to this consumption of tradition, even while many locals are simultaneously dependent on the economic benefits of this tourism. Susan Frohlick (2003) discusses the transformation of “remote” areas of the world into “global playscapes” for Western travelers who can afford to consume the landscape in such a way. Frohlick examines how these tourism practices construct “third world others” whose homes are in these tourist destinations as stationary-local, and travelers as mobile-global, despite of many exceptions to this. Even Wearing states that the purpose of alternative tourism is to “engage in a transformation and the development of self” (2001, p.3) albeit within an assumed encounter premised on “mutual benefit”(ibid). Although the discourses of alternative tourism, and particularly volunteer tourism, claim that this type of tourism serves the needs of Southern people as well, I argue that this claim does not mesh with volunteers’ practices and the discourses which they communicate. At FLF, voluntourism shapes encounters with, and
understandings of, foreign people and places similarly to traditional forms of tourism. Mowforth and Munt suggest,

Tourism is one of the principal ways through which our “world-views” are shaped. This not only results from our holidays but also from the way destinations are represented through travel reviews, travel programmes and documentaries, travel brochures and guides, advertising and the way in which we exchange our holiday experiences (2003, p.6).

Tourism is a discourse which helps to both constitute people’s understandings of the global social world and re-inscribe relationships of power between North and South.

The representation of local people as “happy natives” in “exotic” and “natural” destinations is evident in the travel literature (Adams, 1997; Desmond, 1999; Ford-Smith, 1995). These mediums often reproduce colonial images of service/servility (reminiscent of plantation life), sexualize and eroticize women (and sometimes men) of color, and “recycle colonial messages of the pleasurable nature of domination” (Ford-Smith, 1995, p.379). A very particular portrait is created of people in LDCs and in tourist destinations, based on the only information provided about these people and places. This information is largely either about hedonistic pleasure and the exotic, or oppositely, in images of poverty, need and despair. What is constructed is a discourse simultaneously encouraging “a social space in which one can experience the temporary utopic, and the enactment of fantasy existence... [and] also to establish how raced and gendered subjects in a utopic or dreamlike space might resolve old social conflicts” (Ford-Smith, 1995, p.380). Old colonial discourses are revived in representations of tourist destinations as pleasurable in their domination, in which global inequities are confirmed and left unchallenged. International tourism spaces are what Mary Louise Pratt (1992) refers to as “contact zones”: “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination...” (p.4). The
tourist encounter is one embedded with unequal power and involving varying degrees of oppression.

Jamaica Kincaid’s (1989) subversive use of the “travelogue” format which is usually the tool of “colonizing” wealthy tourists, communicates the intensity of anger and disapproval that local people may have towards tourists and tourism. She writes to the tourists that come to Antigua:

An ugly thing, that is what you are when you become a tourist, an ugly, empty thing, a stupid thing, a piece of rubbish pausing here and there to gaze at this and taste that, and it will never occur to you that the people who inhabit the place in which you have just paused cannot stand you, that behind their closed doors they laugh at your strangeness... They do not like you. (Kincaid, 1989, p.17)

Post-colonial authors like Kincaid assert that tourism is a continuation of the processes of imperialism, colonization and domination evident in earlier encounters with the North.

Tourism is largely about the visual: consuming particular images of difference, observing “otherness” and “seeing” things (tourists hope) as they “really are”. It is not surprising then, that so much of the discourse of tourism has to do with the gaze of the tourist on local populations, and the implications of this directionality (Urry, 1990). Certainly, the locals can gaze back, meet the stare of Westerners, but local responses to the touristic gaze seldom appear in mainstream representations of tourism and seldom enter the consciousness of the tourist. The gaze constructs the Western tourist as “invisible” and able to observe the object; inevitably the ethnic Other.

Tourism is an imaginative creation (and division) of Self and Other. Locals find, in many cases that it is necessary to participate in the global tourism industry that subordinates them in order to survive in the neo-colonial landscape, and thus are faced with choosing to negotiate through the Western representations of themselves, with great costs associated with each option (Butz, 2002). Vincanne Adams (1999) investigates the subjectivities of Sherpas, and how they
incorporate elements of the Western imagined Sherpa into their presentation of self, and in the rituals they act out prior to leading journeys up Mt. Everest. She discusses the mimicry that Sherpas carry out, creating themselves as “Sherpa effigies” in a strategic response to tourists’ expectations. Adventure tourism in mountain trekking may have some similarities to the volunteer tourism at FLF, namely in tourists’ desires to learn more about themselves through the “challenging” experience. Adams writes of the Sherpas’ presentation of self that “Being ideal Sherpas, as defined by foreigners, meant becoming the image projected onto them by those who wanted to see not simply exotic Otherness, but an Otherness that could teach them more about their own true, inner selves.” (p.91) Similarly, locals from la Flor may take into consideration and use the images that foreigners have of them before presenting themselves and the farm to volunteers.

In many cultural tourist sites, a social group or culture may be “museumized” by touristic discourses into a thing to be observed, recorded and taken home in souvenir form. Foreign “others” are themselves influenced by the way they are discursively constructed by the media and the travel infrastructure (Adams, 1997; MacCannell, 1984). Thus, the phenomenon of “(re)constructed ethnicity” occurs, one in which there is a “maintenance and preservation of ethnic forms for the entertainment of ethnically different others.” (MacCannell, 1984, p.385). The representational construction of the West thus can “freeze” the presentation of a social group in time, to conform to the idea that the West has of them, or can insist on locals’ performance of an ethnicity and culture that never was. Jane Desomond’s (1999) study of ethnic bodies on display looks at how the hula dance as a cultural production sells an “artificial” and static racialized image of indigenous Hawaiians. She writes that Hawaii as it is presented to tourists, “...emerges as a site of white Edenic regeneration. A concerned effort was made to represent
Hawaiians as living in the past, as romantic savages who co-existed with the contemporary sophistication and modernity of the visitors and their accommodations in Hawaii.” (p.8) Tourism as a discourse situates Others in static and limited roles, and often in subordinate positions. While they can assert agency in how they choose to present themselves and their community to global others through a process of autoethnography (Butz, 2001), this is often constrained by the expectations laid out by tourists and within the tourist marketing industry.

The discourse of tourism is also enacted through a complex and well-established global industry to deal with and market the Other. Martin Mowforth and Ian Munt (2003) assert that the global tourism industry serves as the new colonialism / imperialism couched in rhetoric of pleasure and fortuitous economic boost to countries “in need”. This industry serves a few well and oppresses many: eighty percent of international tourists come from just twenty countries worldwide (Mowforth & Munt, 2003, p.51). Tourism in practice acts out domination through leisure and travel. Mowforth and Munt call the emerging and trendy niche market of tourism in LDCs, the “new tourism” which encompasses commonly referred to tourisms such as “sustainable,” “alternative” or “eco-” tourism (Mowforth & Munt, 2003, p.94). They argue that the new tourism to LDCs is premised on commodification of culture and “nature” in these destinations, and focuses on foreign intervention. Observing and bearing witness to otherness in destinations is often the goal of tourism, but increasingly it is more than this: various modes of tourism are emerging which allow tourists not just to observe difference, but to intervene as helpers. These vacationing development workers de-differentiate (Uriely, Yonay & Simchai, 2002) and blur the boundaries between work and leisure, tourist and international developer, do-gooder and hedonist. In this form of tourism, discourses of development become indistinguishable from those of tourism, as the two inform and validate one another. Tourism
does not change directions by incorporating elements of development, but instead extends the idea of niche market and specialty “ethical” tourism further with the adopted development discourse. A shift to “softer” tourism, some additional involvement of local people and “improvement projects” does not change the core problem of the imbalance in the exercise of power in the touristic relationship. According to Mowforth and Munt (2003), alternative tourism has many of the same outcomes as mainstream tourism: “…sun, sea, sand and sex – are matched by the Ss of the content and outcome of tourism – subjugation, servility and subservience.” (p.63). The encounter between tourist and local is still grounded on the fundamental establishment of differences in power and the maintenance of this relation.

For the tourist, the commodity produced in tourism is pleasure, and it is usually consumed without awareness of the social networks and processes involved in its production. This commodity fetishism (Mowforth and Munt, 2003) has unique characteristics in tourism, because consuming the product of culture and experiences demands, to some extent, that tourists view the subjugation of those that serve them in the tourist industry. The touristic notions of service are sometimes hard to keep separate from colonial ones of servitude (Mowforth and Munt, 2003) and this is something that dominant discourses of tourism aim to smooth over by creating a notion of “happy natives” serving tourists and the illusion that tourism is helping locals. The new tourism differentiates itself from mainstream tourism often by visits to uncharacteristic and unsavory destinations such as slums and other sites of poverty and pain: “...simultaneously bemoaning and celebrating the existence of such characteristics.” (Mowforth and Munt, 2003, p.67). Discourses of tourism are not simply representational, but also recreate and reinforce a particular social structure of domination and subordination. Tourism as a discourse systematically deals with LDCs and packages their people and culture as commodities:
the “spoils” of birth into privilege and the “winning” end of colonialist encounters. The tourism at FLF is described by a number of terms, some of them being alternative, sustainable, volunteering or eco-tourism. Each of these assumes the inherent helpfulness of the Northern visitor and is part of the problematic “new tourism”. Applying an alternative criticism to alternative travel is necessary and useful particularly because of the assumption that the rapidly growing industries of eco-tourism, backpacking tourism and volunteering are innocuous or helpful.

Data Analysis

In this chapter, I examine the discourses and practices of volunteer tourism, mainly as communicated by volunteers, and also secondarily through interviews with workers, and through my own participant observation. I construct my argument by describing volunteers’ perspectives on tourism and its relation to volunteering; how these participants define tourism and how they understand international volunteering as categorically different from (and better than) other types of tourism. I examine volunteers’ belief that they have access to an authentic experience of Costa Rican life through international volunteering, before discussing the possibility that volunteers participate in international volunteering as a strategic choice to reduce tourist guilt.

I then compare volunteers’ discourses - which imagine international volunteering as categorically different from other tourism - to the volunteers’ practices in Costa Rica. The volunteer practices are often much more similar to “traditional tourism” than volunteers describe when they talk about volunteering. I examine which community and farm spaces volunteers use, what activities they engage in there and who the volunteers associate with (their social network in the field) in order to argue that these look more like tourist use of space than use of space that would conform to volunteer ideals. The chapter ends with a discussion of volunteers’ lack of a
lived philosophical commitment to international volunteering, even though they criticize traditional tourism and claim that voluntourism is ideal. Many volunteers express a hope to participate in “bad” tourism in upcoming trips and seemingly contradict their belief in voluntourism by describing the other tourisms as equally viable at other times, to fulfill other types of tourist desire. It seems that being a good tourist in voluntourism may be an occasional interest of this group, but that they don’t feel strongly against resort tourism or packaged tours, etc. This chapter differs from Chapter Four in that volunteers in my study do not tend to self-critique in terms of tourism activities, and therefore the criticisms applied are external ones that volunteers themselves do not acknowledge and sometimes reject.

Volunteers Defining Tourism

Participants in this study were confident in their definitions of tourism, and in the value of voluntourism to them. The participants consistently defined tourism in terms of pleasure, enjoyment and relaxation for tourists. A majority of participants were critical of “traditional” tourism. Julia represents this tendency well when she says:

I think tourism I see as being more going to the country and spending time in the country but somewhat of an isolated sense, I guess, I mean not really staying in your room in the hotel or a property that’s not really integrated into the community, and then spending your days going to see attractions in the country that all of the other tourist are going to see, too. I guess that’s how I see tourism as being in a country but still being slightly isolated from the culture and the everyday aspects of it.

Julia, as other participants at FLF, constructs traditional tourism as isolated from “reality”. Volunteers feel that traditional tourism reveals only spectacle, and prevents tourists from having access to the everyday. They are most critical about the absence of what they see as “the real” from traditional tourism. Munt (1994) would describe these volunteers’ pursuit of consuming “real” experiences as a form of post-modern tourism. Post-modern tourism in LDCs is characterized by the specialization of tour operators (e.g. Compañeros as a volunteer tour
operator) in unique and “non-mainstream” tourism, the de-differentiation of tourism from other activities (e.g. touring and working at once at FLF), and a preoccupation with getting an “honest look” at Otherness.

Some volunteers are also critical of mainstream tourism’s ability to “destroy the purity of the site,” expecting the tourist site to remain untainted in its presentation of difference. This can in some cases, be extended to arguments that some tourists wish to encounter essentialized others as static in a social-evolutionary sense, in comparison to the dynamic North (see MacCannell’s discussion of reconstructed ethnicity, 1984). Mary explains her problems with mainstream spectacle tourism:

...tourism, because it’s an industry, the word has, like, it’s own kind of negative aspect to it in my mind, just because I think of things like, the more people travel to one area, the more it’s going to become less like it originally was—to be developed to suit them. In which case, it would be very detrimental to that area. And what I mean is for example, like, the Burger King that’s directly facing the Sphinx in Egypt. Like, you can get the two of them in the same picture, which I don’t think should be—I don’t know, it just seems that, this wouldn’t be if it weren’t for tourism and so, I don’t know... it’s kind of like an attachment I have to globalization in that it is happening just because of tourism. So many countries are becoming so much like countries that they maybe shouldn’t want to be like, but besides that, obviously there’s nothing wrong with wanting to learn about other places and there’s nothing wrong with tourism and traveling in general and so, it’s just where to draw the line, is where I guess I’m having difficulty placing (what tourism is).

Here one can see Mary negotiating the tension between a desire to travel and “know” and that of wishing to not exploit. A distaste for tainting the touristic sites with “modernity” emerges with these volunteers both in the field and in their interviews. This desire to keep modernity and touristic sites separate reflects a desire to see things in their “rightful place” (for example, keeping McDonalds only in Northern / Western urbanscapes). This may indicate a discursive construction of the difference between North and South in which volunteers feel tourism should not disrupt boundaries, but rather confirm them by demarcating what belongs to the North (the
modern, the temporal present) and what can belong to the South (the pre-modern, the temporal past).

David Sibley (1995) draws upon object relation theory (ORT) from post-Freudian feminist psychoanalysts such as Melanie Klein and Julia Kristeva, to speak about self-other boundaries enacted in space. Klein’s idea that a child’s psycho-social development relates to his or her ability to learn to differentiate self from other (and therefore about boundaries) through early encounters with the mother. The mother is the first person (“object”) the child learns he or she is separate from. The Mother is both ‘good object’ (provider of food and comfort) and ‘bad object’ (causer of stress when the child learns she may fail to provide for his or her needs). The child learns to reject the abject (Kristeva 1982, cf. Sibley, 1995) as other and impose boundaries between the self and the other. Sibley extends this concept to a social-spatial argument, in which borders between social groups are created and maintained (i.e. between poor and wealthy in an urbanscape, or between North and South in tourism) to reduce the distress, often mostly for privileged groups, that comes from a liminal space which houses both self and other. This may help to explain the displeasure that some tourists may express in discovering within tourist spaces (the other) elements of home (self). Thus, Mary suggests, the sphinx and a Western fast food chain should not be together in the same photograph or space. Boundaries are being transgressed and this is seen as undesirable.

Volunteers have trouble reconciling the general critique that they wish to apply to tourism with their simultaneous desire to travel more. Voluntourism, seen as “helping” (even though they may, as in Chapter Three, feel that this is not much real help at all) is a strategic travel-choice to help these people re-define their cross-cultural experience. Mary explains her negotiation of this tension:
Tourism? I don’t know, I see tourism generally as — I don’t know, it’s hard for me to separate, because, I say things like “I want to travel more” and I — that would mean that I would be a tourist. But when you say it about yourself, or when you say it in a way that you think that you won’t be like the average tourist, or you won’t be detrimental to the places that you’re going to, it’s hard to see yourself as a tourist, because the way that I see tourism is not really as a good thing — I kind of have a negative connotation to it. It’s more like of a— I don’t know. Tourism seems to be hand in hand with globalization, which maybe it shouldn’t be, but has kind of trouble seeing the average tourist as being helpful to any of the places where they’re going. It seems to me that the more of a — maybe I’m thinking of only like, tourists from the West, or something, but I don’t know — I’m having trouble pinpointing exactly what I see it as in my mind. But obviously, there’s your basic definition of going somewhere else and spending money in that place on your travels...

Mary explains that her concept of tourism does not align with her ideas of what constitutes helping. Tourism is what other people do, and globalization happens in the general sense, causing destruction and feeding Northerners’ over-consumption. But volunteers do not feel that they themselves are part of this global process. It is difficult to understand tourism as negative and yet still want to travel, and volunteers come up with ingenious ways to justify their travel as something other than tourism.

Other volunteers’ definitions of tourism seemed to pre-emptively defend tourism as they realized that their trip to Costa Rica was itself a form of tourism. Some participants, when asked about their ideas of tourism in interviews would immediately incorporate elements of alternative tourism into their definitions, and subsequently defend tourism as a practice. This strategy was a different strategy from the slight majority of participants who chose to first criticize mainstream tourism and then differentiate what they had done (voluntourism) from “bad” travel. Vandana provides a good example of pre-emptively describing tourism with positive elements of alternative travel:

(Tourism is) Going to another country, visiting the famous, I don’t know, the famous areas of the country. Trying to learn another culture, just trying to indulge yourself in the culture, just trying to get to know people as well. And having a good time and relaxing, I guess. So, going on
a vacation, not like a beach vacation where you can relax and sit down, but kind of an educational experience.

Although Vandana’s definition begins with traditional elements of tourism definitions (enjoyment and sightseeing etc.) she thinks through her definition and corrects herself into fully deleting the prototypical beach element from her definition. Instead she focuses on difference, indulgence, fun and education (an element of alternative tourism) as important aspects of tourism.

Another exception to the general rule of volunteers’ criticism of tourism is provided by Judith, who is uncharacteristically positive about tourism (for this group of volunteers):

Judith: Oh, I like tourism [it’s] very good for everyone’s economy, like it gives other people jobs, and jobs help with the poverty line. So there’s nothing wrong with tourism, it’s just how it’s used.

Interviewer: How did the people of La Flor view tourism in their community do you think?
J: Probably it’s a good thing, cause like I said our money goes to their little store, to their internet café so it can stay open, so it’s probably good for them in some sense.

Tourism is described more positively, as seen in quotations from Vandana’s and Judith’s interviews, when it is in the context of the alternative tourism in which they participated.

However, critiques of traditional tourism were by far more common than any positive opinion of tourism, and these criticisms reinforced participants’ understandings of themselves as “good tourists”.

Critiques of Tourism

Mary was quick to show her distaste for tourism in general when I asked her why she chose to go on a service and learning trip instead of visiting Costa Rica simply as a tourist:

Um, because tourism in general kind of makes me sick sometimes. Just the way that people can go through money and spend it on the most insignificant garbage. To travel off to a far-off place and then have every thing about their whole life replicated in the place that they’re traveling. Like, you can go to Cuba, learn
absolutely nothing about the country and stay in a resort where your room looks exactly like your room at home or at like, a hotel room at home and so, I don’t know it just really angers me that people want to replicate what they already have when they’re going to a new country to travel to it.

Mary echoes a common refrain among the “alternative travelers” I encountered in my field work: a responsibility to seek out difference and authenticity of experience. There seems to be no critique of how the “difference” presented on the farm and in other volunteering abroad projects may be constructed or staged (MacCannell, 1976; 1984; Mowforth & Munt, 1998; Jamal & Hill, 2002). Nor is there a questioning if putting oneself in a position of “giving aid” serves to Other further or differently than the processes of traditional tourism do.

Critiques of tourism as fundamentally based on unequal distributions of power are common amongst participants, as is the notion that voluntourism offers a solution. Luce says:

Well, I think that generally, [tourism] is a little bit of a problem, it’s a little bit problematic because it generally seems to be concentrated between the haves and the have-nots. It’s kind of an unfair balance. And I feel that people who live in countries where they’re not as economically developed...are, you know, I just feel it’s unfair. But I don’t feel it should just stop...just to learn about other cultures and stuff. I think it’s a good thing in general. I think it’s the only way we learn and use that learning about different cultures and understanding all these things is by going there and being there. Your, your prejudices, people’s prejudices change once they’re faced with the reality.

Participants are ambivalent towards tourism, as Luce’s quote indicates. Many seem to possess a sort of ‘positional schizophrenia’ where they are critical of tourism theoretically, but feel that they themselves are the best of the tourists: they are the “ethical” ones. Yet, as Mowforth and Munt (2003) argue, alternative tourism itself is founded on interventionary and commodifying practices: “The scale and scope of their activities may be qualitatively different from the power wielded by tour operators of large environmental organizations, but their role in the process of commodification is as noteworthy” (p.61). Tourism is thus simultaneously constructed by FLF volunteers as “bad” for exploiting power differences and “good” for the opportunity to learn
which it provides in particular circumstances. Or in other words, tourism is bad when other
people do it, but good when they themselves participate in it. My participants at Finca la Flor
believe that their activities tap into the positive side of tourism, in its power to break stereotypes
and prejudice through a “true” or “authentic” encounter with the Other.

Voluntourism as categorically different from other tourisms

Volunteers at FLF are adamant that the type of tourism they participate in is categorically
different from other tourisms. They frequently describe these other tourisms in stereotyped ways
as only sitting on a lounge chair by a pool or hanging out at a beach, to emphasize the difference
in the type of activity they engage in while on their trip. For example, Simone reflects on this in
the following exchange:

Interviewer: So how would you respond to someone that said somewhat critically
to you, that you were just a tourist at FLF?
Simone: I would say, had I been just a tourist, that I wouldn’t have woken up
every morning at 6:30, that I wouldn’t have been shoveling manure, or cutting
grass, that I wouldn’t have been interacting on the same level with people.
Because I think that whenever we went on trips, you know if we went on a tour,
we’d pay someone on the tour to give us a tour—they were the tour guides. And
so there was an imbalance, you know? I was there to observe and they were there
to tell me. But on the farm, it was different. If I was working with someone, you
know, we were both doing the same thing. Well, while you might have more
expertise, you were still doing the same thing. And that’s an important distinction.
Because I didn’t just lie on the lounge chairs, you know. I did things on the farm,
like I did help the farm maintain when I was there. So, I worked, I sweated, I was
definitely not just a – I was volunteering for sure! (emphatically)

Simone explains a distinction between tourism and volunteering, insisting that she did the same
work as the paid workers at the farm. What she does not mention is that volunteers only work
from breakfast to lunch, with optional work in the afternoons (most take Spanish lessons instead)
and no work on weekends. Local workers are expected to work in the afternoon as well, and
many are expected to work at least part-days on weekends. Simone also brings up a difference in
monetary exchange between mainstream tourism and volunteering, which Hélène echoes:
... I wanted to see for myself without someone hiding things from me, and that’s what I feel they do at tourist areas, they kind of make it as much like North America as possible, so I didn’t want ... that’s why coming as a tourist wasn’t an option for me... Oh, well you get to see the extreme poverty, for sure, which is something you would never see as a tourist. (pause) I don’t know if I have a good answer for that one... The people you meet they’re not paid as opposed to say a tourist resort or something like that, the people that you meet aren’t paid to be nice to you or to wait on you hand and foot like they are in a resort. The food that you eat isn’t, it’s authentic Costa Rican food or, the traditional food anyone else would eat in that country. You just get a feel for what its like to actually live there.

Both Hélène and Simone emphasize the lack of a payment to the relationships they have with local people at the farm, supporting the idea that alternative tourism involves processes of fetishization that obscure the labor relationships involved in creating pleasure for voluntourists (Mowforth and Munt, 2003). These participants’ views fail to acknowledge the organizational structure they volunteer within. In fact, their money is directly responsible for paying the salaries of these workers, and further, the continued employment of these workers is dependent on having positive relationships with volunteers. Even at the second volunteering site of their trip (an urban low-income housing development) volunteers pay their home-stay families, and have some choice in which sites to work at, adding further motivation for the locals they encounter to strategically form good relations with volunteers.

Still, some volunteers discuss voluntourism as a means to achieve better access to the host culture and to persuade locals that travelers have a genuine interest in them. Julia reflects this common sentiment when she says:

... it’s difficult for me to really experience another culture and different community by just standing back and just observing. I think people are much more likely to want to integrate you into their culture and community if you are working with them, and I think by doing that you’re showing more of an interest in really wanting to learn about them rather than just seeing them as just, standing back and taking pictures. So I think that sort of opens, by offering your time and energy to work with somebody else on their garden or daycare or whatever it is you’re working on, it gives them the sense that you really are truly interested in
what it is they’re doing and you’re not just a tourist standing back and watching
them, I guess.

Voluntourism then, is perceived by my participants as categorically different from other
tourisms in that voluntourists make some gestures towards “helping” and in return purchase an
experience that is different in character from other tourisms, because it involves at least some
small amount of labor and slightly less lavish living conditions than other tourisms, and which is
interpreted as more authentic.

Some volunteers communicate discourses of playing out global relations, understanding
themselves as ambassadors to a global site, rather than locating their experiences as particular
and tied to the specifics of la Flor. Voluntourism is a practice that evokes globalization, in the
ease of flow for global capital and wealthy people. Volunteers’ acknowledgement of
participating in “the global” contrasts with their confidence that they are not participating in
exploitative global transactions. Instead these volunteers see themselves in terms of being
representatives of one culture to another. For example, Luce says:

I think they’re trying to take the idea of sustainability and sort of bring it a little
bit into the community, like, not just do a sustainable farm, it’s about everything,
it’s about the whole world, it’s about the whole attitude of the way things are.
And I think the vision that they have is really a wonderful vision, and I think they
were trying to create a sense of “this place is our world, not just our farm or Costa
Rica or anything... not a place that we can just use and that’s it.” I think it’s our
community and the people in the village. And because we’re, a lot of the
volunteers were from other parts of the world and everything, it was like... a
double role thing, because you were also emphasizing sort of world type of
relations, you know. It just was very contingent or, it wasn’t just a little sort of
idea... it was sort of a world thing, and I really felt that when I went to the host
family and had a meal and really felt, “here we are sitting at this table and they’ve
taken pains to really make it nice, you know”. It was such a smart, wonderful
thing to do... that kind of experience really [helped me???] when you travel... that kind of eco-tourist volunteer thing.
Thus, the farm is de-spatialized (or re-spatialized) in volunteer discourses. The farm is
decontextualized from its location in the central valley of CR: instead it is representative of the
whole world. The local becomes a global space to play out volunteers’ ideas of global
exchange.

**Authenticity and Voluntourism**

"I went to Mexico, with my [school] and we stayed in a resort. And so, at the
time, I didn’t see anything wrong with that. And now I look back at it and I’m
like, “what the hell?!! I went to Mexico, I hardly saw any Mexicans – and all my
time with Americans and Canadians” (Mary)

Mary expresses a common motivation for volunteers in choosing a voluntourist trip over another
form of travel: an intention to encounter the people of the host culture in a meaningful way,
rather than to treat them as an invisible backdrop for “fun in the sun.” However, I observed that
volunteers in this group still tend to associate mostly with other Northerners rather than with
locals. Perhaps the only difference lies in an absence of guilt for not getting to know local people
these individuals might feel if they were resort tourists.

The history of tourism has been surveyed by many authors (see for example;
status as a field largely composed of niche tourism markets, of which volunteer travel is just one.
Current tourism focused on education, ethics and sustainability has been preceded by a long
history of travel, with holidays taken in distant locations from tourists’ homes often thought to
have begun with the onset of industrial capitalism (Mowforth and Munt, 2003). Before the
nineteenth century, travel was largely limited to exploration, business and religious pilgrimage
by the privileged class, but after the onset of industrial capitalism a shift towards motivations to
escape from the city occurred (Urry, 1990). With time, there was a transition to what Murphy
(1995, cf. Mowforth and Munt, 2003) deemed “consumer society” and vacations were
constructed as an escape from the day-to-day work people carried out. The trend now, Murphy asserts, is to see travel as a right and an opportunity to learn, which nicely explains some of volunteer tourism’s popularity.

One significant and early critical writing on the touristic experience was MacCannell’s (1973) work on the notion of the “staged authenticity” of tourism. MacCannell introduced the dramaturgical notions of front and backstage areas to the analysis of tourist landscapes and explained the tourist experience as a negotiation between tourists and locals. According to MacCannell, tourists are seeking insight, connectivity and enlightenment (in a pseudo-religious manner) in their excursions, and locals mediate and manipulate their local landscapes to produce “staged backstage” areas that allow the tourist to feel that he or she is experiencing the authentic “other”. He argues that often the true backstage is perceived by tourists as less than sufficient, leading locals to strategically shape their “touristic sites” to conform more to tourist expectations, re-formulating reality. The idea of the tourist experience as a lie presented as truth is relevant to this project in the possibility that farm management strategically shapes la Flor and the farm to conform to tourist/volunteer experiences, more than simply passively opening up an authentic space to new visitors.

The farm presents volunteers with work as recreation, led by staff who are not there just to “get the job done” but also to teach volunteers and make sure that they enjoy their time at the farm. As a work experience, volunteers’ time at la Flor does not reflect a typical la Flor work experience, although it is constructed as an “authentic” Costa-Rica farm work experience. Volunteers are given a wide variety of tasks so as to prevent exhaustion or boredom, and they are even given a choice of what type of daily work to engage in. The “authentic local cuisine” has elements of typical Costa Rican food (a focus on rice and legumes) but the vegetarian
commitment, and the frequent meals of pizza and pancakes may not reflect Costa Rican life as much as the farm’s desire to provide food that the Northern volunteers will enjoy. The farm exists largely for the purpose of pleasing volunteers during their stay there, but does so while purporting to be a project with goals independent of this, which seems to be less and less so as the farm transforms into more of a tourist destination and less of an environmental or development project.

The emphasis on having an authentic experience, and particularly an authentic experience of the Other, dominates much of the discourse about international volunteering among this group. Luce expresses the entire group’s sentiment about being “closer to reality”:

...and I think, um, it’s so much more enriching and valuable to sort of try to get as close as you can to living like the people there and with them and talking with them and everything, rather than.... It just doesn’t seem that practical for me to go somewhere and not see anyone really, or people who work there, you know...It’s not like the sort of--his idea that you have about a place. And you go away and you can stay in your hotel and you don’t go around and see much... um. It just seems to me that you could be anywhere--You could be in Florida. You could be just anywhere with the same kind of weather and a pool. So, you know, authentic to me is when you’re living the real-- you’re trying to live as close to the life of the people that live there that you can. And that’s real to me. Like, that’s authentic. That’s when you get the really great experiences and everything, you know.

Volunteer experiences here are not valorized by any claims to help local people, but instead for this type of travel’s ability to “reveal the truth” about local culture and people. Judith similarly compares the volunteer experience to the experiences of “bad” tourists at resorts:

Judith: I know as a tourist you stay on the resort, and you don’t do anything, and you play on the beach and everybody says oh, what a great country, and stuff well, you didn’t even see the country, you saw the beauty part but you didn’t see the rest, and I always wondered about that, like do people actually go out and see what the actual country is what their people are like, and I thought that’s a terrible way to learn about a country.

Interviewer: So, did you feel like you got to, what things did you feel were different, that you got to see as a volunteer than other people wouldn’t get to see as a tourist?
J: Households and how people you know, interact with each other, how they communicate and just in general, when you go to a resort, I’ve never been to a resort, but you see people on resorts and stuff, and it’s all laid back, and you don’t see anybody working and you know that’s it’s not how it is at all, like there’s always people working and there’s always hardships, and you know that exists and there’s poverty but you don’t see that on a resort, so find more important to see how people live and understand that it’s not all beauty you know and great hotels and beaches… You see the country as it really is, you don’t just see one side of it, you know, the rich side, you see it as a whole where it all integrates as one.

An emphasis on authenticity runs consistently throughout the discourses of these volunteers.

However, MacCannell warns that tourists are always unable to attain their goal of viewing and experiencing the “authentic” touristic site: “Sightseers are motivated by a desire to see life as it is really lived, even to get in with the natives, and at the same time, they are deprecated for always failing to achieve these goals” (1976, p.94). Volunteer tourists regularly evaluate the authenticity of their own experiences and compare them to those of other travelers. Mary shares a vignette illustrating what types of events seem to count as “authentic” to volunteers:

Even like, when we had an exchange that was maybe not so fantastic, like the guy in the bar—it was still so great because it’s like, it’s real and it’s something — the drunk guy in the bar who was singing all in English, but from what we could tell, he couldn’t even speak any English. He was just so drunk that he was hilarious and at the same time a little bit scary, but he wasn’t able to do anything harmful to anyone. That was, I think, so funny. And just being able to see like, real things. Like that bar was such a little hole in the wall — and yet, it was so great you know, because it was like, men from the community and they didn’t care that they were peeing right in front of you and, you know? I just found it so — at the same time, you’re kind of like, “get me out of here!” but at the same time you’re kind of like, “OK, this is incredible, you know. Like, I’m actually seeing what these people do in their spare time and this is like, the real thing, you know?” so, even like that drunk guy on the stool, like I can appreciate him for what he’s worth, because, it was almost as if I was, back home, you know? Like there’s so many drunken idiots on stools at the places I go to, on normal nights. So you kind of like, realize that everyone’s the same — everyone’s different, but everyone’s really the same— with things like that.

Somehow it is “incredible” and an authentic experience to see a real-life-drunk-Costa-Rican-man fall off his stool, and this particular event communicates notions of universality. To these
volunteers, this type of travel experience seems to be constructed as more real, and therefore more valued, than observing “marked” touristic sites such as historical monuments and nature reserves, which are seen as inauthentic and contrived. When the “authentic” parts of a culture are described as those of poverty, suffering and personal troubles, this may serve to reinforce notions of the Other as in need, “backwards” and helpless. For these participants, the most valued component of the volunteering vacation seems to be its perceived access to authenticity. Here, participants are disappointed when their visible outsideness, and especially whiteness makes them stand out, or if they perceive too much whiteness around them, almost as if it taints the authenticity of the experience. Mary expresses this well when she says:

For sure, I feel that was the best part of our trip was that we were not in an area that was completely white or – not completely white (correcting herself) but completely tourists and that was not completely marketed to us. Whereas when we went into San Jose or when we went into Jaco beach, you know, there’s the Best Western and the English billboards and the advertising for the AA meetings in English in the city you know!
K: Was there?
P: Yeah, AA meetings everywhere. ... when I was in (Europe)—I noticed the international traveler, or tourist and how people from all over the world when they’re in (European city), actually look exactly the same. And do the exact same things, but—all I could find were t-shirts in English, so I was going mad. I was like, “why is everything marketed at me?” you know? I want to experience the country for itself. So it wasn’t until we got to smaller towns where I could actually find things a little more authentic, you know. And we even saw that in CR. There were gringo prices in the touristy areas and there were local prices in the non-touristy areas. And so, you know, it’s obviously so much better to be able to speak Spanish with people who can’t speak English, you know. Like, have to speak Spanish, they’re not like, speaking English to you when they can because they’re trying to sell you something you know. Yeah, that was I think, one of the best aspects of our trip, for sure.

The ideal for volunteers seems to be to occupy areas that seem “non-appropriate” for tourists.

The best part of a volunteering trip is its perceived authenticity for these volunteers. Whiteness disrupts authenticity and is used to express the homogeneity of tourists outside the volunteers’
own group. Surprisingly though, in practice volunteers tend to surround themselves with more whiteness, rather than seeking out opportunities to engage with Southern “others”.

The argument that volunteers are there in Costa Rica primarily to help others is refuted by a trend I observed at the farm, in which longer term volunteers would seek out “better” farming projects after becoming disillusioned with FLF. Frequently, rumours of more enjoyable and “authentic” volunteering sites (“this one’s right on the beach, totally solar powered, you only have to work when you want to, and the stove runs on fumes from the outhouse”) would make their way back to the farm as ex-FLF volunteers came back to visit friends, bearing pamphlets and hope. It felt like a gold-rush, where flocks of voluntourists with flexible summer plans become more and more disenchanted with the experiences offered at one destination, and move on to consume another. There was little evidence of adherence to ideals of a particular project but rather considerable emphasis on enjoyment tempered with some snobbery about the “most alternative and organic” project. Some volunteers would return to FLF unsatisfied with these other destinations because, for example, they didn’t have any local people there (many are islands of expatriates and semi-permanent wanderers) or because it was too hot, or there were too many scorpions.

Reducing Tourist Guilt

As demonstrated above, volunteers report a dislike for mainstream travel, and are unhappy when during the trip they are labeled as tourists and not as volunteers. However, volunteers could not avoid feeling like tourists themselves, at various points during their volunteering trip. Strategically maneuvering around discourses of the “ugly tourist,” volunteers devised strategies to deal with the guilt they felt at points when they could not help but identify themselves as tourists. Participants reported feeling like tourists when they had to buy
something, when they were at demarcated “tourist sites”, when language barriers were obvious, and mostly when they felt they were visually identifiable as “different”, thus marked as tourists. As a rule, these volunteers expressed discomfort at being labeled tourists, even when they wanted to be “doing” tourist activities like shopping or going to the beach. Many volunteers expressed a desire to still be primarily described as volunteers and not as tourists. For example, Hélène explains her group’s fear that they would participate in practices that felt like tourism during their “vacation” from the volunteering site to Arenal Volcano, one of the most popular tourist destinations in Costa Rica:

I probably after this trip, I don’t feel I would ever want to go back to like tourist resort, or anything like that, just because I feel you get so much more out of volunteering, or actually going to areas that, where you’re really immersed in the culture, because, these tourist areas, I mean even after our volunteering trip, we did spend a couple of days looking for, or we went tree canoping...So we did, we were worried at that point because we were hoping that the area wasn’t too ‘touristy’, because we didn’t want that anymore, we just, we were going back to being sheltered, and we didn’t want that, we were so I guess excited about being part of the culture, we felt that we would be losing out on that if we opted for like a hotels, instead we opted for hostels.

The quotation expresses a concern which was widespread among my participants; that they would lose cultural capital, or recognition of their position as a “volunteer,” and be seen as just a tourist. Volunteers at tourist sites on these two trips frequently expressed distaste for other tourists while considering themselves “volunteers” on a break from volunteer work. Hélène also articulates a common belief in greater access to culture through alternative travel. Somehow, hostels are more a “part of the culture,” although they are likely equal to traditional hotel lodgings in terms of percentage of foreign clientele. Although hostels may have poorer, younger foreign clients, these establishments do not seem to be any more “Costa Rican” than a motel or hotel, and are usually foreign owned as well. Voluntourism is very much constructed as an age-appropriate activity, and a component of youth alternative travel. Participants often explained
volunteering almost as a “rite of passage” and an activity that they would only be able to do at this point in their lives: “I thought, this is such an opportunity, this is something that I’ll never have the opportunity to do again.” (Simone). Other volunteers express the feeling that they would not be able to participate in volunteer travel when they have kids or are older, because it is too “rugged.” In spite of their comfortable accommodations and experiences on this trip, volunteers still construct voluntourism as a youthful activity, implying that it is more dangerous, physical and contains elements that children or older adults could not participate in.

Volunteers believe that even if they are not actually “helpful” in their activities, that their travel at least does not harm the land or people of the destination site. Further, many of my participants approached their volunteer trip to FLF with an air of accumulating “good traveler points” which would make it more acceptable for them to travel later in more unambiguously touristic ways. Mary encountered this idea from her friends when she went on a non-volunteering / non-eco-tourism vacation to Europe some time after the Costa Rican trip:

Uh, with traveling? See, I got back from Costa Rica and I guess you could say I was all proud of myself because I felt that I had done something. I had been a tourist without being — without leaving a negative footprint — or without leaving a footprint. I thought that I had, like, not gone to the touristy areas and so I felt that I was—I don’t know. It was maybe cocky of me to think this, but it was almost as if I was thinking of myself as like — not one of those tourists I didn’t like. And then, when I got home, I started planning a trip to [Europe], where I was for a month and I was one of those tourists that was like — I was doing the shopping and, I kind of like made myself feel better by saying I wasn’t — I was staying mostly in an apartment that was there and not being used, kind of thing. And I wasn’t, I didn’t spend obscene amounts of money. And I didn’t go to places that were not supposed to be there in my mind. I never went to a McDonalds and I did not support, like, American stores in [Europe], because that just really pisses me off. Especially when people I’m with get excited that there’s a McDonald’s where we are. It really makes me angry and so, I didn’t do anything like that, but at the same time, it was more of a trip that I could feel guilty about. And my friend was trying to make me feel better and she was like ”no, you go on trips like when you went to Costa Rica so that you don’t feel guilty when you do something like this” and I was like, “No! That’s not how it works (laughing). You don’t kind of rid
your conscience of guilt by doing something nice so that you can do something—not bad, but—(not great).

Mary’s friend emphasized the “cash-in” value of alternative travel which can be redeemed not just for reducing tourist guilt during a particular trip, but also retrospectively in later “less ethical” tourism.

**How Space is Described and Used on the Farm and in La Flor**

Spaces of the farm and surrounding community are often used in specifically touristic ways, rather than simply as a workspace or place for cross-cultural communication. Although FLF volunteers stress the difference between themselves and tourists, largely based on the activities that each participate in, FLF volunteers often act like mainstream tourists at the volunteering site (in the farm and in the village of la Flor). In this discussion of how space is used, I refer specifically to the actions of the small group of Canadian volunteers I study (visiting the farm through the small host NGO, Compañeros), with occasional references to general trends I observed on the farm in other travelers. I cannot generalize my claims beyond this population, and am aware that there are likely to be differences in how different sets of volunteers use space, both at this site specifically, and certainly with even more variation at other volunteering destinations.

During my field work there seemed to be a difference between Compañeros volunteers and others. It may be the more structured nature of the group, or it being a group (rather than an assortment of individuals) but Compañeros volunteers seemed more likely to engage in “touristy” behaviour. They often could be found taking pictures during work-time, while management mostly tried to discourage this until the end of the volunteers’ stay. On one occasion an alter-toting truck came to visit the farm (on the day of the saint of agriculture) with men playing music, reading prayers, and attempting to procure donations for the idol of the saint.
While other single volunteers only glanced at the spectacle with disinterest and turned back, to drink their coffee in the kitchen, the Compañeros group expressed deep interest in the spectacle and ran to get their cameras and money to donate. They generally seemed open to experiencing *everything* (gauche or not) while the other volunteers seemed more proud of (or sure of) their counter-cultural role. It seemed that a more touristic use of space may be characteristic of the Compañeros groups, who were more marked as tourists in their group activities, always traveling together, and spent only a short period of time at FLF compared to the longer-term volunteers at the farm.

The volunteers portrayed the farm space as an exotic and other worldly destination, constructing it as an Eden and inherently “different” type of place. Luce expresses this in her statement that:

> It’s such a different place, and it’s sort of exotic in a way, and it would just be completely different from their everyday experience.

Interviewer: Right
L: And it was very wild, but it wasn’t in any way, scary, or you know... it was very interesting, you know

This fantastical language evokes the magical and the wild, but with the disclaimer that the experience there at FLF is safe. The exotic nature of the place is reinforced and difference is maintained as the focus of the experience. Luce reproduces the farm as a tourist fantasy, describing it not just as “different” and “other,” (not necessarily limited to a touristic encounter) but as pleasurable and infused with mystery. She explains that the farm was more than real, it was “just so amazing. It was just very other-worldly, just a very kind of special, magical kind of place”. To her it is “this-- heaven-like, perfect place where everything was in harmony and everything was *amazing.*” Mary describes the farm similarly:

Like I found *everything* to be absolutely beautiful, like the scenery, the wildlife—everything is so colorful and it’s like everything is – even if something like,
smells bad it’s like a good smell, you know? It’s like earthy or it’s like, even if something is not so pretty, it’s like a new thing, it’s like a new kind of um—atmosphere. I don’t know, everything kind of interests me, and I would try to take a lot of pictures of these really cool little insects. And they didn’t really come out which is kind of disappointing, because they have these really gorgeous colored insects and lizards and plants and everything so, that was pretty much – I was pretty much in a surreal, heaven-like experience when I first got there.

For Mary the farm is Eden-like, magically unreal or surreal. Volunteers create meanings for sights and sounds so that even the bad are good, indicating difference, authenticity. Volunteers’ activities and the sites on the farm are things to be touristically consumed. Work is amazing and even manure smells good: these are parts of the authentic landscape of otherness and thus are enjoyed for their difference. Simone uses smell to evoke meaning more directly when she says:

OK. I got there and I could tell that it was a very rural place and that it was really beautiful. You know, settled in the mountains, very green, very lush. Um. It smelled clean you know. It smelled like it wasn’t in the middle of the city, you know? It smelled like it was secluded.

To Simone, the farm was so apart from the rest of her world it exuded this in the scent of the air: the smells of “seclusion.” It is interesting to note that volunteers seem to attend primarily to the “natural” environment in describing the farm and surroundings, with little mention of the social environment and the people involved around the farm. This may again indicate how separate FLF volunteers are from the local people and even local workers.

Farm owners encouraged volunteers to leave the confines of the farm gates and disrupt the insular constitution of the farm. They even reported that they relocated the internet café (from the farm’s office to a building in town) in a strategic attempt to get volunteers to interact with local people. Ella, one of the farm owners, said

I think volunteers here, although they say that they like very much contact with the community – they still don’t use it a lot. They don’t go out a lot. Before they went in the bar, but this is not a good place to look for contact with the community. But they could walk more in the community, use more activities of the community. We invite them to community meetings and then they don’t show
up. Maybe because they are afraid with the language [barrier], but I think it is important that they go out more. They can also use the program of eating with the families more. They are all so afraid of the contact. Sometimes they choose to eat one meal with the family and the rest here because they are among themselves, and they are a little bit being shy to go out.

Simone, a Compañeros volunteer who volunteered in Costa Rica for two months (five weeks of this time at the farm) recognized her isolation from the context of the village as follows:

... especially the first few weeks when we were there before I started eating with a family regularly, I really felt like I was in a bit of a bubble. That I interacted with the volunteers and I interacted with the farm workers, but I had originally planned on working with the kids at the school, every day... And because I wasn’t doing that and because I wasn’t having that outside contact I really felt that this wasn’t what I was here to do. I was here to work with, like with the Costa Ricans who don’t get contact with Canadians every day. So I think that maybe more initiative of sending volunteers into the community and interacting with the people, whether it be you know, making people go and eat with a family or making people you know, I don’t know...

When I asked volunteers about the spaces they occupied most frequently and their comfort around the town, most said they were completely comfortable with going to any destination in the village. However, this does not coincide with what I observed, and it became clear that the “everywhere” volunteers imagined in the town was limited to the public and open places in town: the corner store, the internet café, the soccer field, and then only to watch games, not to play. The volunteers’ understandings of local space were limited, as they did not know about the wide range of spaces that they did not visit. This included such areas as private homes, farms, businesses not marked by signs, religious and community buildings.

Locals hold significant power in keeping particular spaces to themselves and not offering access to the foreign volunteers. This evokes the concept of Foucauldian power-relationships which Cheong and Miller (2000) apply to suggest that power is ubiquitous and diffuse in the touristic experience. Traditionally, power in the touristic experience has been understood as resting with the wealthy tourist and exerted upon the economically disadvantaged local.
However, Foucault's assertion that power is not uni-directional calls for a reinterpretation of the tourist/local power relationship. The highly visible tourist not only gazes at the tourist environment and people in it, but is the object of these people's gazes, and has his or her behaviour mediated by the regulation of the locals' gaze. The economic power of the tourist is met with the knowledge-power of the locals, while tourism brokers mediate and participate in power relationships as "go-betweens" to locals and tourists. The gaze of the tourist is not completely free, as tourists may believe, but is led by the activities of locals and tourism brokers (e.g. tour organizations like Compañeros). Tourists often self-regulate their behaviour based on their understandings of the expectations of the tour site's occupants. In this process of self-discipline, global-local flows of power can be subverted and the constructed "passive local" as a concept in tourist destinations can be disrupted. FLF opens up a particular set of power relations in the village of la Flor. These are associated with wealthy tourists/volunteers visiting a location for pleasure and locals responding in various way to the changes that foreigners bring to their community. By using their knowledge of and access to local spaces, local people can choose to keep some areas to themselves and select ones they will invite foreigners to. Volunteers at FLF may not be aware of the spaces they are excluded from, but some suspect that they have a limited knowledge of the town. Mary expressed the most self-reflective description of where volunteers went in town:

Well, I know that just up the hill, to the right, when you first get out of the farm's trail there, is mostly houses. And so because we had permission to go to their home to eat there - that's where our family's house was, we felt comfortable going. But had we not been invited, I don't think I would have ventured up that way, because it was only homes that were that way and we haven't been invited, it might seem - I just wouldn't have gone up there. Obviously, the internet café because of its association with the farm, felt like a very safe place, felt like an open to anything kind of place and so we weren't afraid to go there. We even spent a few nights there. But, the soccer fields [was] also welcoming, except for the fact that it was on a cliff and you might lose your ball. And then, maybe it
changes at night time—because I know that when we were walking by ourselves at night, I felt a little bit uneasy sometimes, just because, you do have a trust in everyone, and it’s almost maybe a false trust. Like, you don’t know what these people are capable of and you don’t know what they’re like, but for some reason you, like because you trust the farm, you seem to trust everyone and so, I felt OK going around at night, but then maybe if I was alone – which thank god we never really were—I would have felt differently – I would have maybe not felt so comfortable because there ARE a lot of men out on the streets and they do call at you and you never really know what their true intentions are, so, I was maybe a bit wary. So I wouldn’t go too many places by myself. I didn’t really venture – besides our walks once in a while, where we went all together down the road – besides that I didn’t really venture very far on my own.

She expresses not only her version of the limitations of where volunteers would go, but fear for using community spaces at different times. At night, she says, “it changes” so that the spaces feel less open, and perceived as potentially threatening. This may also be reflective of a fear of “dangerous” others, as she mentions that volunteers do not know local people well once the interaction is outside of the “safe” one affiliated with and monitored by the farm. It is important to acknowledge as well that the fear Mary feels may not be completely tied to fear of unknown “others” but also died into her positioning as a woman.

The use of space also carries with it implications for the social networks that volunteers develop while they are in the field. In spite of farm management’s stated desire to integrate volunteers into the community with the help of the carefully positioned internet café, volunteers mostly maintain their Northerner-focused social networks even here. Julia explains:

Well, at the internet café, we spent some times in our afternoons there, which was a comfortable environment to be in—I mean it was nice to be able to sit and relax there a bit and you know, a few people from the community came in, but other than whoever was running the café, we didn’t really interact a whole lot with the community there unless there was a few people there. I guess I wouldn’t have felt comfortable in environments like, sometimes they had things going on in the community centre, or at the store there that we walked past along the way, across from the soccer field. So I guess, off the farm property, I didn’t feel that I was integrated into the community very well, but I didn’t get the sense that it was and intentional thing, but maybe it was just a time thing too. I mean, if I had spent more than a week there, I mean maybe if I was there for a month, then that
wouldn’t have been something that happened. So, the internet café was the one place that off the farm property – and then, the farm we went to visit and then the home that we went to visit to of one of the workers on the farm – oh what was her name – Luci’s family—they welcomed us into their home and went out of their way to have us there for a visit, which was really nice. And I think that was right at the end of the trip, and I think I realized that it would have been a good experience for me to spend some time with different families in their homes too. But it was at the end of the trip, so you didn’t realize that so much.

Julia raises an important point: the short time frame that volunteers are in the community of la Flor means that there is very little chance for them to do anything but superficially observe the town and participate in limited parts of public life. However, this is markedly different from the discourses of connectivity, intersubjectivity and sharing that surround international volunteering trips like this one.

**Questioning Volunteers’ Commitment to Voluntourism**

As I have demonstrated, volunteer discourse valorizes voluntourism and alternative travel, which caused me to expect that volunteers would report an accompanying philosophical commitment to this type of travel. I was surprised to learn that most of my participants understood voluntourism as simply one of a variety of equally valid tourist paths. For example, Julia states that her decision to participate in voluntourism now is due simply to its convenient fit into her life as a young student:

I think that it plays a really important part, it plays an important part, you know in the economic benefits and the financial benefits to a country and to a community, and a lot of countries really benefit a lot from tourism financially. And I think that it’s right, now I’m not at a point in my life where I want a holiday where I just go and lie on the beach and relax the entire week, but I think there are periods in your life where you need that (laughs). You need that sort of stress free vacation, but I think it varies with the stages you are at. But I think it’s really important, I think for people to go to a country and even if they are not volunteering or not closely immersed with the culture they’re still getting some exposure and I think that’s important for everyone to have. Particularly when you live in a country like Canada, people who are Canadian are from all different parts of the world.
Here, Julia conveys a positive view of tourism, and presents voluntourism as age-specific activity, an idea that is representative of this group's general view. Volunteers seem to understand “appropriate” tourism options in terms of “life-phase,” with the idea that certain types of travel are more appropriate at different times of a person’s life.

Vandana expresses a similar sentiment that other types of tourism may be appropriate in other situations:

A lot of people, they don’t want to go lie down on the beach, they want to learn something, too. I guess this is another viable option for people who want to go visit a country, but also learn about the culture, more than just relax, and be served by someone… [is tourism] more ethical? I don’t think so because, I don’t by going to a country and just wanting to relax on the beach is unethical. It’s people’s preferences if somehow the people living in that country are affected by it, like tourism, by someone coming in and just wanting to stay in a hotel and relax, the (unclear) people are getting affected by it, then I think it would be unethical, but I don’t see that happening a lot. I’m not sure. I could, you know, like, be blind to some facts, I don’t know. I’m not sure about all the facts. But I wouldn’t say it’s more ethical, I think it’s just a different kind of tourism. I wouldn’t say it’s more ethical, no… I think people should still be given a choice if they want to go relax or they want to learn about a culture. I think people should have that choice, obviously. But it hasn’t really changed too much of my perspective about tourism.

Vandana sees voluntourism as just one of a wide variety of equally valid tourism options. These FLF volunteers do not show a lived adherence to the philosophy of “alternative” or volunteer tourism that they praise so much. This is supported by research suggesting that the form of tourism (defined as an institutional arrangement, like volunteering or backpacking tourism) is not necessarily one and the same with the type of tourism (defined as the more ideological attributes of tourism, such as a deeply held belief in avoiding exploitation or in any shared motivation for travel) (Uriely, Yonay & Simchai, 2002). Volunteering can be both a form and a type but may not be both at once for some people participating in it. For example, some may just act out the form of travel, without adherence to ideological beliefs of volunteering. Perhaps as Uriely, Yonay &
Simchai suggest for backpacking tourism, assumptions about the motivations and ideologies of participants in voluntourism should not be made, and rather type and form discussions of voluntourism should be undertaken separately. Volunteers choose to participate for a variety of reasons including a desire to participate in what is becoming a “rite-of-passage” for young Northerners, a desire to see an authentic and different landscape, and possibly a desire to travel ethically. Volunteering as a form of travel may be used as a sign to signify volunteers’ allegiance to volunteering as a “type” of tourism, regardless of travelers’ actual philosophical commitment to the experience. They benefit from assumptions that choosing a form of tourism indicates strong philosophical commitments to the type of tourism, while my participants clearly demonstrate that they have no such ideological commitment to participating solely in volunteer travel, or in avoiding other forms of tourism for ethical reasons.

There are also material limits to choosing voluntourism consistently. Mary explains some realistic barriers to participating exclusively in volunteerism, even if one has a philosophical allegiance to it:

And then before I went to CR about maybe 2 or 3 years before that, I went to Mexico, with my [school] and we stayed in a resort. And so, at the time, I didn’t see anything wrong with that. And now I look back at it and I’m like, “what the hell?!?! I went to Mexico, I hardly saw any Mexicans — and all my time with Americans and Canadians”. I don’t know. It almost makes me angry I did something like that, but at the same time, like, you know—you have fun at places like this, so it’s hard to kind of step back and realize what you’re supporting when you go on a trip like that, because everything is included including alcohol and you are on a beach and you are with people like yourself who don’t have any particular responsibilities at that time. So you do have a good time and it’s hard to really see that maybe you’re not—you know. But at the same time, it’s kind-of good to have an experience like that so you know what happens exactly and you know what it’s about and you know that you probably want to try and limit yourself to trips like that in the future. So I guess I have quite a broad range, from one extreme to the other... And also it’s hard to afford one type of tourism all the time, like, Mexico was one of those packaged deals and I could have done that probably three times with the amount of money I spent in Costa Rica. So, when
you do something like volunteering, you feel better but at the same time, I spent a whole lot of money on that, so it’s a hard thing to reproduce.

Although Mary contends that a resort trip seems like a guilty pleasure now, she also admits that voluntourism participants pay a premium to behave “ethically,” so realistically, they must limit their involvement with voluntourism, because it is usually the more expensive tourist option.

Some volunteers are more open about desiring future traditional tourism trips. Judith states:

Judith: As far as going back to Costa Rica I would go back, but next time as a tourist so I can do the tourist thing, you know. I wouldn’t want to sit on a beach again though, but going back and do things you couldn’t do because you were busy working and stuff, I’d, like do that and.
Interviewer: What types of things, for example?
J: I’d love to have gone to the cloud forest and the canopy tree walk and those sorts of things and the volcano.

Volunteers are not all committed to volunteer tourism: in fact, after this trip they may be more ready to try “traditional” tourism. Judith is ready to make up for the guilty pleasures she missed this time in her choice to be a “working tourist”. Uriely, Yonay & Simchai (2002) would classify our volunteer group “working-holiday tourists” who pay for their experience of doing a type of work that is novel to their lived experience at home. This is different from “non-institutionalized working tourists” in that volunteers’ participation in manual labor is not for necessity. It is recreation and interest that motivates their work rather than economics, as the earlier discussion of the expense of voluntourism speaks to. Volunteers’ economic status allows them to work for leisure, rather than for subsistence.

Situating this discussion of voluntourism in the context of the relationship between leisure and work on this vacation, as they become one and the same, the assertion that voluntourism is for the benefit of the Southern Other becomes difficult to sustain. The Other and the LDC’s landscape become objects to be consumed, rather than engaged with in a
compassionate and equitable encounter, as described in voluntourist advertising and popular discourse.

International volunteerism at Finca la Flor is tourism focused. The farm staff construct an experience that is pleasing to volunteers and that is imagined to be “authentic” to them. The work, food and living quarters are “rustic” but comfortable and “fun” to experience. An emphasis is placed on creating an encounter where the volunteer feels that he or she has learned and experienced new things: it is an experience designed to be rewarding to the volunteers, first and foremost. Volunteers enjoy the farm as a spectacle and an exotic place of “difference” to be consumed, much as could be expected in mainstream tourism. This group of participants did not problematize the authenticity of this as a tourist experience, and in fact felt confident that they were the best possible form of tourists, and that voluntourism is an “ethical” choice that manages to avoid the negative aspects of mainstream tourism. The primary focus of the volunteering encounter at FLF is not on work or “help” but on providing pleasure to volunteers.

Acknowledging the fact that volunteers’ leisure happens in an institutional context is important, as the organization of FLF does not ostensibly aim just to please the tourism fantasies of its guests, but to promote a particular way of life, style of agriculture and preservation of “nature”. Volunteers seem to agree with the goals and philosophies of the farm, but not to acknowledge participating in what is explicitly constructed as an international (alternative) development project. In the next chapter, I will describe the development orientation of the goals of the farm itself and the discourses that constitute it. Volunteers’ participation as development workers is largely unacknowledged, and the next chapter discusses the active practices of development at FLF and the lack of volunteers’ acknowledgement of this. The farm is not just a site of calculated helping and tourist pleasure, but a site of very real and easily problematizable
development goals and ideals that volunteers participate in without much reflection or self-identification.
CHAPTER FIVE
Development: the Invisible Discourse

In chapters Three and Four I have argued that FLF volunteers on the trips I studied understand themselves to be excellent tourists and poor volunteers. However, in spite of the prominence of development as an organizing principle for FLF as a project and for the trip itself, volunteers rejected the idea of themselves as international developers. Many seemed unfamiliar with the concept in general, and others were sure that although they knew what international development was, this practice of volunteering at FLF did not fit into an international development framework. How was it that this group could consistently understand their activities and those of the farm in terms that did not include international development? If, for volunteers at FLF, alternative tourism was an accepted discourse, and volunteerism an abandoned one, it seemed that the looming discourse of development was to them, an invisible one.

Finca la Flor is quite explicitly an alternative development agency with a stated anti-corporate, pro-local, alternative agriculture focus. The intentions of the organization are to suggest changes to and “improve” the lives of the people of La Flor by encouraging alternative agricultural and conservation practices. The farm, however, works within a market model, rather than aiming to contest and provide a radical alternative to the system it identifies as unjust. Further, it seeks to demonstrate how organic farming and nature conservation projects are financially feasible, to inject money into the local economy (through volunteers’ spending and some local job creation) and itself relies on foreign funding (through volunteers’ fees).

In this chapter, I set out to investigate how volunteers managed to conceptualize their volunteering at the sustainable development project of FLF as something other than development, and investigate which particular elements volunteers felt the farm differed from (or, occasionally was similar to) a development project. What discursive elements of
international development do volunteers identify as present at the farm, and which elements of
their conceptualization of “international development” do they feel do not exist on the farm? My
second goal in the chapter is to investigate more empirically the farm space as transformed into a
staged tourist site, where development activities are presented for volunteers to observe and
briefly participate in, while always maintaining their primary role as tourists. In a post-modern
conceptualization, FLF volunteers are taking part in a de-differentiated activity (Munt, 1994) in
which they are able to participate in development without commitment to its ideals, to
experience pleasure and self-satisfying travel without guilt, by enacting tourism at an “ethical”
site. I begin the chapter now by contextualizing my discussion of international development with
some critical literature which relates to the international development discourses that play out at
FLF. In this discussion of development as a discourse I will draw mainly on the work of
Agrawal, Escobar, Ferguson and Mitchell briefly to address the historical formation of the
development discourse and its ascension to hegemonic status in understandings of global
“progress”. Through this brief literature review, I will discuss the notion of “Othering” in
development discourses and how non-Westerners subjectivities are denied by the development
rhetoric. Throughout, the problematic notions of modernity, objectivity and progress will be
located as fundamental to the development discourse.

Agrawal’s (1997) comparison of the rhetoric of colonial development to current
environmental / conservation discourse is useful in a discussion of FLF. Agrawal suggests that
there is a conceptual similarity between projects ostensibly about “environmentalism” and ones
clearly labeled as international development projects, the latter of which are more easily
problematized using critical development perspectives. According to Agrawal, the two
endeavours are linked by similar motivations and rationales: first, conservation and development
both acknowledge the richness of LDCs in terms of raw materials or the potential for expansion, either economic or in fostering / protecting biodiversity through Northern initiatives; second, the two discourses portray indigenous people as being incapable of managing these resources; third, the knowledge and resources to solve the problems of the South are imagined in both development and conservation discourse as consistently originating from the North. The conviction that development or Northern-defined environmental / conservation programs are desirable and necessary, minimizes recognition of Southern knowledge and ability and creates the North as the exclusive site of civilization, organization, education and intelligence.

"Underdevelopment" or environmental "problems" in the South, as defined by the North, thus become pathologized and in need of treatment by Western experts (Crush, 1995). In spite of conceptual overlap between development and environmental programs in LDCs, volunteers at FLF often expressed beliefs that FLF was clearly not a development program, but explained it as an environmental program with categorically different characteristics and goals.

Watts (2001) applies a similar critique, in a review of recent critical development literature, in which he asserts that development programs render the recipients of its projects as docile subjects, and define development problems in ways that de-politicize social problems, decontextualize problems from their location in a field of power imbalances and constitute them as technical issues to be solved by Northern modernity and capitalism. At FLF, the foreigners identify what are considered local problems and how they should be corrected. Then farm management brings in more foreigners to attempt to enact local change at the site of FLF, through changes in local social practice, agriculture and conservation. In general, critical research has argued that development projects may result in more conflict and resistance than consent and help (Parpart, 1995; Escobar, 1995).
In the post-WWII period, the concept of “developing” poorer nations according to the economic and cultural model of the United States was formalized. This period is popularly understood as beginning with President Truman’s push to develop the “less economically successful” nations (Escobar, 1994). The objective was to pull LDCs into the modernity of the West through urbanization, industrialization and the adoption of Western agricultural methods, traditions and values. According to Escobar (1994) and others (see Fischer, 1995; Hewitt, 2000; Crush, 1995), a faith in “progress” and rationality was reflected in the formula for international development’s success: injection of capital, science and technology would bring the dream of Western-styled freedom and prosperity to the world. It was through the binary representations of particular nations as “undeveloped” (and the West as developed) that the West maintained its construction of the Rest as sub-standard, and continued a paternalistic treatment of these countries in the post-colonial period.

From the 1950s to the end of the 1970s, most critiques of development were limited to critiques of the strategies of development, not questioning the need for development itself. Therefore, one might critique mainstream capitalist development and suggest socialist development or “alternative development”, but there was little questioning of the need for development to continue as a project, in some form. The discourse of development had become hegemonic, and its assumptions naturalized. As Escobar (1994, p.5) says: “...one could criticize a given approach and propose modifications or improvements accordingly, but the fact of development itself, and the need for it, could not be doubted”.

In the contemporary era of development, the gaze of the North over the South is constructed with the Northern viewer as an “invisible visitor” with access to Truth through a gaze at the less-developed nations, on exhibit and available for the North to work on (Escobar,
In mainstream development discourse, the North’s ability to know and understand “other” countries was (and is) not seen (by Northerners, at least) as scribed by the particular position of power the North was in. Instead, it was seen simply as the gaze of detached objective truth. Even pro-development writing claiming to advocate for the rights of people in LDCs often represents these populations and places as inherently powerless, in need and lacking (what the Northern experts deem important). This is seen, for example, in the examination of women in LDCs, and descriptions of them as victims with no socially relevant power and lacking sexual / reproductive “freedom”, “modern” education etc. (Escobar, 1994; Cook, 2003). Thus, the North reinforces its conception of itself and its women as modern, educated and free. At the core of this construction of the Other, is a system of measurement which places the North as the benchmark against which to evaluate all other people and places.

While development ostensibly aims to bring widespread prosperity and abundance to LDCs, it has failed consistently at even these questionable goals of economic improvement and reduction of (for example) hunger and poverty. Instead, more poverty, more “underdevelopment” and more suffering seems to be the product of many development initiatives, yet new strategies and imaginations of development are adopted and practiced over and over, without much questioning of the concept of development itself (Ferguson, 1990). James Ferguson’s (1990) investigation into the large number of rural development programs in Lesotho is a project of deconstructing the discourse of development in this context of failure. His investigation into these development projects suggested that the most significant material effects of development projects may be ones that are unplanned and unanticipated (although they may not be unpredictable).
While the stated objectives of the Lesotho development programs he examined were rarely met, Ferguson felt that there were reliable and consistent results of these projects: they recreated need for development institutions, reinscribed the notion of “need” for aid, and in turn maintained the development machinery that employed so many Westerners and sustained the Western concept of the Other. The creation of “lack” was always met with new plans to modernize and new troops of “developers” to send to the country. As Escobar says, “The fact that most people’s conditions not only did not improve but deteriorated with the passing of time did not seem to bother most experts. Reality, in sum, had been colonized by the development discourse...” (Escobar, 1994, p.5). Ferguson explains that

‘development’ institutions generate their own form of discourse ... (which) constructs Lesotho as a particular kind of object of knowledge, and creates a structure of knowledge around that object. Interventions are then organized on the basis of this structure of knowledge, which, while interventions ‘failing’ on their own terms, nonetheless have regular effects, which include the expansion and entrenchment of bureaucratic state power, side by side with the projection of a representation of economic and social life which denies “politics” and, to the extent that it is successful, suspends its effects. (1994, p.xiv-xv).

As Ferguson describes, experts continued to systematically locate and name underdevelopment," to plan development and improvement in the lives of LDCs, and to fail in their outlined projects. Then, they would re-strategize and try again, with similar effects. Examining development as a discourse (as Ferguson does in Lesotho) allows an investigation of the institution of development. It further examines how problems (as well as places, people and practices) are defined through the development machinery which proceeds to regulate the LDCs in accordance with the West’s own description of the problem. Escobar reports some of the main problems with development as being “further entrenchment of the state, the restructuring of rural social relations, the deepening of Western modernizing influences and de-depoliticization of problems” (1994, p.12). By contextualizing development as an institutional product of a Northern discourse,
situated in Northern thought and serving Northern goals, development projects such as the one at FLF can be investigated and their development assumptions examined.

Timothy Mitchell (1991; 1995) also examines development as discourse in his examination of the West’s (and particularly the U.S.’s) construction of Egypt. He examines how descriptions of Egypt reflect not just how America wanted to represent Egypt to itself and the world, but also how America represents itself as a counter-reflection of the disorder and chaos expressed in its representation of the East. By creating an Egypt that is backward and traditional, the “civility” and progress of the West is reflected back on itself in the mirror of “difference” it has constructed.

Descriptions of Egypt in development literature follow a particular formula, Mitchell argues. Time after time, the country is introduced in terms of “objective” geographical and demographic limits: namely in the description of the little “habitable” and agriculturally viable land as being limited to that hugging the Nile, and the inhabitants of Egypt being crowded into this finite area while multiplying themselves at an alarming rate. Mitchell reports that development “experts” claim there are too many people for the land and food available. Yet the choice of descriptive statistics is highly selective. Mitchell argues that the fertility of Egyptian arable land is much higher than that of Western countries, and historically the land was used efficiently in growing grains and legumes. Only after Western intervention and the push to “modernize” (i.e. to raise more livestock and adapt a Western-styled diet) did the land yield per person become a “problem”. The superficial final objectivity of space and numbers (geography and population) serve to establish the necessity for Western intervention, in the form of development “strategies” through technology and management (Mitchell, 1995). In this way, the LDC is constructed as the object to be fixed and analyzed, while the practice of defining, describing and “fixing” is left
unexamined as a social phenomenon. Mitchell says, "The discourse of international development constitutes itself in this way as an expertise and intelligence that stands completely apart from the country and the people it describes," (Mitchell, 1990, p.130) despite the fact that development is a product of socio-historical context which should not stand outside the realm of evaluation.

In the current research on FLF volunteers, it is important to investigate the multiple (and unstated, or unintended) effects of the farm’s practices -and specifically, the practices of volunteers- for those involved with it. Ferguson’s work serves as an excellent model for examining the practice of international volunteering at the site of Finca la Flor. International volunteering as a practice is founded upon and itself produces discourses about the social world, through the participation of volunteers and the popular discussion of the world through this practice. As Ferguson examined the specific material effects of development discourses, so I hope to look at international volunteering’s discursive effects on the “material” outcome of its practice. Just as discourses of development construct Lesotho as an object of development, so do the same discourses (along with associated ones of tourism and philanthropy) construct communities like la Flor as appropriate sites for “help” and international volunteers as useful, and volunteerism as beneficial to volunteers and local people from la Flor. I wish to argue that the “text” of international volunteering has escaped the design that was intended by its authors (the gatekeepers of international volunteering at this site: Compañeros and the farm founders) and that the practices of FLF make it seem much more like a tourist site at a “staged” development project than its mandate suggests. The farm houses different practices and produces a number of effects other than those intended in the farm’s official goals.
A Textual Reading From FLF and Compañeros Websites

The Finca la Flor website documents the official farm mandate and ideas behind farm operations. The farm is described as (1) an agroecological farm-school, (2) an alternative Spanish Institute, (3) a voluntary work program focused on issues of organic farming, reforestation, communal and environmental issues in Costa Rica, (4) home to courses such as the farm's Sustainable Development Course (currently cancelled) and (5) “a beautiful vacation retreat to escape the big city and day-to-day hectic life” (Finca la Flor website, June, 2004). The farm’s owners are open about the farm’s focus on tourism and development, and a focus on foreign visitors. In fact, the farm’s website lists FLF goals as: (1) working towards sustainable development, (2) regenerating 10ha of tropical rain forest, (3) developing and educating about organic agriculture, (4) supporting Costa Rican environmental initiatives, (5) creating social projects for children, women and the community, (6) fostering cultural exchange (Finca la Flor website, June, 2004). Visitors to the farm are not required to volunteer (although most choose to), but are told that they can enjoy the farm in one of four ways: (1) by taking Spanish lessons at the FLF Alternative Spanish Institute, (2) by taking part in volunteer farm / conservation work 3) by “Enjoy[ing], relax[ing] and spend[ing] a nice vacation of agro-ecotourism”( Finca la Flor website, June, 2004) or 4) participating in a combination of the first three options. The website stresses how accommodating the farm is to the needs of the volunteers, in terms of where they wish to work and what they would like to do with their time: “As far as work is concerned, there is plenty to be done, always according to your requirements!”( Finca la Flor website, June, 2004). Even volunteers’ laundry is taken care of! The website also stresses the safety of the farm and the town (in a way that invites fear of visiting other locations in Costa Rica): “Walking freely around the farm and its surroundings without any fear of being assaulted or worrying
about your belongings is one of the most relaxing vantages La Flor Spanish Institute and La Flor de Paraíso Agro-ecological farm provides to their visitors. This type of security cannot be assured when in a large city.” (Finca la Flor website, June, 2004). The farm is associated with Northern volunteer organizations including AFS (American Field Service), Gap Challenge (British work abroad program for “in-between” stage students) and WWOOF (Willing Workers On Organic Farms). The AFS website advertises that its programs (of which FLF is one) allow volunteers to:

Step into a wider world than you've ever imagined—new people, new perspectives, and new cultures. Explore daily life in another country by living not as a tourist, but with your host family. You'll learn to speak the language, become a member of the community, and make lasting friendships. When you return home, it will be with a greater understanding of yourself, the world, and your place in it. (AFS website, available at http://www.usa.afs.org/)

International volunteering seems to be set up as a tourism project to a new type of destination: the international development project.

Volunteers Defining Development

In this section I want to describe volunteers’ understandings of what international development is, in order to contextualize their later opinions (in their discussion of the trip with me) of whether or not they felt like they were involved in international development work while traveling as volunteers. It was a surprise to me in my interviews how unfamiliar participants were with the concept of international development. Several were unable to even roughly define it without some prompting by me. Even those volunteers who had some more established sense of what development was had not previously conceptualized their volunteering experience in terms of international development, or considered themselves development workers (with one vague exception). Vandana’s comments are representative of the sort of understanding of international development that was characteristic of most participants:
Trying to help out economically in a smaller country who needs economic help from a developed country such as Canada. Kind of go there and just help people out in general. Yeah, just go and try to help people get some money together, I guess, as much as possible... I didn’t, I never really thought I was doing development work, but I was just helping people in general. People who I guess needed help... I think they’re important, really important for a developed country to help out a lesser developed country. Important for Canada to help out smaller countries cause we have the resources to help them, and if developed countries such as Canada doesn’t help, then I guess, who will? So, these countries do need a lot of help, and if we can help them we should.

Vandana’s definition contains elements which are common to other participants/ understandings as well: the South as in need, Northern help as the solution to these problems, and her experience volunteering in La Flor as something she does not consider to be a part of international development.

Judith has a more detailed idea of what constitutes a LDC, and explains the needs and crisis that she feels indicate such a nation. To her, development is:

Trying to re – or build up on a nation that has very low economic growth, very high poverty, children on the streets, going there to help them become, not maybe better, but self improve and so that way, maybe not become like us, cause that’s a terrible way to be, but you know so that way not everyone gets to live on the streets, the select few get to live in their big houses. Judith

Judith is momentarily critical of wealth differentials within Northern countries themselves, but accepts the idea that international development somehow addresses this imbalance. Simone speaks with the most confidence on the topic of international development, indicating her support for development initiatives as a possible way to redistribute wealth and address previous exploitation of the South:

International development for me personally, I know that there are a lot of theoretical perspectives on it, but I think that international development should be improving the lives of others who don’t have what we have in the first world. And what we have in the first world came largely because we exploited other people’s resources and land, and people. And that, now that we are the “haves” as opposed to the “have-nots” we really have to give back. And that international development is giving back.
She does not challenge the goals of international development (of aiming to give to the South what we have in the North). However when I asked Simone if she felt development projects do a good job of “helping” she expressed skepticism about much international development in practice, evoking the common notion that development is a good idea that gets corrupted when taken on by bigger organizations. She suggested that large development agencies are inherently political, but implied that smaller organizations are “truly” altruistic and a-political:

I think it’s hard to say [if development projects do help]. There are a lot of international development projects that have been hidden under the guise of something else and that have alternative political platforms. And there are so many that have just caused so much more poverty and unhappiness. I mean, you look at dam projects that for how long were seen as the answer to undevelopment. And that you know, just have caused death, caused people to lose their land and have caused death. I think that certainly not all development projects have been good. But I think that it’s the grand scale ones, like the big scale ones, that have failed and that the smaller scale ones, you know, going into a small community and saying, “we’re going to teach these people about how to protect themselves from AIDS”. You know, there’s one little community – that that’s more manageable and that they probably have more success than the big grandiose ones. And also, I think that the big grandiose ones are all kinds of money and all kinds of political aid – that they are more inherently political and that it’s harder to actually help the people.

Simone and the other volunteers believe in some pure form of idealistic, altruistic development, even when they offer quite nuanced critiques of how development has played out in the past.

Simone retains her faith in the dream of development, saying:

I think that pure, idealistic development; development that is “no strings attached, we want to help you, we want to liberate your people, we want to give you a chance to make a better life for yourself” then absolutely. Development can work there. But, with hidden agendas and with whatnot, then no, it’s not going to happen. It’s just another form of exploitation.

Volunteers do not critique development’s central tenets that the North has answers, should intervene in the lives of the Southern people, and that the North can know how to “liberate” the
South. Instead, volunteers’ criticisms are leveled mainly as what they see as the corrupt hidden business agendas behind much agency development.

Luce exemplifies this in her suspicion of large-scale development initiatives, despite an admiration for development in general:

Well, one company or group of companies that go outside their own country and build different—whatever-- in my mind, it’s always, the motive is that it’s beneficial for the person BUILDING and beneficial for the people receiving it. I think that it’s not always motivated by pure benevolence, but you know-- I’m sure there are organizations that build things-- but I know that the Canadian government built the airport in Antigua
K: Is that right?
P: Yeah. I always think that there’s always something else going on. I think it’s just a bit suspect.

It is significant to note that participants from the first group, who were at the farm for three to five weeks, were much more critical of both international development and the farm in general, than were members of the second group, who spent less than one week at the farm. While this difference may be coincidental, I suspect that even a couple of extra weeks gave participants from the first group significantly greater access to the operations of the farm, through more conversations with workers, other volunteers, and by observing problems in the farm’s operation that may not be as visible on a shorter visit. Very brief volunteering trips allow only a superficial view of development projects, preventing volunteers from forming a comprehensive analysis of the projects. However, these “brief” trips are more common, and more feasible for many Northern travelers, and thus of particular value to study, even if longer international volunteerism stints might yield a more self-critical reflection. It seems that this type of brief, international volunteerism may preclude meaningful social interaction between volunteers and locals, and a thorough understanding of the projects they work on.
Developing Countries as “in Need” of Assistance from the North

My participants entered the international volunteering encounter with particular ideas about the destination country and people, often envisioning them as chaotic, dangerous, poor, lacking and volatile. Sometimes these ideas can be disrupted while actually in the field, as with Mary:

Interviewer: Right. So in your case, why did you feel it was necessary to go to a different country to volunteer in the summer?
Mary: Well, mostly because I feel that in the Canada or the US or in developed countries, although there is a lot of volunteering work that can be done, it seems like initially when you go into the project, when you say developing country” or when you say like, “central America” or something, it has this connotation with it like, they need help really badly. But it’s kind of a fallacy in that they don’t see themselves as needing help so badly and so once you actually get into it you realize that they’re not really asking for your help, you’re giving it – that they may not need it. But not that they need it more than people in your own country, because, they don’t see themselves as being inferior in any way. And initially you kind of maybe see yourself as maybe kind of like a “nurse going into the battlefield” or something kind of scenario where there’s “grave need of help” [sarcastically] and “nourishment” or something, but they’re not a horribly poor country. They actually can sustain themselves quite well and they actually have maybe more to give us than we do them in terms of forms of knowledge or ways to be more efficient in our energy use or something like that.

Mary’s epiphany may be one of the single best indications of self-reflection within this group, on the appropriateness of volunteers coming to la Flor to give “aid”. She challenges the dominant development discourse of need, and notes that she may benefit more from the encounter with others than they do. In this quote Mary confronts and rejects othering discourse, replacing assumptions of Southern “need” and Northern knowledge with the concept that Costa Rican people may be best off as autonomous, solving their own problems and having various useful resources equal or greater to those of the North.
Julia is moderately critical of Northern decision-making, but justifies her role as a volunteer by saying that the people of Southern LDCs are too busy trying “just to survive” to volunteer, and offer help the way well-rested Northerners can:

I think that sometimes, and I’m not sure if I saw this so much in our trip, it’s difficult for people who are in the country that’s needing assistance or the community that’s needing assistance to go out, and they’re obviously living in a stressful environment, and it may be difficult to separate their emotions and stresses from the situation that they’re in to, you know, do the work and put all of the time and energy into developing their own community, so I think that by people coming in from the outside to assist with that can be really beneficial, because they aren’t experiencing all the same stressors and emotions that are going along with living in a situation like that. So I think that’s where the volunteer work can come in to be able to come, I mean at the same time there can be a negative aspect to that too, to people coming in from other countries and different cultures sort of knowing how things are done in their culture, and thinking that’s the best way to do it. But I think that if it’s done with the openness and really the concern for the work that you’re doing, really going along with the cultural beliefs that’s really beneficial.

Julia constructs volunteers as energetic and in a better situation to help, leaving her with only a mild critique of the potential “bossiness” of development in general. In all, volunteers tend to define international development idealistically, although almost half of the group is wary of development when put into practice by large development groups. With these understandings of what international development is, to what extent and how do volunteers at FLF view themselves as development workers?

**Understanding Volunteering As International Development**

Volunteers tended not to understand their volunteering time at the farm as international development work. This seems largely to be the result of three things: (1) the type of tasks they carried out on the farm (e.g. weeding, cleaning animal quarters, etc.; rather than building a schoolhouse) (2) the small scale of the farm (the volunteers imagined development as large-scale projects) and (3) the lack of contact with local people (they felt the project was isolated and they weren’t directly “helping” locals). Simone gives a detailed account of the times she felt like a
development worker on the trip to Costa Rica and notes that she did not identify as one at all while at FLF:

I feel like, when I was working in the school, I know this wasn’t on the farm, but I feel that for me that was the most meaningful experiences for me. That’s when I was doing what I could do the best. That’s when I was doing what I had initially planned to do while I was in CR and then absolutely I felt like I was being a development worker. When I was on the farm, I felt more, maybe, I felt like I was helping on the farm, but I felt like the farm was more an individual project rather than a development project. Being that, the farm was there, [farm owners] had their own agenda and that it wasn’t necessarily to better the whole community, you know what I mean?... projects were, you know “We’re running our farm, volunteers can come in and work on the farm and we will do things to help the community, but the whole point of the project is not to better the lives of every single person in this community. And so I felt more like, I was a volunteer, rather than a development worker, there.

Simone establishes a clear distinction between what a development worker is and what a volunteer is. As a volunteer, she aided a self-contained environmental project, isolated from the community around it. If she were a development worker, she asserts, she would be doing things in the community and aiming to affect the lives of every person in the community. Her conceptualization of development is representative of the group. To many, providing education felt more like development work since while on the farm the volunteers were the students (learning organic techniques etc), and this did not fit with their model for doing development work. Also, volunteers defined development work as aimed at changing the local community.

But at the farm, the insular nature of the space and lack of contact with outside people made it seem less like development, and more like volunteering on a “good project”. Although the farm owners expressed an interest in volunteers associating with locals, the structure of farm activities (i.e. with projects centered on farm property, meals served there, etc.) largely precluded this.

Luce also mentioned the importance of the tasks volunteers were engaged in, to understanding one’s work as development:
Luce: Well, the week that we spent in San Jose with Sam felt more like... well...
Interviewer: Did that feel more like development work?
L: Yeah, it did. Even though I know she seemed to be kind of working on her own
and really organizing a lot of things on her own and she wasn’t answering to
anybody.
I: and what types of activities that week were you doing that maybe could be
understood as development work?
L: Um, we were in a small pueblo, a little village that had been built by the
government helping to paint houses... it just seemed more the TYPE of work that
would be done. Yeah, but I think it’s an organizational thing. It’s more difficult to
do the farm thing in that way...
I: More difficult to do it in what way, sorry?
L: Like, you know if you’re answering to somebody who’s not there, maybe it’s
more difficult, but, yeah... just when I think about International Development, I
think about building and you know...

It seems that certain activities evoke and more closely resemble volunteers’ idea of development.

However, volunteers also differentiated their volunteer work on the farm from development
work based on another criterion: the scale of projects. Volunteers tended to imagine
international development to be a practice carried out by large governmental agencies and large
NGOs. Therefore, they often had difficulty seeing FLF as a development project, and as a result
did not apply the same critiques they would to large development agencies. Mary expresses this
well, saying:

Huh. I hadn’t thought about that [volunteer work being a part of international
development]. I guess that’s true. We are coming in and essentially “helping out”
from an international perspective, but I think that it becomes detrimental if we
were trying to come in and run the place, but I think it was helpful in the way that
we were more trying to learn from them than we were trying to impose what we
knew onto them. And so, I guess it’s possible that what we were doing could be
seen as some kind of international development because we were coming in and
giving a contribution of sorts and we were basically not minding our own
business, but, it’s probably, what we did as opposed to maybe what an institution
maybe with a little more money would do, is very different.

Luce reports more respect for international development after conceptualizing FLF as a
development project, citing her ability to see who was making the decisions as important.
It's more, um. It's not-- like there isn't this huge umbrella that I thought that I was under. Like, I wasn't you know, I just felt like I could do it and leave and there wasn't any sort of feeling like, yeah I'm working with... the idea of international development makes me think of a really large organization-- and I feel like a lot of the time when you get too big, you lose sight of some of the things that you were intending to do or that you were originally maybe wanting to do. It gets too big and the vision gets lost....Well, definitely what we were doing sort of made me feel like there was a face, you know? That it was much more-- the control of the decision making was more in the control of the people that I could see every day rather than somebody in another country or another place that was just sort of handing down orders. You know, like I have this sort of idea those international developers: "Well, yeah we know what this country needs" and they build this thing and it's a total waste of time and money, because they don't know the people. So that's my-- I have sort of a more negative idea of that. But this would definitely, change my idea of that, because I didn't figure it could be on such a small scale. And it's much better for me I think, if the people who are living there are making the decisions, because they know, based on what they see every day.

This assertion that local people were central to decision making at FLF is interesting, because it was non-local farm owners and not locals who consistently made the majority of decisions on the farm. The scale of a project is used as an evaluative tool for volunteers to discern what is and is not "development". Small projects are not seen as development, because they are perceived as connected to local needs, and as being more ethical. Similarly, if any damage is imagined, and most volunteers did not imagine the project as damaging, it is phrased as a "nicer" and lesser version of the damage government organizations or NGOs would do:

Interviewer: So how do you think the types of things that we would do, that might be understood still as development on the farm, are different than what big development agencies would do? How are those activities different?
Mary: Well, I'm thinking more, that they're more sustainable and that they're not as detrimental to the community. I don't feel that volunteers being at the farm are especially detrimental to the community, except maybe for the fact that a dependence does exist on the volunteers, to sustain the farm. So in the way it's kind of a minor, minor version of the dependence that is created on a multinational that comes in and forces people to work for them, because, along with the dependences there, it's creating a problem. And so, we're probably a minor version of it and we're probably not as detrimental in what we're doing, and we're maybe (laughs) nicer about it or, I don't know. We're -- a dependence is created, but at the same time, it's not as though the farm has to develop bad practices in order to -- or because of our stay there—they're dependent on us, to
do good things. And so it’s not like, I guess, the farmer would be doing bad things as a result of dependence on multinational—forcing him to have a cash-crop type of thing. That’s probably where the difference is. (Mary)

Criticism of the farm is not extended to its most basic purpose: to encourage locals to change lifestyle and livelihood according to the ideals of the outsiders who run the farm. However, Mary does conceptualize a potential problem with the farm (and of development in general) in creating a local dependency upon the development agency, a view which does not disrupt the traditional iteration of development relationships. The only problem she sees re-creates stereotypical roles for the North and South: the North could potentially “do their job” too well, being too helpful, and the South could become more and more “helpless”. While volunteers developed an understanding of farm as a development agency during the course of the interviews, they portrayed a nicer, smaller version of international development and were surprised to think of themselves as involved in international development.

Volunteers’ Understanding of the Farm

Volunteers’ understandings of the goals of the farm were fairly consistent within the Compañeros groups I was involved with, and closely matched the stated / advertised goals of FLF. Volunteers’ ideas about the farm goals certainly touched upon the central tenets of development: often mentioning goals of improvement, education and teaching “responsible” agriculture. The farm goals were not problematized by volunteers, only the farm’s lack of achieving them. Julia says:

Um, I think that it’s a combination of—I think that a lot of it is education and trying to educate people in Costa Rica and the volunteers that come in about organic farming and sort of being aware of your environment and sort of, how what you’re doing is impacting the environment and so I got the sense that education was a big thing for them and working with some different school groups. We didn’t see any groups there when we were there, but it seemed that they really wanted to share with others what they were doing and educate others on organic farming and the environmental aspects of it.
Even though the volunteers may not have seen farm personnel instruct anyone else but themselves, they nevertheless accept the ideals and purposes of the farm. The problem with the farm, Mary says, is that the farm doesn’t deliver what it promises. She phrased her advice as follows: “Well, I guess, maybe that they *stick to* their goals that I just mentioned, because they seemed to be their goals *on paper.*” Gricel, one of the farm’s owners, expressed a desire to develop the community of la Flor in spite of the farm’s apparent failure to do so in the past. She explained that the previous owners of the farm were foreigners as well, but were very hostile to local people, even shooting off guns if anyone came onto the property. She believes that this explains some of the reluctance of locals to participate in farm activities, as the memory of the gringos there before this group is so negative:

We would like to help the community. This is something that maybe they have not understood. We want to give other ways to development. It’s not only for us—some American people who are on the farm-- as the previous owners of the property were-- to make money out of it. We want to help—somehow.

Farm owners and volunteers both feel the farm’s intentions are noble and that the only problems occur in trying to translate them into practice.

Volunteers offered varying degrees of criticism of FLF, depending on the amount of time they spent on the farm, contact with workers / locals and their overall stance towards development. Some volunteers like Judith had no criticisms of the farm:

Interviewer: Were there certain activities that volunteers did or the farm did that were not as helpful to the community?  
Judith: I’m not-- I don’t see how that would be possible.  
I: Sure.  
J: We don’t go out to you know hurt the community, always try to go out and help it so I’m not sure how we could hurt it.

Judith is at one end of the spectrum, and cannot imagine negative consequences of farm operations, because they are not intended. However, the majority of volunteers felt that the farm
was not interfering with (or “improving”) local people’s lives enough. They recommended more extensive development projects in the community of la Flor, and a general expansion of farm operations beyond the physical boundaries of the farm property:

I’m not sure if it’s possible, but I guess they could try and expand, but I guess it have to depend on the number of volunteers they get, just try and extend it to other farms. And I’ve heard that other organic farms do exist in Costa Rica, try and extend their project a little bit further. Make sure people get the message. (Vandana)

Here, the problem is seen as not extending farm goals (and actions) “far enough”. The farm needs to more effectively develop locals. Hélène echoes this sentiment:

I’m not sure how long they’ve been up for, but I know they’ve had some success stories, for example that man that we met who tried organic flower gardens, and I guess he said he was someone who came to the farm, learned how to have an organic farm, how to grow vegetables or plants without chemicals and then went on and set up his own farm. And then – I know that for sure they’ve some sort of success, I’m not sure how long they’ve been around for, so, if they’ve been around for a while and that’s their only success story, then I guess maybe not so successful.

Success is defined by Hélène as the number of people the farm has converted to organic and alternative agriculture. If this were the measure of success though, she would not be able to include the aforementioned farmer, as he had begun organic farming before the farm started. The farm’s owners do not require any ideological commitment from their volunteers. Nor do Compañeros, other agencies, or the volunteers themselves. Volunteers essentially sign up, work where they are told and then return to Canada. It is not surprising that they do not have access to means of evaluating the farm based on their brief and limited experience of it.

Simone has a prescription for making FLF look more like a development project:

I think that, to make the farm more of a development project, it would have to incorporate more people from the community. Like, for example if international volunteers came in and they were trained on, I don’t know, how to teach people to make organic manure and organic pesticides, whatnot, and then people from the community came in and then volunteers then would show these people how to use
it on their own farms, and to show them the differences between monoculture and sharecropping and then they took that knowledge back to their own farm, then that would make it more of a development project, rather than doing the opposite. You know, the organic farm being set up and people working with the hired workers, but that not being indicative of what’s going on in the community at large. You know what I mean? I think that that’s the difference between an environmental project and a development project.

A couple of the volunteers who had spent the most time at the farm offered more comprehensive critiques. At the time of volunteers’ visits, a number of long-term local workers were fired, including two workers that the volunteers had become close to, with some surrounding controversy amongst volunteers and workers about whether or not their firing was justified. Further, it became evident to volunteers who had spent a longer time at the farm that it was not self-sustaining. Volunteers who did develop some critical analysis of the farm came to their critique through understanding that the farm was not achieving its goals. Management must rely on purchased food from other Costa Rican farmers, and the farm is unable to produce enough of any product for regular sale (although some attempts are made to do so with goat-dairy products). Further, some volunteers at the farm for longer periods began to become aware of the farm’s primary dependence on volunteer funds for its maintenance. Mary reports how the farm could actually serve as a deterrent to other farms trying organic agriculture:

Well, I would have to say, just having the institution as an example is probably a really important aspect of it, but at the same time, if they’re not getting it to produce the same amount of efficiency as other farms in the area, then it’s not the best example to go by... Well, it’s obviously not the best thing in the world to hire farmers from the community and then when you can’t afford to keep them anymore, to let them go, because it’s not stable work for them, so, if they have other options, why shouldn’t they do those, I guess. Also, it’s hard to know whose side to take. However it seemed that [the farm owners] sometimes upset people from the community because according to those people, they were maybe not as fair as they thought that they should be, running an institution like this, that they were more, I guess, CEO like and felt that they had all control over everything and that they did not listen to everyone else when they were making decisions, but I’m not exactly sure of the entire situation, so I probably shouldn’t comment too much on that. But in demonstrating that you’re supposedly doing a good thing and
that you can make good results out of it, the use of volunteer money to sustain the farm is kind of detrimental to setting a good example and saying that this could be done, you wouldn’t really need the volunteers. And if it could be done, you wouldn’t need to, I guess—it just seems that in trying to set a good example, they may be doing less for the cause than they’re trying to do. Just because if someone had heard about not using chemicals, they might say “Oh, well that’s a better thing and I should try to use less or I should try to switch” but in seeing that it doesn’t work, it might turn them off the idea completely.

The discourses of conservation and the urgent need for a transition to organic methods were so dominant at the farm that locals’ insistence upon continued use of agrochemicals was sometimes mind-boggling for the volunteers. However, as part of Mary’s continuing epiphany she seemed to come to understand that locals do not think the same way as those involved with the farm and that demanding they do so may be a problem:

But I think, probably the chayote farmers in the area, although they might not have realized it—were probably not doing so well and having a cash crop and using harmful pesticides on their projects and then being proud of it. Because, I remember the dad at the home we were at, was showing us his gorgeous chayotes and he was so proud that they were going to Italy and Canada and all over the world to be sold. And that kind of hit me—I was just like, “Oh, they’re proud of this. I forgot” you know? This is what I was talking about with construction before. Like, this is something that he does, this is his product. This is what he gets to do in life. And so you forget for a second in all this talk of how cash crops, monocultures, inorganic farming, is done and you realize, oh yeah, this is what people do for a living. So easy, just slap on the wrist and say, “don’t do that!” They are proud of it, you know, so maybe that was also kind of detrimental—not detrimental, but a struggle for them, maybe to realize that.

Thus, Mary learned that volunteers’ definition of “problems” could be locals’ pride and livelihood. This serves to complicate her discourse of “helping” since locals do not identify the same problem or need for help that the farm does. Joel, a long term Costa Rican volunteer / worker, agrees with Mary, that the farm initiatives do not necessarily mesh with the needs and desires of the community:

There are problems with organization on the farm here. The farm exists in a community but relies on volunteers [to continue its operations]. There is no real connection with the community. For example, [local] people do not have the
ability to come here and do not have the desire to use an organization like this which has resources to help the community. The mentality of the community is not compatible with here.

The potential for the farm to be more than just an environmental project is re-stated by Simone, in her assertion that the farm could be a site for promoting a more comprehensive type of justice, not just an environmental mandate, if workers and locals were treated better and power was more evenly distributed:

I know that while we were there, there were all the stories about [the farm owners] firing people or threatening to let people to go and all of those politics... and I think that that is detrimental to the community. I mean, it’s an environmental project, but it could also be a social justice project. And, I don’t think that, you know, power plays – or at least that’s what they appeared to be to me – are constructive to the project in any way or bettering the community.

(Simone)

Gricel (an owner) instead had a rather dismissive reason for the farm’s lack of success in attaining its goals. She said:

Costa Ricans are very passive. They do not have much education. They don’t like to inquire – have curiosity, they don’t like to know. They’re content with their lives and they don’t have curiosity. They don’t come [here to the farm] much. Only the relatives of the people that work here come here.

However, volunteers offer a different account of the farm’s struggles, believing it is a combination of financial strain and justified local resistance to the expenses and questionable feasibility of changing their agricultural practices. For example, Mary says:

[obstacles] to the [farm’s] success? Probably that they’re not as successful in producing enough to show that organic agriculture is a beneficial method of feeding your family. ..(repeats question). Probably that it’s difficult to show that organic agriculture can be just as successful, because if you can’t make it work, then it won’t be. That was actually their biggest struggle. Maybe I guess, having to be dependent on International volunteers is also quite, maybe even nerve-racking for them or quite difficult for them because I know at one point when we were there they were basically waiting on our payments to pay their own bills directly, like within a five minute span of it, so it we could actually see how dependent they were on our funds for funding, so – and seeing that maybe you
could see that they were struggling more than we thought, but at the same time, they also opened a café while we were there, so – maybe that had a little more to do with why they were uh—
Interviewer: Strapped for cash.
M: Yeah. So – I don’t know. They didn’t seem to be struggling too hard but the fact that they had to let go of some workers while we were there did kind of show that they probably were not in the best situation at that time, and that maybe they needed to figure out a way that they could benefit more from their own produce or their own practices as opposed to depending so much on us.

Her critique is of the farm’s dependence on volunteer money and lack of success with its own agricultural yield. Volunteers do not question their right to be at the farm, overall, but do wish the farm was not reliant on them. Perhaps this disrupts the illusion of visiting a “working development project” when volunteers see that it is dependent solely on their money. Julia echoes this sentiment:

I think that, my guess is that financial concerns are a big [struggle] and being able to have some profit themselves and pay their workers and maintain the upkeep of the farm so that they can have groups into volunteer and to stay there. I think – I don’t know—but I think maybe they experience some resistance from farmers in the area- moving them to the organic farming if that’s not what they’ve done in the past. Then my guess is that it’s more work for them to go to the organic farming than to use some of the chemicals. And they may not be producing the same amount of produce. So I think they may find some resistance there in trying to encourage and convince the surrounding farms that it’s a beneficial thing to do.

Volunteers’ critiques offer advice to the farm so that it can succeed at its goals, but they do not challenge its founding assumptions.

**Transition in Farm Operations: From Volunteering/ Conservation to Agro-ecotourism**

What has the focus on volunteers meant practically for the operations of the farm?

Largely, it seems that the alternative development focus has been diminished, while the farm’s focus has shifted to satisfying volunteers’ desires. In spite of the farm owners being very critical of tourism in Costa Rica, and even of eco-tourism (“We criticize the ecotourism- how it developed---maybe in the beginning it was different, but now it is a bit businessy” [Ella]), the
owners admit that their project is moving more in the direction of eco-tourism, but insist that their agro-ecotourism is done for the right reasons: "it’s not so [we] earn a lot of money, it’s to put the money in the development of the community" (Ella). Ella explained to me that the farm was not designed as a tourist destination (at the point of our discussion), but was about to turn in that direction. She understood that some volunteers seemed to use the farm as a tourist site, for cheap room and board and as a means to see the world, but indicated that this was frustrating to the management, who did felt the farm should not be used for merely touristic purposes. Ella’s concept of the farm as it existed while I did my fieldwork, was so separate from tourism that when I asked her if her opinions of tourism had changed since starting the farm, she said she would have to wait until they started “doing” tourism projects, to let me know. She described for me the “official” new tourist-focused projects to come,

We have developed some programs here for tourist programs. One was to work more with people in the middle age. Like, not such young people. People from 40 and 60 years of age, maybe. To have more of this maybe. And the other is to have more educational tourism. You know, like, we haven’t done it yet, but we have one week where the farm will be the base, and we will do a lot of educational tours, like going to an organic coffee plantation, and to the sugar cane factory and also to some tourist places like Guayabo national park. So a combination of environmental tourism, but also about a history of Costa Rica, of the social problems and the current environmental situation. We’ve set up two tours, but haven’t started yet...an eight day and a fifteen day tour.

Gricel, the other owner, also spoke to me about shifting the farm’s focus more onto their Spanish language school, hoping to get more professional teachers and certification – a move that would completely remove the volunteering component from foreigners’ stays. Although this option already exists, most visitors who come to the farm to learn Spanish, choose to volunteer at least half-days and then take their Spanish classes in the afternoons. On my three trips to the farm, I observed volunteers’ acting like tourists and the farm itself creating an environment that seemed more focused on pleasing the visiting foreigners, than on a goal of “development,” in spite of the
owners’ assertions that an intentional organizational shift towards tourism had not yet come. For example, the farm’s management designed a specific project for one of the Compañeros groups of participants. It consisted of constructing about 70 wooden signs to mark particular flora and indicate the path through the forest. The management explained that such a project is nice for a visiting group in that they get to see a project they worked on completed in their time there. On my first trip to the farm, in the summer of 2002, when I myself was a volunteer, we did not have such treatment, working with animal maintenance, agriculture (picking weeds) and similar labors with no “rewarding endpoint”. This sign project with my first group of participants in May 2003 seemed like a transition towards tourism and away from the work of organic farming.

Constructing the volunteer experience to have a visible completion point suggests that the volunteers are being catered to more than the project itself. The specific sign making activity evokes scholarly work on the placement of signs to control tourists’ gaze and use of space (Urry, 1990; Dann, 2003). Ironically, in this case the tourists placed the gaze-directing signs themselves. I doubt the farm owners were trying to regulate visitors’ access to the forest from volunteers, but certainly the demarcation legitimated certain views (and marked them as touristic). Rather, the task may reflect the farm’s new emphasis on tourism and education, over simple regeneration and agriculture as ends in themselves.

The FLF development project becomes one of the new alternative tourism sites for “ethical” travelers. The tourist motivation to visit such sites resembles those of catastrophe tourism (or “disaster tourism”; Mowforth and Munt, 2003), in which tours are sold to compassionate Northerners who drive through or briefly offer some labor at the site of shanty towns, as in Honduras after Hurricane Mitch. Short term trips like the Compañeros ones to Costa Rica “stop the bus” for two weeks to contribute some, perhaps more substantial amount of labor
(and more centrally, money), and then soon leave. Volunteering may sometimes be used as a tool to legitimate travel to LDCs and the consumption of stereotyped otherness, represented as “simplicity,” poverty, or even as crisis, each in contrast to volunteers’ “home” nations. As Urry says, “By considering the typical objects of the tourist gaze one can use these to make sense of elements of the wider society with which they are contrasted” (1990, p.2). The tourist gaze, here at the site of a development project, always informs travelers as much about their homes as it does about the foreign destinations to which they travel.

International volunteering seems to be understood as categorically different from development work in a number of ways, reflected in the responses of FLF volunteers who insist that they are not doing any international development. First, there is no necessary ideological commitment, or even a necessary understanding of farm ideology for volunteers. While most volunteers have some general concept of the type of project the farm aims to be, many participate without investigating the farm’s history, goals and range of activities. Certainly, the farm does not require volunteers to understand these things in depth, although orientations are often given to large groups (but not single volunteers). This development project is, for volunteers, simply an alternative tourist destination, and as a result, they seem to appreciate it and act much as they would at another beautiful and interesting traditional tourist site. They take pictures, enjoy hikes and view local and farm “sites.” Second, the actual amount of time spent at the farm is significantly less than international development workers typically spend, which allows persons without ideological commitments to “be a part of” development without reflecting much upon the processes of development and their role there. While developers come in with “expertise” and a plan to change local communities, volunteers come in with no
particular skills and no particular plan, but are willing to hop on board the current plan (Fischer, 1998).

As chronicled in Chapter Four, the volunteers at FLF seem to go make a series of concessions about the usefulness of their “work” as volunteers. A similar and parallel process of conceding can be seen in the farm’s operations, as the goals of development recede while the goals of agritourism come to be the farm’s focus. For example, the owners told me about a horseback riding (15 day) trip they took this year across the mountains in a large group. Ella asked us to watch out for any Canadian friends who might be interested in doing horseback riding adventures, as the farm may start a new program along these lines. It would not have a directly ecological / sustainable development focus, but more of an “outdoor adventure” one. Gricel mentioned that the trail trip would be meant to commemorate the trips of the Spanish colonizers across the country, a strange tip of the hat to colonization.

The farm is constantly reinventing itself: one week the farm owners decide they are not taking individual volunteers, only large groups, and proceed to e-mail oncoming single travelers to let them know that the farm’s policy has changed. Working with groups seems to be a sure step towards traditional tourism; easier to manage and control the effect that coming and going has on farm operations (with reliable, guaranteed profit). A month later, the farm is accepting single volunteers again and focusing even more on new and varied tourism projects (starting a horseback-riding program, day tours and farm stays without work: pure tourism). The farm tries to be an intentional community with a number of long term volunteers and workers living on the farm, but conflicts over lifestyle and decision-making make this volatile. Workers are hired and fired based on the number of volunteers, and volunteers themselves are welcomed for their money and largely entertained by the farm, in a space designed alternately to give them grunt-
work tasks that are unrewarding and to provide “fun” projects catering to volunteers’ desire to enjoy the farm. Volunteers’ discourses of personal legitimation seem to affect the practices and focus of the farm which in turn creates itself as a more touristic site affecting volunteers’ understandings of themselves more as tourists. In its current form, the practice of international volunteerism at FLF is best described as a brief touristic trip to gaze upon a development project.
CHAPTER SIX
Conclusion

International Volunteerism at Finca la Flor

I have argued throughout the thesis that the international volunteering project of Finca la Flor is constituted discursively at the intersection of three main discursive formations: international development, volunteering and tourism. These discourses overlap, shift and occasionally contradict one another as they assume and recede from prominence in volunteers’ understandings of their experiences and in how they are played out by farm management. In this research I have separated the constitutive discourses so that the “story” of international volunteerism at FLF can be told from the perspective of each, and to show how the stated centrality of international development and voluntourism does not necessarily result in their accompanying practice at FLF. Volunteers sometimes contest these dominant discourses, sometimes accept them and sometimes deny that they are relevant. Often, they seem to do all these things in a complex negotiation of the de-differentiated experience of international volunteering.

As a concept international voluntourism is “slippery” and malleable, which allows its defenders to evade the criticisms to which it is susceptible. If the “altruism” of the project is questioned, it can easily be shape-shifted into a program of building up volunteer selves. If the desire to “develop” the South is questioned, then international volunteerism is about mutual learning and cross-cultural exchange. If this exchange is critiqued as unbalanced, or mainly benefiting the foreign volunteer, then international volunteerism is really just the most ethical of all the tourisms. If international volunteers are poor volunteers and development workers, they are described as at least being the best of all possible tourists.
Discourses of international development shape the official projects of the farm, as its owners attempt to change and “improve” the lives of local Costa Rican people through environmental and agricultural initiatives designed and implemented mostly by privileged Northerners. To benefit from an association with the farm, local people must behave in ways acceptable to the farm owners, and make attempts to change their lifestyles in a direction that the farm management finds desirable. Volunteers are familiar with the development-oriented mandate of the farm before their arrival, but manage to understand their activities as distinct from international development during and after their time at the farm. At the farm, the projects which they participate in seem more like tourism at an interesting environmental project, and the tasks seem far removed from how volunteers understand international development. Accordingly, the discourse of international development functions as a “ghost discourse” which volunteers do not acknowledge, and therefore do not engage with overtly in their constructed understanding of international volunteerism.

Discourses of volunteerism bring with them the accompanying notions of self-improvement for the volunteer, of paternalistic and altruistic help to the “needy,” and the absence of a wide-spread criticism of global injustice and oppression. Two underlying premises to volunteer work are that (1) it is useful to the recipient of volunteer labor and (2) that this labor is enjoyable to the volunteer, even if only in the largely abstract sense of knowing that volunteer work is a “good thing” to do. Finca la Flor volunteers confront both of these assumptions in the field and negotiate their “truth” in evaluating their experience. Similarly, the farm management seems eager to create a volunteering experience that is pleasurable and to argue that volunteer labor is useful.
Despite the evidence that each of these discourses plays a prominent role in constructing the expectations and experiences of volunteers, and the practices of the farm, I am led to conclude that at FLF, the discourses of international development and volunteering have been subordinated to an emerging dominant discourse of tourism. Finca la Flor has transformed more and more into a tourist project where "ethical" tourists can observe and sample development and environmentalism, and understand their experiences as more "authentic" than in traditional tourist vacations. Similarly, volunteers at FLF act like tourists and often represent themselves as "ethical" or alternative tourists, managing to avoid subjecting themselves to their own criticisms of traditional tourists, because they feel that their strategic choice of volunteer travel is truly more sustainable, and "gives back" to the host country. Volunteers are conceptualized as the ideal tourists, and in the end, their payment for pleasure can be rationalized as not only harmless to local people and places, but even helpful to them, in spite of volunteers' ambivalence about this when evaluating their trip explicitly as volunteer or development work.

While international development and tourism have long been understood and evaluated as discourses, one particular contribution of this thesis is in demonstrating the productiveness of examining volunteerism as a discourse. As such, the social phenomenon of volunteering communicates a framework for understanding the social world and ordering experiences. International volunteerism does not exist as merely a discursive concept, but is also a social phenomenon with material practices and outcomes for all actors involved. This research has addressed some of the "real world" implications of the discourses surrounding international volunteerism as they play out at Finca la Flor.
Limitations and Further Research Opportunities

This study is an examination of one particular international volunteering project, valuable for the detailed picture it gives of a specific project during a time of transition. Clearly, my analysis applies primarily to FLF and I am hesitant to offer generalizations beyond the scope of this particular project, or even to generalize my conclusions at FLF beyond the span of my involvement with it. Nevertheless, I think my findings and analysis have relevance beyond the specific context of FLF, and contribute to a more general understanding of international volunteering as a growing global phenomenon. If I were to continue to develop and improve my investigation of this growing global phenomenon, either at FLF or at some other site, I would strive for greater triangulation of research methods and sources of data.

The current study does employ triangulation in a number of ways: primarily in terms of two groups of Canadian volunteers; three separate visits over the period of one year—in total, three months of time; and several data collection methods, including participant observation, in-depth interviews and textual analysis. However, as I explain in the remainder of this section, the research would benefit from even further triangulation, in terms of sources of data (i.e. focusing on different voices relevant to FLF, or on completely different projects), temporal duration (i.e. extending this research longitudinally), and types of data (e.g. selecting new methods of data collection, such as having participants keep “journals” of their experiences).

My research has focused on the experiences of Canadian volunteers at the FLF volunteering site. I have not attempted to give equal weight to the voices of every group involved with the farm. Instead, I focus on the area of experience which I have greatest access to, and understanding of, as a former international volunteer and as a mediator of international volunteering for other Canadians. I did interview five local people, but the resulting
audiocassettes were difficult to hear due to background noises of constructions, vehicles and ongoing conversations. In addition, locals were reluctant to talk to me “in private,” and I was consistently told that it would be better to conduct the interview with the whole family around, or while others continued to work around them. As a result, my research does not include formal analysis of my interviews with locals (farm worker and non-farm worker), but I must stress that they are an integral part of the rich context I use to interpret the practices of the farm and those involved with it. While speaking with local people in the community was important for establishing an understanding of the community context of this program, it is crucial for future research on international volunteerism to more fully incorporate local peoples’ experiences and understandings, not least as part of an effort to disrupt discourses which valorize volunteers’ experiences above those of their supposed beneficiaries. During my three separate trips to la Flor I interacted in varying degrees of intensity with an array of families in la Flor. From my conversations with these people, I suspect that research focusing on locals would only strengthen my argument that FLF functions largely as a tourist destination, and operates less as a local-issues focused development or volunteer organization than the goals of the project would suggest, but for now this remains a suspicion.

While I do not attempt to generalize my claims about the nature of Finca la Flor to other volunteering projects, this study does serve as a useful counter-example to some general claims about international volunteerism made by authors such as Wearing (2001; 2002) who describe it as a largely unproblematic and anti-oppressive practice. Again, I argue that international volunteering, at least at the site of Finca la Flor, does not disrupt structures of systemic oppression, but instead focuses on Northerners ideas and “needs” while subordinating

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7 It is worth noting that Wearing’s participants worked on a similar project: a conservation project in Costa Rica largely run by foreign volunteers and with contact with local people who were hired to assist.
those of Southerners. International volunteering at FLF limits the discussion of structural causes of global inequity and instead aims to address Southern “problems” by working within the ideals of oppressive systems; re-creating the problematic elements of development and tourism through further privileging Northerners experiences and further institutionalizing unequal power relations between North and South. Additional research should focus on other projects outside of FLF and investigate the extent to which the patterns I discuss are relevant to other international volunteering projects. It may be of particular interest to investigate how volunteers understand themselves at volunteering projects which are more integrated with the host community, in order to see how volunteers negotiate their position when it more closely resembles international development and volunteer work as they may imagine it prototypically.

As I have noted, the farm is a dynamic and constantly changing place, due to the stream of new faces that populate and then soon leave it, and also due to the owners’ shifting ideas about what the farm should “be” in terms of principle focus, and where the emphasis of labor and funding should lie. A more longitudinal study of FLF would address the fluctuations which seem a part of the fibre of this operation over time, and perhaps examine periods of greater stability. While the two-year span of my involvement with the farm is a fairly brief look at institutional trends over time, I think that I came into contact with FLF at a particularly significant time in the history of the farm. The rapidly shifting goals, the high rate of staff turnover and the heated debates over farm rules and goals during my period of study all provided me with insights into the variable and complicated ways discourses of development, tourism and volunteerism were constituted, practiced and harnessed to serve particular interests over a short period of time.
While short-term volunteering-tourism trips like the ones to FLF may seem to lie on the most superficial/touristic end of the International Volunteering spectrum, I think they are especially important to study, as they are the most accessible to participants in terms of time and money, and therefore attract the most participants. Often such trips serve as a spring-board to later volunteering trips of longer duration, as several of my participants hoped to do, and as other volunteers I encountered at FLF went on to do. This may suggest that a particular “type” of person participates in the most short-term voluntourism: new travelers with some trepidation, and not yet firmly established ideas of what they feel their role is as an “international volunteer.” Repeat voluntourists, or voluntourists on longer volunteering trips may have different and more deeply thought out ways of describing and understanding their volunteer travel experiences. While I am not confident about extending the current analysis of these one to six week stays at FLF to international volunteering trips of longer durations, there is some established research to indicate that similar patterns occur in long term international volunteers or workers who are more firmly entrenched in the host site (Cook, 2003).

It may also be useful to expand the current analysis of FLF by drawing on a larger range of literature. As I became more and more involved in the farm, additional areas of relevant academic literature seemed to emerge as potentially useful to examining international volunteering. For example, I am particularly interested in the gendered nature of international volunteering in general and at FLF in particular. The farm is owned by two women, there are far more women volunteers at the farm than male ones, and there is a highly gendered division of labor for local workers. Looking at how notions of gender affect volunteers’ conceptions of their volunteering activity may indicate how constructions of femininity (e.g. in the “ethic of care” and notions of “natural” roles as nurturers) may incline women to view their work less as
development and more as a global extension of family (Rosenberg, 2003). Are men, with socially embedded notions of masculinity, more likely to understand their volunteering work abroad as international development? Other bodies of literature which may be particularly useful to draw upon include ethnographies of development projects and of volunteer organizations (Watts, 2001).

**A Radical Critique of International Volunteerism**

At first glance, international volunteerism appears difficult to critique. It is a practice that is frequently heralded by mainstream politicians and human-rights advocates alike. It seems innocuous and “obviously” a good idea. I suggest that it is just this characteristic of taken-for-grantedness that should raise an eyebrow in the careful observer of social phenomena. Longstanding oppressive relationships of power may be contested by such programs, but I suggest that most often they are not. In fact, volunteering abroad often seems to be a convenient way for well-meaning Northerners to travel, and gain life and job experience, without the guilt of being an unabashed tourist. Volunteering builds cultural capital and notions of enterprising, independent and youthful Northerners, as it did when the Peace Corps began as the model for many of these programs in the 60s (Fischer, 1998). Moreover, it recreates the South as helpless and in need, without offering a radical critique of global inequities.

What I attempt to offer here is just such a radical critique of international volunteerism as a social practice. I do not aim to reform it, and thus I will not offer suggestions for its improvement, although I realize that superficial improvements may emerge as “obvious” in this research. At the core of international volunteering are assumptions about what groups of people have problems (the South) and what groups of people have the solutions (the North). Instead, I assert that we need to look at what questions are *not* asked when we support these relatively
conservative volunteer abroad programs. We do not question the distribution of wealth and resources. We do not question the racist assumptions that one country or group of countries are better and “right” because they have accumulated the most wealth and institutions to defend that wealth. And we do not question whether or not wealthy Northerners’ brief vacations can really have benefits to the people and places they visit that could outweigh the environmental costs of their travel and stay, the money that feeds larger exploiting corporations (e.g. airlines and travel organizations) and the interference they happily offer local people when volunteers themselves often have no relevant experience to offer as “help”. International volunteerism is a misleading and problematic practice. It claims to be harmless, and even demands praise for being “helpful,” but often it seems to turn into just another form of tourism with all of the corresponding problems its participants may feel if, or when, they travel as more conventional tourists --- but without the guilt.
## Appendix A: Research Design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Data</th>
<th>Location of Collection</th>
<th>Time of Collection</th>
<th>Use of Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compañeros volunteers</td>
<td>May 2003 group: three of four volunteers interviewed. August 2003 group: four of five volunteers interviewed. There was one male. Ages 20-38, all university students.</td>
<td>Over the phone, in Canada.</td>
<td>September - December 2003.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>local FLF workers</td>
<td>Three workers in various positions on the farms interviewed. There were two women interviewed. Ages 20-45</td>
<td>In la Flor, Costa Rica.</td>
<td>May 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>local (non-FLF workers)</td>
<td>One local man, approx. age 50.</td>
<td>In la Flor, Costa Rica.</td>
<td>May 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FLF owners</td>
<td>Two women, one in late 30s, the other in late 50s.</td>
<td>In la Flor, Costa Rica.</td>
<td>May 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Observation</td>
<td>Field notes and personal journals kept during fieldwork during trips.</td>
<td>In la Flor, Costa Rica.</td>
<td>May - June 2003, August 2003.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textual Analysis</td>
<td>Finca la Flor Website, maps, resource and promotional materials (brochures)</td>
<td>In la Flor, Costa Rica.</td>
<td>May - June 2003, August 2003.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Steps to Data Collection

- The farm owners were contacted before my first fieldwork visit to Costa Rica. They provided written permission for me to conduct this study of their organization, and with some of their employees. They also agreed to be interviewed during my stay in May 2003. Both followed through with this agreement.

- Prospective participants from the pool of FLF / Compañeros volunteers group were approached at the farm in May and August 2003 while I was there facilitating their trip. They were presented with a letter of information and an informal invitation to participate.

- Local people (FLF workers and non-FLF workers) were given two days to scrutinize a letter of information and consider an invitation to be interviewed. They were then approached again with a formal invitation to participate. If they agreed verbally to participate an interview time and place was arranged. Before the interview began, they were presented with and led through the informed consent letter, and asked to sign it before the interview commenced.

- Volunteers were not formally invited to participate until after they returned home from Costa Rica (several weeks later). At that time they were contacted by email or telephone to invite them formally to participate. If they agreed, I sent them an informed consent letter by mail, which they signed and returned to me before I interviewed them by telephone. I did not formally invite them to participate while we were in Costa Rica, due to my position as the volunteer group facilitator, and my wish to avoid any potential that they may have felt coerced into participating if I asked them while in that formal relationship. After they returned home my leadership role was terminated, and potential participants could feel free to consent or not at their discretion.

- All interviews were tape-recorded. Volunteer interviews were transcribed in full, while farm owners’, workers’ and local people’s interviews were partially transcribed.
## Appendix C: Description of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Class</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer 1</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White / Canadian</td>
<td>BA, Bed. (in progress)</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>upper-middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White / Canadian</td>
<td>BA (in progress)</td>
<td>English, some Spanish</td>
<td>upper-middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V3</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White / Canadian</td>
<td>BA (in progress)</td>
<td>English, French</td>
<td>upper-middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White / Canadian</td>
<td>BA (in progress)</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>upper-middle</td>
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<tr>
<td>V5</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>White / Canadian</td>
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<td>English, French</td>
<td>upper-middle</td>
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<tr>
<td>V6</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Salvadoran/Canadian</td>
<td>BA (in progress)</td>
<td>English, Spanish</td>
<td>upper-middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V7</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Salvadoran/Canadian</td>
<td>BA (in progress)</td>
<td>English, Spanish</td>
<td>upper-middle</td>
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<tr>
<td>Owner 1</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White / German</td>
<td>BA, BSW</td>
<td>English, Spanish, German</td>
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<tr>
<td>O2</td>
<td>35</td>
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<td>Spanish, English</td>
<td>upper-middle</td>
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<tr>
<td>Local 1</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>Costa Rican</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Rural / Working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L2</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Costa Rican</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Rural / Working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L3</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Costa Rican</td>
<td>BA (in progress)</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Rural / Working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L4</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Costa Rican</td>
<td>Some university</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Rural / Working</td>
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<tr>
<td>L5</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>M</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
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