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Peace Corps culture and the language of violence: A Feminist discursive analysis

Elizabeth Z. Johnk

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Peace Corps Culture and the Language of Violence: A Feminist Discursive Analysis

by

Elizabeth Z. Johnk

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Eastern Michigan University

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Thesis Committee:

Dr. Margaret Crouch, Ph.D., Chair

Dr. Ashley Glassburn Falzetti, Ph.D.

Dr. Elisabeth Däumer, Ph.D.

Ypsilanti, Michigan

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: In Place and Time: A Review of the Literature.....	13
Chapter 3: Setting the Historico-Cultural Stage, 2010.....	23
Chapter 4: Peace Corps Discourse.....	37
Chapter 5: A Liberal Feminist Analysis.....	48
Chapter 6: A Native Feminist Analysis.....	56
Chapter 7: A Comparative Analysis of Two Feminist Lenses.....	64
Chapter 8: Conclusion.....	67
Bibliography.....	72

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ABSTRACT

Peace Corps is an international volunteer service organization and an agency of the United States Federal Government. Like all American governmental institutions, Peace Corps has an institutional culture with a heteropatriarchal, settler colonial legacy. In recent years, this has manifested in Peace Corps' mishandling of cases of sexual violence against Peace Corps Volunteers. The agency has undertaken many reforms in response to public pressure, including changes at the level of language in policy and protocol.

This project has two objectives, the first of which is an analysis of Peace Corps discourse on violence, victimhood, and responsibility. This discursive analysis is carried out within two distinct frameworks: a Liberal feminist framework and a Native feminist framework. My second objective is a comparative analysis of these two frameworks, which includes an explanation of why the Native feminist lens provides the more critical reading of the two.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“The Peace Corps has met with a number of returned Volunteers who have shared personal experiences of rape and sexual assault...Their insights are invaluable and have helped shape our commitment to make the survivor’s perspective a critical part of our reforms. I am sorry for what they suffered, and I am committed to ensuring that their experiences are not repeated.”

Aaron Williams, former Peace Corps Director (2009-2012) (Williams 2011, sec. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Peace Corps, and Global Narcotics Affairs).

"I pushed [Peace Corps] to really do what they have the capability of doing. And that's what's so frustrating because they have the ability to do this and it is a choice not to."

Kellie Greene, former director of the Peace Corps Office of Victim Advocates, speaking of Peace Corps' unfulfilled capability to support Volunteer survivors of sexual violence (CBS News 2015).

There is increasing acceptance among Americans that sexual violence has always been and continues to be a part of the reality of life as a Peace Corps Volunteer (Anderson 2010).¹² Prior to 2010, this reality was hidden by Peace Corps’ secretive institutional culture and a romanticized public perception of the agency. This paper is motivated by a desire to better understand how that institutional culture conceives of violence; especially sexual violence; safety; the individual; and personal responsibility. Feminist scholars should pay attention to Peace Corps as a case study of sexual and

¹ Peace Corps Volunteers, themselves, have said that rape is “the consequence of being a woman living” in the world today, and that PCV experiences of rape are statistically on par with, for instance, college campuses (Hakala 2015).

² In tandem with agency publications, I will often abbreviate ‘Peace Corps Volunteer’ within this paper as ‘PCV’ or ‘Volunteer.’ I maintain the capitalization of ‘Volunteer’ because it is indicative of the unique context of Peace Corps service.

institutional violence, both for how it has largely operated with impunity until recently, and for how it is presently responding to calls for reform.

This paper has two main objectives. The first is to undertake discursive analysis of key Peace Corps texts to show how the agency's language, and the institutional cultural values embodied in that language, have or have not changed since Peace Corps first promised to address the issue of sexual violence in 2011 (Williams 2011). This analysis will be undertaken through two feminist lenses: Liberal feminism and Native feminism. My second goal is to compare these two analyses to determine which provides a better theoretical perspective.

These objectives entail two distinct but interconnected sets of questions, which I will discuss in successive chapters. My feminist discursive analyses will be guided by the following questions: 1) How does Peace Corps define and discuss violence and victimhood? 2) How does it discuss and represent concepts of safety, responsibility, and the individual? 3) Looking at the texts collectively, how have these responses changed over the last five years, if at all? The first set of questions deals with the Peace Corps texts, and how they are viewed through each lens. The goal of these questions is to discover what can be learned about Peace Corps ideology from these texts, as understood through the lens of Liberal feminism (Chapter Three) and the lens of Native feminism (Chapter Four).

Chapter Five will offer a comparative analysis of Liberal and Native feminist

perspectives, which uses the analysis provided by the first set as a way of ‘testing’ different methodological approaches. I will argue that a Native feminist framework offers the better critical and analytic tool of the two frameworks, by showing how this framework requires thorough contextualization of a subject of research against its broader historic-cultural background. Such contextualization is necessary to show how violence is bound up in historically and culturally specific circumstances, as well as the temporal continuity of different violences across time. Even where violence changes forms, the root causes of present-day forms is rendered legible by analyzing the historical context from which such forms arise. In the case of Peace Corps, this means examining the germination of the agency, its form, and its mission within a settler colonial government during the Cold War—a time of capitalist and imperialist expansion by the United States.

Because a Liberal feminist reading does not prioritize a historico-cultural contextualization, Peace Corps’ position as an agency of the U.S. heteropatriarchal settler state remains critically unexamined when viewed through its lens.³ Further, Liberal feminism shares many unexamined colonial values with Peace Corps, which is another weakness of this framework. I argue that the mistreatment of Peace Corps

³ As a feminist researcher, I am informed by the works of Native, Indigenous, and anti-colonial feminist scholars whose works explicate the continuation of racist, misogynist violence from the past into the present. As shall be discussed further below, settler colonialism is not a singular event, but an ongoing project, seeking the annihilation of Indigenous peoples and their culture (see Wolfe 2006). I have undertaken this project in part to understand Peace Corps’ role in the perpetuation of settler colonial heteropatriarchy, and to demonstrate the need for feminist scholars to take seriously a commitment to decoloniality in our work.

Volunteer (PCV) victims of sexual violence persists because of deeply-rooted colonial heteropatriarchal attitudes about violence, safety, individualism, and gender, which the present policy changes do not address. In fact, through Native feminist discursive analysis, I show that these policies and other Peace Corps texts continue to reflect these colonial heteropatriarchal values, despite some changes in language.

Before delving further, I would like to clarify some terminology that recurs throughout this paper. By *heteropatriarchy*, I am referring to the pervasive cultural construct that critical race, queer, and legal studies scholar Francisco Valdes calls a “culmination” of “androsexism and heterosexism in Euro-American culture” (2013, 162). By *settler colonialism*, I mean the invasive “structure” described by anthropologist and colonial studies scholar Patrick Wolfe, a structure which functions on a “logic of elimination” of Indigenous peoples and “destroys to replace” with settler peoples, cultures, and institutions (2006, 388). Thus, settler colonial heteropatriarchy is a constellation of deeply rooted sociocultural beliefs, practices, and institutions that privilege heterosexuality, cisgender masculinity, and whiteness; oppress queerness and femininity; and seek to eliminate indigeneity.

The language of sexual violence is variable and discussions about it are rife with disagreement about the nature of ‘real rape.’ Legal definitions are often the most specific, but even here, there is great diversity of opinion among state laws, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Department of Justice, not to mention governments of

nations other than the U.S. For the purpose of this paper, I am using my own definition of 'rape,' which is one directly informed by anti-rape activists, SAC advocates, and the crisis counseling community of which I am a part. This community defines rape as *any unwanted sexual touch*.⁴

Project Background and Rationale

The timing and significance of this project must be placed in the context of the momentous changes that have occurred in American perceptions of and attitudes towards sexual violence since 2010. These changes have partially resulted from increasing awareness of 'epidemic' levels of sexual violence on college campuses, in prisons, in the military, and in the government-sponsored volunteer agency Peace Corps (NPR 2010; PBS 2010). Discourses produced by these institutions can provide insight into how attitudes towards sexual violence are changing.

It has been more than five years since ABC News' *20/20* investigation into Peace Corps' handling of the 2009 death of PCV Kate Puzey, as well as the callous treatment of her family (*20/20* 2011). With only two months of service in Benin left, 24-year-old Kate Puzey discovered that a fellow teacher and Peace Corps employee, Beninese citizen Constant Bio, was allegedly raping students at her school (Schechter and Ross

⁴ As such, there is no need to distinguish between 'types' of sexual violence, which tends to induce hierarchization of individual survivors' experiences. Rather, this definition puts the power of naming and defining into the hands of the survivor. Readers should understand this definition to apply my use of both the terms 'sexual assault' and 'rape.'

2011a). Puzey reported Bio to Peace Corps Benin's country director, requesting that the allegations remain anonymous, for Bio's brother was an associate director of Peace Corps Benin (Toth 2016). However, Peace Corps failed to keep Puzey's email confidential. The day after Bio was fired, Puzey was found to have been murdered at her home. After investigating Puzey's death, the Peace Corps Office of the Inspector General reported that "there was a direct link between the leaked information and a local criminal investigation" (Schecter and Ross 2011a). Peace Corps' failure to protect the confidentiality of its Volunteers ultimately resulted in Kate Puzey's murder.

This initial investigation of what ABC News calls "one of the most iconic and respected organizations in the world" paved the way for widespread news media critiques of Peace Corps' treatment of Volunteer victims of rape and other forms of violence (ibid)⁵. Enough time has elapsed that some outcomes of the backlash against this mishandling are now manifest. The time seems right to take stock of these outcomes, together with effects that may be less perceptible.

Peace Corps is but one example of institutions in American society that have been forced to undergo changes as a result of public pressures regarding sexual violence. I am choosing to focus on Peace Corps for three reasons. First, as respected agency said to embody America's highest ideals of service, Peace Corps has historically

⁵ For example, see articles from the LA Times (Mianecki 2011), the Daily Beast (Mak 2014), and Time Magazine (Frizell 2015).

been romanticized in ways that enable it to avoid close scrutiny. Delving into Peace Corps' institutional culture helps demystify its attitudes and behaviors, allowing us to recognize where and how Peace Corps falls short of addressing sexual violence. Second, Peace Corps provides concrete texts, distributed across time, which lend themselves to analysis. One avenue for understanding cultural change within institutions is the close reading of *language*, including textual discourse. This is particularly beneficial for analyzing institutions like Peace Corps, which produce large amounts of text, the purpose of which is often to convey institutional cultural values both internally and to external audiences. Finally, Peace Corps is useful as a kind of litmus test of American attitudes towards and perceptions of sexual violence.

Peace Corps as a Litmus Test

To elaborate on my first reason for focusing on Peace Corps, its usefulness as a metric of American cultural attitudes stems from the fact that it is one component of the enormous and slow-moving machine that is U.S. bureaucracy, yet it is also one of the few components with a constant influx of new members. At its inception, the Peace Corps sprang rapidly into being; within six years, the agency sent over 14,500 Volunteers to 55 countries. Yet from the time of its quick germination, and despite how independent Peace Corps may be as an agency, it is still a part of the bureaucratic machinery of the US Federal Government.

As within other government agencies, change generally happens very slowly in Peace Corps. When change does occur, it is often when Peace Corps is under serious pressure, whether internally or externally. For instance, in the mid-1960s, when Peace Corps was barely five years old, the agency faced serious criticisms from Volunteers, themselves. They argued that they were too poorly trained and not receiving adequate support to effectively carry out their assignments. In the spirit of the 60s, PCVs used strikes and other tactics of protest to get the agency's attention (Searles 1997). In response to Volunteer unhappiness and criticism of Peace Corps as an ineffectual form of aid to the Third World, then-director Joseph Blatchford began overhauling Peace Corps at a fundamental level through his New Directions campaign.

Even when the promise of dramatic change is made, effective implementation can take years or even decades. Director Blatchford began implementing New Directions almost immediately upon taking the helm. Some of the changes he sought to make were to work closely with host countries to identify their most dire needs where Volunteers could be of use, and to prepare PCV jobs that would be meaningful and impactful for both Volunteers and host countries. However, these two goals continue to go unmet in many host countries and for many PCVs.⁶

⁶ For commentary on bureaucratic calcification, poor treatment of PCVs, and inadequacies of training and site preparation from Volunteers, themselves, see Roston 2014. See also Strauss 2008.

But perhaps there is a silver lining to this frustrating bureaucratic cloud. Because of Peace Corps' rigidity and slow evolution, the agency serves as a kind of barometer for the broader cultural climate of the US. Just as Peace Corps' very conception, as well as its initial upheavals, reflected the tumultuous climate of the 1960s, so too do proposed changes to the policies of today's Peace Corps reflect recent shifts in American attitudes towards sexism, misogyny, and gendered violence. Sexual violence is less and less acceptable, and more and more discussed, debated, and protested as an issue of public concern. While initial awareness of and protest against sexual violence within Peace Corps and the agency's inadequate response to it arose from PCVs and their families, they were supported by a broader outcry against gendered violence in the US that stimulated similar mobilizations against sexual violence in the military, sexual harassment and misogyny in gamer and Internet culture, and rape on college campuses. In fact, high-profile investigations into rape at universities, in the military, and in Peace Corps began almost at the same time, in 2010.⁷ It wasn't that people suddenly started caring about gendered violence, but rather that the time was ripe for the shift in public sentiment about misogyny and gendered violence to bloom in mass media and other cultural outlets, which manifested in a proliferation of media

⁷ This is not to say that campaigns to raise awareness about the prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses, within the military, and elsewhere did not make gains prior to 2010. Rather, there was an abrupt increase in mainstream media coverage on sexual violence around 2010 that brought these issues to the fore of public dialogue in ways that had not been seen perhaps since the rise of the Take Back the Night movement in the 1970s and 80s.

analyzing, and markedly *opposing*, sexual violence in a multitude of forms (for examples from gamer culture, see Timmins 2011; for examples from the military, see Benedict 2009; for examples from college campuses, see Smith and van der Voo 2010).

The implications of viewing Peace Corps as a microcosm of broader American culture are that the findings of this project are relevant for understanding similar institutional cultures. My hope for this project is that readers will see the need for greater scrutiny and perseverance in follow-up to the problems of institutional violence and sexual violence, particularly where these issues intersect, as in the case of Peace Corps. This paper certainly does not fully satisfy the current paucity of research on Peace Corps and violence, not to mention the lack of public analysis through critical feminist lenses, but I believe it serves to highlight the need for research in those directions. I also hope, then, that this small contribution might provide a spark for such future projects.

Methodology

In conducting research for this paper, I used the tools of discursive analysis to closely read, code, and establish themes within Peace Corps texts.⁸ I also compared different versions of the *Peace Corps Volunteer Handbook* to glean a sense of what has

⁸ All of these documents were publically available on Peace Corps' website as of May 2016, though I have since found that the site has been dramatically overhauled and some of the documents are not as readily locatable. Moreover, I found it exceedingly difficult to find copies of the *PCV Handbook* published before 2011; the 2008 version was obtained through a source other than Peace Corps. Finally, I obtained the "MS243 Procedures" document from the Peace Corps Manual on the agency's website.

changed (if anything) across time. My analysis involved the following texts: The 2008 and 2014 versions of the *Peace Corps Volunteer Handbook*, “Safety and Security Highlights to Help You Prepare for Peace Corps Service” (2011), “Peace Corps Frequently Asked Questions: Safety and Volunteer Support” (2011), and “MS 243 Procedures for Responding to Sexual Assault” (2015).⁹

My analysis primarily focuses on the 2008 and 2014 versions of the *PCV Handbook*, due to the fact that it is essentially the same document, and so even minute changes in language (reformatting of a paragraph, removal or replacement of individual words, etc.) is noticeable. I also selected two documents from the time period in which Peace Corps was most likely to have begun transitions or revisions in language, following the passage of the Kate Puzey Peace Corps Volunteer Protection Act in 2011. I chose the final document, “MS 243 Procedures,” to investigate changes that may have occurred recently.

My analysis of this textual discourse is strongly informed by feminist theory and praxis, with a recognition of how the framing and deployment of language reflects values, attitudes, and behaviors in ways that are c/overtly gendered (Lazar 2007; Doherty and Anderson 2008). As already explained, this feminist discourse analysis is conducted through two different feminist lenses to fulfill the second goal of this paper:

⁹ More narrowly, I also examined documents such as the Welcome Books of different Peace Corps host countries.

a comparative analysis of Liberal and Native feminist frameworks. However, it is fair to say that this project is guided by Native feminist methods and methodologies, as reflected in my decision to examine a range of documents across time, as well as to incorporate autoethnographic elements. These choices serve to historically locate the issue of sexual violence in Peace Corps, and to contextualize my relationship to this project.

Positioning Myself in this Project

During my brief time as a Peace Corps Volunteer (PCV), I witnessed the effects of the agency's institutional culture, and how the romanticization of Peace Corps service protects the agency status quo from both internal and external pressures that might otherwise drive change.¹⁰ Having been intimately connected with the agency for a time as a PCV naturally informs my perspective on this research project. It is a part of my lived experience, which feminist writers privilege as a source and inspiration for theory (hooks 1991; Alcoff 2000). In light of this tradition, my lived experience will be interwoven with the research and theoretical content of this paper as snapshots of my interactions with Peace Corps. Further, my experience uniquely situates me as a self-reflective, critical insider, having witnessed the violence of Peace Corps' institutional culture firsthand.

¹⁰ I participated in Peace Corps from July 2010 to January 2011.

CHAPTER TWO: IN PLACE AND TIME: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Peace Corps: Canon and Critique

Most of the formally published writing that exists on Peace Corps has been produced by Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCVs), who talk about their service experiences in memoirs.¹¹ The scholarly literature on Peace Corps is quite limited, which has been noted by authors such as former Peace Corps Country Director P. David Searles. His book, *The Peace Corps Experience*, discusses Peace Corps' early history, and offers future directions for research into Peace Corps' contributions to development theory and development 'on the ground' within the countries where it works.

Peace Corps is often depicted as the brainchild of President John F. Kennedy, who launched the agency almost immediately upon taking office (Searles 1997). Peace Corps has been variously complicit in, and an active conduit for, U.S. imperialism and heteropatriarchal colonialism from its beginnings. Born in the midst of the Cold War, the agency received bipartisan support in part thanks to a recognition that it was a powerfully influential and global tool for whoever controlled Congress or the White

¹¹ For examples, see Thomsen 1969; Tidwell 1990; and Herrera 1999. It is worth noting that even where such memoirs are critical of Peace Corps, their authors are frequently upheld as exemplars of successful Peace Corps Volunteers.

House. JFK's successor President Lyndon B. Johnson, for instance, "made it clear that he regarded the Peace Corps as an instrument of his policies" (Meisler 2011, 71). Peace Corps "emerged at the height of U.S. military strength" (Cobbs Hoffman 2000, 5), and was supposed to represent America's morality as a counterbalance to the horrific violence of its "evil twin, the Vietnam War" (Cobbs Hoffman 2000, 4). These political shades also colored individual Volunteers' service. Peace Corps Volunteers were suspected by host country nationals of being spies or infiltrators, despite great efforts by the JFK administration to protect Peace Corps from the CIA (Searles 1997; Meisler 2011).

Critical American studies scholar Molly Geidel offers insights into Peace Corps' imperialist, capitalist, and liberal agenda in her book *Peace Corps Fantasies: How Development Shaped the Global Sixties* (2015). Her close study of Peace Corps' early history shows how individualism and other liberal values shaped the agency's mission and the manner in which that mission continues to be carried out.¹² "At the very heart of Peace Corps philosophy and policy," she asserts, "is the attempt to model and enact individual transformation" within those citizens of host countries with which the agency comes into contact (55). Even as PCVs are the shining models against which host country nationals are presumed to measure their work ethic and competence, Volunteers, too, are bound up in the agency's hyperindividualistic mission to generate a

¹² Manifestations of these values continue to appear in Peace Corps texts, as I will show in my discursive analysis in Chapter Two.

productive and responsible citizenry. Geidel's work highlights the connection between individualism, liberalism, and the desire for capitalist and colonial control on the part of Peace Corps.

Peace Corps and Sexual Violence

As little scholarly research as there is on the general subject of Peace Corps, virtually no scholarly research exists on the subject of sexual violence within Peace Corps, despite PCVs experiencing this problem on an ongoing basis. We have the greatest statistical information on violence perpetrated by host country nationals against Volunteers, yet this data is most likely shallow in scope and definition and leads to an underestimation of the situation. For example, the latest statistical data from Peace Corps is the Statistical Report of Crimes Against Volunteers 2014, which shows a 44% increase in Volunteer reported rape from 2013, and 78% from 2004, probably due to improved reporting standards (United States Peace Corps 2015).

Given that new standards for 'best practices' in responding to sexual violence against Volunteers were only recently implemented, this jump in reporting is likely only partially revealing of the actual number of rapes experienced by PCVs. There can be little doubt that situations will vary by country, yet Peace Corps has not conducted any in-depth, country-specific investigation for broader comparative purposes. Perhaps more alarmingly, very little research has been conducted regarding the prevalence of violence perpetrated against PCVs by other Volunteers, and violence perpetrated

against host country nationals by Volunteers. The xenophobic and racist assumption on which the agency functions is that all sexual violence in the Peace Corps context is perpetrated by (primarily non-white) host country nationals against (primarily white) PCVs. Such an assumption means the agency is naturally inclined to overlook Volunteer-on-Volunteer violence, or violence perpetrated by Volunteers against the people of their host country.

Sexual violence is by no means solely a Peace Corps phenomenon. The problem as it manifests in the Peace Corps context is but one aspect of a much larger, pervasive phenomenon that can be found in myriad forms around the world. The prevalence and forms of sexual violence are idiosyncratic to place and time. Feminist scholars and activists have been at the forefront of queries into this problem, as well as efforts to stem it.

Liberal Feminism

Briefly, Liberal feminism “is an historical tradition that grew out of liberalism” and sought to reconcile liberal ideologies and values with a view of women as full and equal citizens (Wendell 1987, 65; see also Nash 2001). In her paper “A (Qualified) Defense of Liberal Feminism,” feminist scholar Susan Wendell argues that Liberal feminism’s late-20th century political commitments include “the promotion of women’s greater recognition and self-value as individuals,...equality of opportunity,...promotion of equal education for girls and boys,...ending sex prejudice and *de facto*

discrimination,...equality of legal rights, and...education as a major tool of social reform" (1987, 66). In these espoused "political commitments," we can see evidence of sustained liberal values, such as individualism and equality within public institutions (e.g. education, the law, etc.).

Writers and thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, and Harriet Taylor Mill authored some of the earliest texts in the Liberal feminist canon.

Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* was, in its time, a radical call for the full, formal education of women, which in her day was limited to men. Responding directly to writers who were arguing against the education of women, Wollstonecraft argued that women needed to be formally educated in rational philosophies and other subjects so that they could make contributions to their societies. Although this text predates feminist movement (and even the use of the word 'feminism'), many of its logics, including rationality and liberal equality in education, carried over to the writings of suffragists and other women's rights philosophers.

The women's rights reformers and suffragists who were the progenitors of Liberal feminism for the most part "cared more about personal freedom for each woman than about making the powers of government more equally divided, increasing voter turnout, or encouraging women to agree on a comprehensive feminist agenda" (Marilley 1996, 3). In this way, Liberal feminism is focused on individual rights, and aligns with a "liberal principle" which argues that "because all persons possess natural

rights, all must be guaranteed political rights and stand as equal citizens” (ibid). With its basis in the liberal goal of equal rights and equal citizenship standing regardless of sex, Liberal feminism was interested in gaining access to political and governmental systems from which women were traditionally excluded—not in changing those systems in any revolutionary way. A view of the aim of Liberal feminism as a bid for equality, rather than a desire to fundamentally overhaul or restructure sociopolitical, economic, and cultural systems, is reflected in studies of Liberal feminism’s function in or interaction with given systems.¹³

Second Wave feminists in the 1960’s Women’s Liberation Movement continued to value “autonomous personhood” as generated through a rights-based system, just as Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mills did (Gerson 2002, 794). This emphasis on individualism and achievement of equality within existing systems would later be heavily critiqued by feminist activists opposing sexual violence, for the reason that individualistic values (e.g. personal responsibility, exercise of ‘sound judgment’) form the basis of victim-blaming attitudes that continue to suffuse educational, legal, and other settings, and therefore contribute to the maintenance of rape culture as a whole (Doherty and Anderson 2008).

Feminist Theory and Sexual Violence

¹³ For example, see “Politics, Public Policy, and Title IX: Some Limitations of Liberal Feminism” (Boutilier, SanGiovanni, and Birrell 1994) and “Liberal Feminism, Cultural Diversity and Comparative Education” (Enslin and Tjiattas 2004).

Feminist activists and scholars from a diversity of disciplines have made continuous and vital contributions to the body of scholarship on sexual violence since the 1960s, and many of these texts are now seen as foundational to the study of gendered violence. Radical, Liberal, and other feminist thinkers have written about sexual violence as a systemic aspect of maintaining gendered hierarchies (Brownmiller 1976); sexual violence as a natural outcome of a sociocultural view of women as inferior (MacKinnon 1987); sexual violence as wrongly attributed to some biological imperative inherent in men, and more correctly attributable to degradation of the feminine and the normalization of gendered violence (Scully 1994); and sexual violence as a manifestation of ingrained masculinist values and male peer support of acts of gender-based violence (DeKeseredy and Schwartz 2013).

However, these studies reflect certain shortcomings that are ubiquitous in such scholarship: a unidimensional or at best additive approach to sexual violence, which diminishes the specific impact and manifestations of violence against particular groups of victims (e.g. Native women, LGBTQ-identified people, non-Western people), and a failure to ground the analyses in a specific place and time.

Therefore, it is crucial to look beyond what are perhaps more mainstream feminist treatments of the study of sexual violence to those that examine the effects of this phenomenon through a more nuanced, intersectional, rather than additive, lens, while embedding this examination within broader considerations of place and time.

Certainly, such considerations are applicable to examining sexual violence in the Peace Corps context, given that this problem manifests differently in geographically diverse places and also varies across time. Research on sexual violence as a systemic problem is being done within settler colonial studies, especially by Native feminist studies, both within and outside of colonial studies.

Native Feminisms and Theories of Sexual Violence

Native feminists are doing intersectional work on sexual violence that few other feminist scholars are doing. Although most feminists easily recognize gendered and even racialized dynamics of sexual violence, they often struggle to see how sexual violence is integral to the production and enforcement of gender, race, and nation(ality) (Gunn Allen 1992; Smith 2015). Native feminists theorize *as well as historicize* the constructedness of gender, race, nationality, and other aspects of identity within the context of settler colonialism (Goeman and Denetdale 2009; Simpson 2009).

To clarify, Native feminisms are veins of feminist thought which interrogate settler colonial beliefs, structures, and processes, particularly as they interact with race, gender, and sexuality. Native feminisms seek to recenter “indigenous ways of knowing” (Arvin, Tuck and Morrill 2013, 21) as part of critiquing, resisting, and dismantling colonial heteropatriarchy. This includes a (re)centering and privileging of Native women’s voices and experiences, which provide insight into the gendered and raced nature of colonial violence and national identity. Because settler colonialism is an

ongoing, culturally-structuring project (Wolfe 2006), Native women's lived experiences across time speak to the evolution, as well as continuity, of sexual violence within the settler state (Smith 2015).

Native feminists interrogate settler-imposed conceptualizations of gender and sexuality that are heteropatriarchal and normatively white. These conceptualizations leave no room for non-binary or fluid Native gender roles and sexualities, instead framing Native ideas and embodiments as 'perverse' and 'savage', and in need of Christianization and civilization (Barker 2011, Deer 2015, Smith 2015). Sexual violence was a colonial tactic frequently employed to 'civilize' Native populations in order to eradicate existing matrilineal and woman-centered sociocultural systems. In this way, sexual violence can be understood as an inherent feature of eurocentric heteropatriarchy. Patriarchal systems were often completely foreign to the matrifocal gynocracies of pre-contact Native American cultures (Allen 1992).

Native feminists understand sexual violence to be not only a gendered and racialized phenomenon, but one that is inextricably bound up in colonial histories. They understand that sexual violence is not only a patriarchal tactic, but it is a colonial one. They see this tactic as being employed against bodies, but also against languages, cultures, and land (Smith 2015). Native feminists argue that for Indigenous peoples, sexual violence cannot be separated from genocide, land dispossession, and the destruction of Indigenous sovereignty.

The scholarship of Native feminists is almost invariably place-based, and Indigenous theories, pedagogies, and methodologies that center upon land reflect the fact that “maintaining relationships to the land is at the heart of Indigenous peoples struggles”(Goeman 2008, 23). These scholars are usually discussing the situations of the communities from which they originate, but even when that work is outside of their own communities, they are still careful to note upon whose land they are writing and researching and with which Native peoples they are conducting research (Arvin, Tuck and Morrill 2013). Land, place, and space as recurrent themes of Native feminisms are useful to my project of thinking through the implications of experiencing sexual violence within a particular place and time. Deep contextualization within time and place work against the violent processes of abstraction and individuation that allow heteropatriarchal settler colonialism to disguise the origins of that violence and its specifically gendered and raced effects.

Native Feminisms, Settler Colonialism, and Implications for Peace Corps

The U.S. is a settler colonial state, and while the Peace Corps is not a settler endeavor, it is an imperialist, capitalist one in that it mirrors the structures and ideologies of the colonial Federal Government from which it originates. These structures and ideologies were installed at the outset of the formation of the American nation-state, and they continue to pervade our thoughts, behaviors, and institutions today (Lugones 2008). The very notion of ‘development’ is derivative of colonial

renderings of Indigenous/people of colour as ‘backward’ and ‘savage’ — a notion which is of course internalized by some Peace Corps staff and Volunteers.¹⁴ The Peace Corps has often been described as an anti-communist project and a tool of American propaganda since its inception during the Cold War (Geidel 2015; Cobbs Hoffman 2000). (Re)embedding Peace Corps in its historico-cultural context enables us to see the agency as an imperialist, colonial project, and this, in turn, usefully reframes sexual violence as it takes place in that context, especially Peace Corps’ response to that violence as it happens on foreign soil.

¹⁴ This notion is reflected in the Margery Michelmore postcard incident, which is discussed in the next section.

CHAPTER THREE: SETTING THE HISTORICO-CULTURAL STAGE

Peace Corps History: 1961-2010

Founded March 1st, 1961, the Peace Corps is an agency of the United States

Federal Government, whose international goodwill mission consists of three aspects:

1. To help the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women
2. To help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served
3. To help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of all Americans

(Peace Corps 2014)

Despite much political strife during its fifty-year history, Peace Corps has, for the most part, been the darling of Congress (Meisler 2011). It was established with strong bipartisan support and seen as sponsoring “volunteers [who] represented the United States in a way that was personal, human, and natural” (Searles 1997, 28). As a volunteer agency invested in working in ‘developing nations’, Peace Corps’ three-part mission has been framed as pure and heroic, representing Americans’ most noble aspirations (Cobbs Hoffman 2000). Its Volunteers have been consistently painted as the country’s ‘best and brightest’, with even the Peace Corps Volunteer handbooks opening with a self-congratulatory air, noting that new Volunteers “are joining an extraordinary group of Americans who...have sought the challenges that are unique to Peace Corps service” (2014, v).

This largely uncritical reception has meant a lack of close scrutiny of the agency's policies, operations, and values, as Peace Corps is widely presumed to have both Volunteers' and their host countries' best interests at heart. What is rarely questioned is the degree to which these policies and values prioritize the agency's self-interest, self-preservation, and self-promotion, and how such prioritization affects the lives of those who come into contact with Peace Corps.¹⁵

A high degree of admiration has also meant that research and study of Peace Corps has primarily been undertaken by former Volunteers and staff—insiders, in other words--most of whom perpetuate the valorization of Peace Corps' history.¹⁶ Few analytic and critical pieces exist that look closely at the agency,¹⁷ and none at all take up the problem of sexual violence within Peace Corps' institutional culture. Therefore, a scholarly analysis of this problem will help fill gaps in knowledge, as well as contribute to the ongoing dialogue around Peace Corps' institutional culture and its handling of violence within its ranks.

The Vaccination

¹⁵ While this paper focuses on specific aspects of Peace Corps' values related to violence and the individual, I hope that some of its insights will be taken up by other scholars interested, for instance, in the intersections of neoliberalism, coloniality, gendered violence, and institutional culture.

¹⁶ While they attempt to be balanced in their portrayals of Peace Corps, most of these books end on a positive note, suggesting that Peace Corps' existence is a net gain for Americans, Volunteers, and host countries alike. There is a sore lack of critical analysis, as noted by author P. David Searles (1997). For examples of such valorizing accounts, see *The Bold Experiment: JFK's Peace Corps* (Rice 1985), *What You Can Do for Your Country* (Schwarz 1991), and *When the World Calls* (Meisler 2011).

¹⁷ One exception is *Keeping Kennedy's Promise: The Peace Corps, Unmet Hope of the New Frontier* (Lowther and Lucas 1978), whose authors, while former Peace Corps staffers, are notably critical of many aspects of Peace Corps.

In spring of 2010, just prior to my departure for Peace Corps Service, National Public Radio (NPR) brought the issue of sexual assault on college campuses to the forefront of public attention (NPR 2010; Shapiro 2010). At the same time, increasing media attention was being directed toward the issue of rape in the military (BBC News 2010; PBS 2010), and the pervasiveness of misogyny and rape culture in Internet, gaming, and sports cultures was being challenged in both formal and informal spheres (Westmarland and Graham 2010; Timmins 2011; Harding 2009). This drastic shift in public consciousness that saw growing disapproval of and anger toward sexual violence may have felt sudden to many, but was long overdue for others, including sexual assault counselors (SAC), feminist activists, and rape survivors.

Being a SAC advocate just coming into my feminist consciousness, I didn't imagine that Peace Corps was wholly different from universities, the military, or broader culture, somehow immune from rape culture. Not long after my cohort completed our pre-service training (PST) and moved to our permanent sites of service in late 2010, a firestorm of media coverage of rape within Peace Corps began stateside. ABC News' *20/20* broke the story in an intense investigative report that included interviews with current and returned Peace Corps Volunteers who discussed their experiences of sexual violence, including stalking and gang rape, during their service (Pyle 2011). The *20/20* investigation revealed that not only was sexual violence a more prevalent phenomenon than Peace Corps was acknowledging but the agency was also

badly mishandling the cases of PCVs who reported being assaulted. This investigative report was quickly followed by other reports, interviews, and individual blogs and social media accounts (Stolberg 2011; Mianeki 2011; Pearson 2011).

Given that I (not to mention a number of my fellow PCVs) had, during pre-service training, vocalized concern that Peace Corps' policies and protocols regarding Volunteer safety were inherently victim-blaming, this news did not come as a shock. It did surprise me, though, that the seemingly above-reproach agency was suddenly being called to account so aggressively and so publicly.

The aforementioned public perception of Peace Corps as an altruistic project devoted to improving the lives of people in 'Third World' countries has quashed much criticism of the agency, as mistakes and flawed aspects of its institutional culture have largely been glossed over as exceptions to the rule. Throughout its fifty year history, the agency has been practically invulnerable to negative publicity.

This is not merely a personal impression; Peace Corps members, themselves, have declared the agency "immune" to harmful criticism and bad PR (Meisler 2011, 44; see also Schechter 2011). A frequently-cited reason for this immunity is the now-infamous "postcard incident" (Meisler, 42), and it is worth examining this moment in Peace Corps history as it is at once a partial explanation of the agency's enduringly positive reputation and a demonstration of its colonial mindset.

In its first year, a PCV in Nigeria sent a postcard from Ibadan to her boyfriend

back in the U.S. detailing some of her early impressions of the city, but the postcard never left the country. Instead, it became the catalyst of intense backlash against Peace Corps in Nigeria. The postcard read as follows:

Dear Bobbo: Don't be furious at getting a postcard. I promise a letter next time. I wanted you to see the incredible and fascinating city we were in. With all the training we had, we were really not prepared for the squalor and absolutely primitive living conditions rampant both in the city and in the bush. We had no idea what 'underdeveloped' meant. It really is a revelation and after we got over the initial horrified shock, a very rewarding experience. Everyone except us lives on the streets, cooks in the streets, sells in the streets, even goes to the bathroom in the streets. Please write.

Marge

p.s. We are excessively cut off from the rest of the world. (ibid, 39).

Found, copied, and publically distributed by Nigerian university students around Ibadan, the seemingly simple note erupted into the eponymous, infamous "postcard incident," during which Peace Corps scrambled to respond to Nigerians calling for the expulsion of PCVs. Attempting to save face and keep the incident quiet, the agency decided to bring the author of the card, Margery Michelmore, back to the U.S. in order to ease tensions in Nigeria. When she arrived at JFK Airport, a group of press was waiting to inundate her with questions. Many Peace Corps officials feared the worst. Peace Corps had already been accused of imperialism and cultural insensitivity, and this postcard seemed to confirm those criticisms (Searles 1997). To Peace Corps officials' astonishment, however, Margery won the reporters over, some of whom

ended up saying, “It must have been the goddamn Nigerians” (ibid, 42).

One of the key founders of Peace Corps, Warren Wiggins, would later call the postcard incident

...[t]he greatest thing that could have happened to the Peace Corps in the beginning...It was like a vaccination...Never again would a major newspaper, under the worst of conditions, streamer anything negative about the Peace Corps. Since then, the Peace Corps has had rape, manslaughter, bigamy, disappearances, Volunteers going insane, meddling in local politics, being eaten by crocodiles, but never again did it get a bad play in national news. The vaccination took; we were immune” (ibid, 44).

In 2010, however, it appeared that this ‘vaccination’ was wearing off. It was surprising and reassuring that the focus of this public criticism was not centrally the occurrence of sexual violence in Peace Corps, itself, so much as was the mishandling of PCV needs and rights in these cases. In other words, people were less shocked to hear that PCVs experience sexual violence, probably in part the result of growing consciousness of rape culture. Rather, the public was rightly outraged by Peace Corps’ persistent insensitivity to and irresponsibility in dealing with this issue. Some went so far as to say that Peace Corps was covering up cases of rape among PCVs (Schechter and Ross 2011b).

In May and September of 2011, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer (RPCV) victims and their supporters (including expert witnesses) testified before Congress, saying that Peace Corps’ response to their experiences of sexual violence was “inadequate,

uncompassionate, victim-blaming, and ineffective,” and further “cited a lack of staff accountability to or oversight of the response effort” (Peace Corps Office of Inspector General 2012, i).

Several of the cases of Volunteer rape survivors have been featured in news programs such as ABC New’s *20/20*, though only one or two in any depth (Pyle 2011). To illustrate the gravity of Peace Corps’ malfeasance, I would like to discuss three cases in detail, as recounted by former PCV rape survivors.¹⁸ Because identifying information in their sworn affidavits has been redacted, I have used pseudonyms. Unfortunately, most information about time and place has also been redacted in these affidavits. There is also very little identity-based information outside of age, and sometimes sexual orientation.¹⁹ Such information is crucial to a deeper analysis of the circumstances of sexual violence in the Peace Corps context. Nevertheless, it is important to include the voices of rape survivors in this project, and especially to recount their stories in their own words.

Megan’s Experience: “More Trouble than It’s Worth”

When she had just finished nursing school at the age of twenty-one, Megan

¹⁸ By no means was my choice to delve into these particular cases driven by the notion that they are somehow more grievous than others, nor are they representative of Volunteer victims’ experiences generally. Though they shared many commonalities, each case that I read was unique, and readers should remember that traumatic experiences, such as rape, should never be generalized across individuals. It is a grave disservice to the Volunteers who came forth to share their stories to imagine that if we have heard one, we have heard them all.

¹⁹ It is worth mentioning that only one of these affidavits was submitted by a male-identified Volunteer, and he points out that the stigmatization of male victims and the lack of sensitivity to gender violence in Peace Corps contributes to underreporting of cases of rape against male Volunteers. Also, a handful of affidavits were authored by Volunteers who specifically mention having a queer identity.

joined Peace Corps because she wanted to “help people with limited access to healthcare” (“Peace Corps Volunteer Affidavits” 2016, 1). In 2009, three months into her service, Megan was “sexually assaulted in broad daylight, in the middle of town, while sober, wearing a full-length skirt, on [her] way to buy lunch” (ibid). She was then stalked and harassed by the same man “on a regular basis” and felt that “[her] life was in danger” (ibid). When she informed the Peace Corps office in her host country, they “responded by minimizing [her] concerns and telling [her] to deal with it on [her] own” (ibid). They did not believe she was in danger, nor did they document the crime against Megan. Even had Peace Corps documented Megan’s experiences, it’s unlikely they would have supported her in prosecuting the perpetrator, as they told her “it’s more trouble than it’s worth” (ibid, 2).

Megan’s co-workers and fellow Volunteers accused her of “dressing provocatively, being drunk, and not greeting people enough,” all of which “were completely untrue” (ibid). “Because the safety training in [pre-service training] put blame on the victim of crimes by saying that if you greet people and dress appropriately, nothing bad will happen,” her fellow PCVs assumed that Megan must have failed to follow Peace Corps policies and guidelines in some fashion (ibid). She already felt unsafe at her home, but then her house was broken into; she “was homeless for two months” while Peace Corps sought a new site for her (ibid). Despite her requests to stay with her boyfriend (another Volunteer) in whose presence she felt safe,

Peace Corps “[forbid her]” from doing so (ibid). At this time, she felt “unsupported by everyone [she] knew in country, including her fellow PCVs” (ibid). Megan terminated her service early and returned to the U.S., after which “Peace Corps did not contact me at all” (ibid). Although she was entitled to counseling sessions and healthcare, Megan received no reimbursement from Peace Corps.

Chloe’s Experience: Assaulted by a Fellow Volunteer

Prior to traveling overseas with Peace Corps, twenty-four-year-old Chloe recalled that the agency’s recruiters “denied [the] prevalence [of sexual assault]” against PCVs, and she received “no training regarding sexual assault safety” (“Peace Corps Volunteer Affidavits” 2016, 7).²⁰ In 2010, four months into her service, she was “date raped by a fellow volunteer at a Fourth of July party” (ibid). After reporting the rape to her Peace Corps Medical Officer (PCMO), Chloe did receive medical care, but then was quickly subjected to a “highly damaging interrogation” *prior to* receiving any psychological counseling or information about her rights (ibid, 8). During this interrogation, Chloe was not “afforded a PCV or 3rd party advocate” to support her and “was made to feel like the perpetrator” (ibid). She was interrogated “under extreme distress” while experiencing acute symptoms of trauma and felt she wasn’t able to “accurately represent or defend” herself (ibid, 7).

²⁰ In any case, considering who her perpetrator was, it seems unlikely that any Peace Corps training would admit to this as a possible risk.

Chloe's country director (CD) discouraged her from telling any other PCVs what had happened to her, nor "too many friends and family in the United States" (ibid, 8). Peace Corps "did and did not take action to document that a crime had been committed," and although they undertook an internal investigation, Chloe has "never been privy to its results" (ibid, 7). Her rapist received no punishment, and what's more he was allowed to continue his service. According to Chloe's affidavit, her rapist's Peace Corps record does not even "indicate that this incident occurred" (ibid). Chloe, on the other hand, "was subjected to manipulation and implied threats by [Peace Corps] staff;" she was 'permitted' to complete her service only after she threatened to take legal action against then-director of Peace Corps Headquarters Aaron Williams (ibid, 8). Peace Corps tried very hard to dismiss her from service, and even though she was 'allowed' to stay, Chloe was not reimbursed for counseling and other medical costs despite being "assured" by Peace Corps that she would be (ibid, 8).

Jordan's Experience: "The Choices We Make"

Twenty-three-year-old Jordan joined Peace Corps in 2009, hoping to "do something meaningful" while getting "a change of pace" from typical American life (ibid, 14). During pre-service training, she "heard a rumor that [Peace Corps] was underreporting statistics" on crime. Peace Corps "made it clear from the beginning that if something happened to [a PCV], it was because of the choices we made" (ibid).

One year and two months into service, in 2010, Jordan was sexually assaulted by

the 15-year-old cousin of her boyfriend (a host country national), to whom she considered herself a mentor. He had come to her home and asked to sleep on her couch because he was too drunk to walk all the way home. Jordan stipulated that he could stay only “until he sobered up,” and then needed to leave. When she went to rest in her room, she inadvertently dozed off, and some time later awoke to find the perpetrator on top on her, trying to take her shirt off. While she was screaming, he put his hands down her pants, and she was only able to get him off by kicking and punching him, after which he left.

The next day, Jordan went to her boyfriend’s relatives, whom she “considered family,” and told them “what the boy had done to [her]” (ibid, 14). The perpetrator’s family “defended his actions” and sent her away. “Crushed,” Jordan contacted Peace Corps and told them “vaguely what had happened” (14), but wasn’t until two weeks later that her PCMO contacted her about medical attention. To her knowledge, Peace Corps never documented the rape, nor did they offer to help her take legal measures against her rapist. To the contrary, Jordan was “put on probation and a behavioral contract” (ibid, 15).²¹ Peace Corps was “very clear” in communicating that Jordan’s own

²¹ Sometimes Peace Corps uses behavioral contracts in order to address what they see as the ‘bad behaviors’ of Volunteers, such as drinking, doing drugs, having sex, etc. Even PCV victims of crime are also asked to sign behavioral contracts conditioning the continuation of their service upon cessation of behaviors that Peace Corps views as ‘inviting crime,’ although there are now protections for rape victims who come forward (see the 2014 version of the *PCV Handbook*). PCV rape survivor Danielle Dryke was asked to sign such a contract, a copy of which can be found at <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2016/mar/31/i-was-raped-and-my-counsellor-asked-me-what-i-had-been-wearing>.

actions “warranted this assault” (ibid). Jordan felt “very guilty, ashamed and alone after this incident,” and although she received one counseling session, she was never offered “a meaningful opportunity to prosecute” her rapist (ibid), despite assurances by Peace Corps that all Volunteer victims of crime will be provided with such an opportunity (Peace Corps 2014, 22).

From the experiences of these Volunteers, it is clear that Peace Corps’ institutional culture is one of victim-blaming and holding survivors accountable for their own rapes. Because of the blaming survivors, other Volunteers who experience violence are less likely to come forward, meaning that Peace Corps’ reputation for protecting Volunteers is maintained, and Peace Corps is exempted from providing the necessary legal, medical, and therapeutic interventions and protections owed to ‘real victims.’ This harmful aspect of Peace Corps institutional culture is sustained by practices (trivializing victims’ experiences, neglecting to document crimes and punish Peace Corps-associate offenders) and beliefs (PCVs should expect victimization if they break protocol, PCVs are responsible for the violence of their perpetrators) that work against the rights and well-being of all Volunteers, but especially Volunteer victims.

Demands for Change

Between PCVs, RPCVs, the public, the media, and now lawmakers, both the internal and external pressures for Peace Corps to change were tremendous. The first changes came in the form of the Kate Puzey Peace Corps Volunteer Protection Act of

2011, through which Congress mandated that Peace Corps amend and improve its sexual assault risk-reduction and response training (SARRT), develop a more victim-centered sexual assault policy, and institute an Office of Victim Advocacy, among other directives (Kate Puzey Peace Corps Volunteer Protection Act of 2011) . Additionally, internal Federal-level investigations of Peace Corps’ existing policy and protocol were conducted through the Office of the Inspector General. The investigation found that sexual violence was going unreported because Volunteer survivors feared retribution and blame, and further that inconsistencies in Peace Corps policies were contributing to failures of delivery of victim support services (Peace Corps Office of Inspector General 2012).

As part of the fulfillment of the Kate Puzey PCV Protection Act, Peace Corps launched a new initiative for Volunteer support: the Office for Victim Advocacy. They hired a seasoned SAC advocate and expert on sexual violence, Kellie Greene, to direct the new office, and began to institute new guidelines and protocols for dealing with victims of sexual violence. At the same time, many new documents, as well as amendments to old ones, were produced that highlighted Peace Corps’ commitment to Volunteer victims.²²

²² See, for example, the Peace Corps document “Commitment to Sexual Assault Victims” at: <http://files.peacecorps.gov/multimedia/pdf/documents/Commitment%20to%20Sexual%20Assault%20Victims.pdf>

CHAPTER FOUR: PEACE CORPS DISCOURSE

Through a discursive analysis of the 2008 and 2014 versions of the *Peace Corps Volunteer Handbook*, as well as three additional Peace Corps documents published between 2011 and 2015, I found that there were both consistencies and changes in language over time. In this chapter, I will discuss some of the major variations and consistencies in Peace Corps language related to violence, safety, responsibility, and the individual.

Changes in Peace Corps Language over Time

Given that Peace Corps came under public scrutiny in late 2010 and early 2011 for its mishandling of cases of sexual violence against PCVs, it is not surprising that there is some evidence of change in language in publications released during 2011.²³ The most striking changes reflect Peace Corps' claim to be undergoing "nothing short of a broad culture shift," and that "the agency's new approach is Volunteer-centered every step of the way" (Peace Corps 2013, 3)

Some differences in language between the publications include the centering of the Volunteer as an agency 'priority;' the appearance of 'investment' language; greater emphasis on reporting safety and security incidents to Peace Corps authorities; less

²³ As early as May 2011, when the "Peace Corps FAQs on Safety and Volunteer Support" sheet was released.

overt correlation of victimization with ‘risky behavior’; and a greater emphasis on compassion for victims of crimes.

To provide a brief ‘bird’s eye’ view of major changes in the Peace Corps Volunteer handbooks, mentions of safety and security are lumped into two chapters in the 2008 version: that on “Volunteer Health” (a total of eight pages) and that on “Volunteer Safety and Security” (three pages). The 2014 version of the *Handbook* extends the chapters on “Volunteer Health” (nine pages) and “Volunteer Safety and Security” (six pages), and the latter chapter includes a brand new section on “Support for Victims of Crime”, with specific considerations for victims of sexual assault.

In the 2008 *Handbook*, a variety of health and safety risks—natural disasters, car accidents, sexual assaults—are discussed in general terms in the “Health” and “Safety and Security” chapters. Along with the fact that these two chapters appear in succession, this generalized discussion produces the sense that all sorts of threats to Volunteer health and safety can be approached and prevented in similar ways, namely by “exercising sound judgment” (Peace Corps 2008). This version of the *Handbook* contains a phrase that embodies then-Peace Corps’ overall attitude towards safety, risk, and responsibility, which I have marked in italics below:

The Peace Corps has established procedures and policies to help Volunteers reduce their risks and enhance their safety and security. At the same time, *the Volunteer’s own conduct is the single most important factor in ensuring his or her own safety and well-being.* Staying safe and secure during Peace Corps service requires Volunteers to take personal responsibility for following the guidance provided during training on observing locally appropriate behavior, exercising

sound judgment, and abiding by Peace Corps' policies and procedures. (ibid, emphasis added)

The superlative phrasing (“single most important”) works to center responsibility for safety upon the individual Volunteer (rather than with, for example, Peace Corps as an agency, the host country community, or the PCV community). This is confirmed by reiterating a ‘requirement’ that Volunteers “take personal responsibility” for themselves, and “exercise[e] sound judgment”. Consequently, Peace Corps points to the PCV as the individual in charge of assessing risk, exercising ‘sound judgment’ and rational decision-making, and actively taking steps to minimize exposure to violence. The Volunteer’s personal behavior is scrutinized as the source and cause of “unwanted attention” or even crime (e.g. sexual violence) (ibid). Peace Corps’ role is that of educator, through whose training PCVs will be “sensiti[zed] to the effect [the Volunteer’s] behavior has on [their] personal safety” (ibid). This sensitization includes training on “locally appropriate behavior” regarding “dress, living arrangements, exercise, consumption of alcohol, socializing with members of the opposite sex, [and] going out alone at night” —all aspects of behavior theoretically under the Volunteer’s control (ibid). The implication here is that not only is a Volunteer with “sound judgment” viewed as more likely succeed in “minimiz[ing] risks to their safety and security” (ibid), if they do experience crime such as sexual violence, it is due to some failing on their part. These behavioral expectations about dress,

socializing, drinking, and so forth are highly gendered, but Peace Corps does not acknowledge how placing gendered expectations of self-policing upon the Volunteer leads to a default verdict of victim-blaming. This was the case for PCV Danielle Dryke, who was asked by her Peace Corps counselor to “explain every choice [she] had made before, during and after the attack,” including what she was wearing, down to her choice of footwear (Hicks 2016).

The suggestion that “the Volunteer’s own conduct is the single most important factor in ensuring his or her own safety and well-being” is completely overhauled in the 2014 version; the Volunteer, themselves, is no longer “the single most important factor” regarding safety and security, although they can still “play a key role” (Peace Corps 2014, 21). The introduction of the “Safety and Security” chapter has been also been totally revised, with the focus shifting from the Volunteer to the agency, itself:

The safety and security of Peace Corps Volunteers is our highest priority. The Peace Corps devotes significant resources to providing Volunteers with the training, support, and information they need to stay healthy and safe. Yet because Volunteers serve worldwide, often in very remote areas, health and safety risks are an inherent part of Volunteer service. (ibid)

There are also other mentions of Peace Corps’ responsibilities, or what actions the agency will take to protect and serve Volunteers. The 2014 *Handbook*’s new section on “Support for Victims of Crime” includes a subsection titled “Commitment to Sexual Assault Victims,” which outlines the specific values and actions that Peace Corps promises to carry out in its treatment of rape victims (ibid, 24-5). In a remarkable

departure from the tone of the 2008 *Handbook*, Peace Corps unequivocally declares that “Peace Corps staff members worldwide will honor this commitment and demonstrate that commitment to you through their words and actions” (ibid, 25). This is startling because it contains no caveats or conditions about the conduct of the Volunteer. By contrast, the tack of the 2008 *Handbook* is to describe Peace Corps’ primary responsibility as providing information (in the form of policies, procedures, trainings, etc.) to Volunteers, who are in turn expected to utilize this information to make informed decisions about “mature behavior and the exercise of sound judgment” (Peace Corps 2008, 17).

Related to this, a striking feature of Peace Corps’ discussion of ‘commitment’ is that it is framed in terms of *investment*. According to the “Safety and Security Highlights” document, “Peace Corps devotes significant resources to providing Volunteers with the training, support, and information they need to stay healthy and safe” (Peace Corps 2011b, 1).²⁴ This language of investment in PCV safety and security appears to have replaced the language of ‘requirement’ and ‘responsibility’ more frequently seen in older documents.²⁵

The shift in Peace Corps’ attitude toward the safety of the Volunteer is clearly seen in the aforementioned “Safety and Security” introduction of the 2014 *Handbook*,

²⁴ This language is reiterated in the Safety and Volunteer Support FAQs sheet, as well as the 2014 *PCV Handbook*.

²⁵ For instance, the 2008 *PCV Handbook* “requires” that PCVs “take personal responsibility for following the guidance provided during training on observing locally appropriate behavior, exercising sound judgment, and abiding by Peace Corps’ policies and procedures” (Peace Corps 2008, 17).

which designates Volunteer safety as the agency's "highest priority" (Peace Corps 2014, 21).²⁶ Nevertheless, it would seem there is a discrepancy between Peace Corps' "highest priority" and its core values. Tellingly, there is only one sentence in this section that is in bold typeface, and it is this statement that I argue actually embodies Peace Corps' most central value: "**Our aim is to reduce risks**" (ibid). While this newer version of the *Handbook* appears to shift some responsibility for safety and security onto Peace Corps, ultimately this bolded statement functions as a caveat. This alludes to a sustained belief in the responsibility of the individual Volunteer when we consider that Peace Corps' preventative strategies focused primarily upon the behavior of the—especially female—Volunteer.

Within the *Handbook*, the issue of reporting crimes against Volunteers has been reformulated from "Volunteers must report any crimes or security incidents they experience to the Peace Corps office" (Peace Corps 2008, 18). The 2014 version now reads:

If a Volunteer is the victim of a crime during service, the local Peace Corps post and the Peace Corps offices of Safety and Security, Health Services, and Victim Advocacy are ready to provide support. Immediate reporting to Peace Corps officials is strongly encouraged, so the Peace Corps can provide a Volunteer victim with the support that he/she deserves and to quickly address any safety and security concerns (21-22).

²⁶ In the 2008 version of the *PCV Handbook*, the agency's explicitly-stated commitment to the safety and security of its Volunteers is mentioned only twice, and neither instance pertains to the experience of crime. In the 2014 version of the *PCV Handbook*, commitment to Volunteer safety and security is stated eleven times, three of which are related to the experience of crimes perpetrated against Volunteers. This sentiment is echoed in the "Safety and Volunteer Support" FAQ sheet, as well, which states that the "safety and security of Peace Corps Volunteers are fundamental elements in all agency decisions" (Peace Corps 2011a, 1).

The effect of this reformulation is to cast Peace Corps in a less ominous ‘helper role,’ with the command language (“must”) replaced with “encourage(ment)”.

Moreover, where the 2008 version reads as though Volunteers will be in some kind of trouble with Peace Corps for experiencing crime (especially if they fail to report those experiences), the 2014 version clearly says that Volunteers who experience crime *are deserving* of support. This seems to be further evidence of a shift toward greater prioritization of the Volunteer.

Another change is that the connection between safety and Volunteer conduct is somewhat diminished. The 2008 *Handbook* charges Volunteers with “tak[ing] personal responsibility for following the guidance provided during training on observing locally appropriate behavior, exercising sound judgment, and abiding by Peace Corps’ policies and procedures” (Peace Corps 2008, 17). The 2014 version, on the other hand, tells us that Peace Corps “policies, training, and procedures” are designed “to help Volunteers reduce risks” (Peace Corps 2014, 22). This seems to share responsibility for safety between the Volunteer and the agency, again echoing a greater prioritization of PCVs. In a similar vein, discussions of “risky behavior” once common in pre-2012 documents such as the FAQ sheet on “Safety and Volunteer Support” are minimized in the most recent Peace Corps publications (2013, 4).²⁷ This could perhaps be due to the association

²⁷ The titles of some common documents have similarly changed, reflecting a focus that downplays the likelihood and severity of crimes being committed against Volunteers. Peace Corps’ “Protecting and Supporting Volunteers” (March 2012) is now titled “Reducing Risks and Supporting Volunteers” (June 2013), demonstrating the agency’s focus on proactive PCV training and skill-building that can ‘reduce risks’, moving away from discussions of the

of the phrase “risky behavior” with victim-blaming attitudes that were condemned by feminist media²⁸—attitudes that Peace Corps has worked to distance itself from following the passage of the Kate Puzey PCV Protection Act (2011).

Finally, in all post-2010 documents, there appears to be greater sensitivity and compassion for Volunteer victims of crime, particularly sexual violence. This is demonstrated through the inclusion of the agency’s “Commitment to Sexual Assault Victims” in the 2014 *Handbook* (24), as well as the acknowledgement in the “Procedures for Responding to Sexual Assault” that Peace Corps has “obligation to be prepared to respond effectively and *compassionately* to Volunteers who have been the victim of sexual assault” (2015, 4, emphasis added). Not only is all of the documentation on responding to sexual assault brand new, but it is clearly victim-centered, and makes great effort to convey a sense of care for Volunteer victims. This reflects the pressure from Congress and the media to avoid overt victim-blaming and to acknowledge that rape victims deserve compassionate care, rather than suspicion and admonishment.

For all PCVs, not just PCV victims, where once the lion’s share of responsibility for safety and security was placed upon the individual Volunteer, the focus of these texts has shifted away from what is expected of Volunteers to what Peace Corps is doing to support them.

‘inherent risks’ of service. Effectively, while Peace Corps data (likely improved by increased reporting) shows that the perpetration crimes against Volunteers is actually an even greater a problem than before (Peace Corps 2015b), these documents suggest that Peace Corps is doing more about it.

²⁸ For example, see blog posts by Angyal (2011) and feministactivist (2011).

Stasis: “Mature Behavior and Sound Judgment”

Despite new and revised language and publications, there were several aspects of Peace Corps discourse that remained notably consistent from the 2008 to 2014 versions of the *PCV Handbook*, such as the connection of a Volunteer’s safety with their behavior and judgment; the repetition of ‘rational’ terminology, such as ‘minimizing risk’ and ‘sound judgment’; and the diminished but continued correlation of victimization with so-called ‘risky behavior’.

Much of the language around risk reduction remains highly similar or the same, and although the assumption of responsibility is somewhat more balanced between the Volunteer and the agency,²⁹ in actuality the task of ‘minimizing risk’ appears yet to fall on the Volunteer. Peace Corps continues to connect Volunteer safety with the Volunteer’s use of “good judgment” (Peace Corps 2011b, 4).³⁰ For example, the 2014 *Handbook* states that “[o]ne’s personal safety is optimized by mature behavior and exercising sound judgment” (Peace Corps 2014, 22). Thus, the association of ‘risky

²⁹ For example, the document titled “Safety and Security Highlights to Help You Prepare for Peace Corps Service” says that “Safety and security overseas is everyone’s responsibility...[and] is truly a partnership involving many people” (Peace Corps 2011b, 4).

³⁰ Additionally, some of the country-specific Volunteer Welcome Books (also referred to as handbooks) similarly contain references to “common sense,” which is a degree more extreme than “good judgment” in that the very notion of ‘common sense’ insinuates that it is something everyone possesses and agrees upon. The Peace Corps *Ecuador Volunteer Handbook* urges Volunteers to “exercise common sense and good judgment to promote safety and reduce risks,” and reminds them that their “actions reflect on Peace Corps Ecuador as a whole” (Peace Corps 2015b). The Peace Corps Cambodia Welcome Book explains that “[t]he most accomplished Volunteers view themselves as responsible for the outcomes of their experience and take responsibility for making the most of their assignment,” and further that Peace Corps expects Volunteers “to be as independent and as self-reliant as possible” (Peace Corps 2015a, 2). Moreover, Peace Corps Cambodia expects that, through policy guidelines and trainings, the Volunteer will be “empowered to take responsibility for his or her safety and well-being” (Peace Corps 2015a, 17).

behaviors' with 'health and safety risks' is less overt, yet the sentiment remains subtly embedded in post-2010 publications.

Surprisingly, one of the most overtly victim-blaming elements of the 2008 *Handbook* remains unchanged in the 2014 version. Both versions contain a chapter on "Volunteer Life and Conduct," which explains that, according to Peace Corps data, "Volunteer and trainee misuse of alcohol is substantially associated with being victimized by crime, including violent crimes such as assault and rape" (United States Peace Corps 2008, 75). There is no acknowledgment that alcohol "is the drug most commonly used to help commit sexual assault" (Office on Women's Health 2012). In both handbooks, there is a clear association between alcohol consumption, which is deemed a 'risky behavior', and becoming the victim of sexual violence.

Despite language shifts, changes in tone, and reframing subjects within these documents, Peace Corps' actual stated strategies in which Volunteers are trained on how to 'minimize risk' appear to have changed very little. The 2014 *Handbook*, early on in the "Safety and Security" chapter, lists some "factors that can put a Volunteer at risk," including "[l]iving and traveling in an unfamiliar environment, having a limited understanding of local language and culture, and being perceived as wealthy" (Peace Corps 2014, 21). Some of these factors are out of (especially new) Volunteers' control. As far as 'reducing risks,' Peace Corps explains that its main strategies include "[t]raining and information sharing [to] help make Volunteers aware of the risks they face and

provide them with strategies to counter those risks” (Peace Corps 2011b, 5) (with no specific mention of what those strategies are), and ‘community integration’, which assumes that “Volunteers are safest when they are in their respective communities and when they have established relationships with community members, host families, and others to create an effective support network” (Peace Corps 2011b, 4). Although ‘community integration’ reads as a concrete, implementable strategy, it ignores that fact that, in the case of sexual violence, most Volunteers know their rapists— a predictable fact when we consider that the majority of rape survivors know their rapists.

CHAPTER FIVE: A LIBERAL FEMINIST ANALYSIS

In the tradition of liberal political philosophy, as expressed by 19th century philosopher John Stuart Mill, “it is only the cultivation of individuality which produces, or can produce, well-developed human beings,” and as such, “individuality should assert itself” (Mill 2011 [1859], 59, 53). This emphasis on individuality is central to liberal philosophy, and by extension, Liberal feminism. Because the liberty of the individual is of the highest value, they are free to think and act without constraint, so long as it harms no one outside themselves (ibid, 71). However, where the individual acts “as a fool,” Mill invites us to judge them. By contrast, the individual who exercises characteristics such as rationality, “which conduce to [their] own good,” are “so much the nearer to the ideal perfection of human nature” and deserve our admiration (ibid).

From these foundations, liberal political philosophy views human beings as endowed with both rights and responsibilities as individuals insofar as we “[possess] any tolerable amount of common sense” (ibid, 63). Being endowed, too, with rationality, we are rightfully expected to avoid potential hazards to our health and safety. For example, I should avoid delivering the paper to that house where I encountered an aggressive dog until the owner has brought it inside. Naturally, I shouldn’t go out into an empty field during a lightning storm. Many Americans consider assessing and avoiding risk to be ‘common sense.’ In the Western colonial mindset, as informed by liberal political philosophy, the individual who fails to exercise rationality deserves to

be socially, if not legally, penalized, and “must expect to be lowered in the opinion of others” (ibid, 72).

One problem with this aspect of liberalism, and thus Liberal feminism, is that rationality is not a cross-cultural constant, and human beings cannot be assessed as part of a “hazard-risk landscape” in the same way as animals or the weather (see Doherty and Anderson 2008). ‘Rationality’ is now understood to be a value of the white Western world, which has a long history of associating ‘rationality’ or ‘common sense’ with masculinity, and of associating and subsequently denigrating emotionality together with femininity (Browning Cole 1993). As I will demonstrate in this chapter, a Liberal feminist lens highlights the emphasis on the individual PCV in Peace Corps texts, along with themes of personal responsibility, ‘sound judgment’, and gender essentialism.

As mentioned in the literature review above, there is a tendency among Liberal feminists to reinforce a dichotomous view of sex/gender,³¹ and to resort to discussions of sexual violence as an individual problem.³² These tendencies arise from assumptions that there are no (non-)gendered views outside of “what it is to be a man or a woman” (Groenhout 2002, 53), resulting in the use of dichotomous gendered paradigms when

³¹ See, for example, Rosemarie Putnam Tong’s analysis of Betty Friedan’s work (Putnam Tong 1988).

³² As also discussed in the literature review, liberal feminism has a long history. There are many different subsets of this particular strain of feminist thought, some of which contrast with each other. For the sake of this paper, I am focusing primarily upon certain concepts and values that appear with some consistency across different types of liberal feminism, and which are also reflected by Peace Corps culture. This is not to gloss over the differences between, for instance, classical liberal feminism and welfare liberal feminism, but to highlight consistencies that can be used to construct an analytic lens.

thinking about sexual violence (man:woman::rapist:victim); and that it is possible for an individual to avoid being raped by “tak[ing] special precautions” and exercising one’s “sense of judgment” (interview with Susan Brownmiller, Van Syckle 2015). The latter assumption reflects the classical liberal focus on the individual, especially the belief that the individual is endowed with certain rights, *as well as responsibilities*, by virtue of having rationality (i.e. a “sense of judgment”). In the Liberal view, the tradeoff for protection of our rights is that we as individuals exercise rationality, which is a unique to human nature and one reason that we are endowed with rights in the first place.

Liberal feminist activist Susan Brownmiller epitomizes the ‘common sense’-oriented variant of Liberal feminism, asserting that “[i]t’s unrealistic” for women to imagine they can be safe doing the same kinds of activities as men (e.g. walking at night, going to parties), and they must “take special precautions,” such as avoiding drinking ‘too much’ or dressing ‘inappropriately,’ in order to avoid being raped (Van Syckle 2015). In the same vein as Peace Corps, Brownmiller expects women to take responsibility for their behavior and to exercise a “sense of judgment” (ibid).

Liberal feminist philosopher Martha Nussbaum’s view on personal responsibility similarly reflects Peace Corps’ cultural beliefs about gender and violence. In response to the question, “[w]hat can women do” to avoid rape by men who are “above the law,” she offers a litany of “sage advice” about not dating, going home with, or being alone with “such men” (Nussbaum 2015). This situates responsibility for

avoiding sexual violence with women, and again takes a gender dichotomous view of rape.

Of the cases of sexual violence against PCVs that we know about, the majority of them were committed by men against women. However, as PCV victims, themselves, have pointed out, male rape survivors are even less likely to report their assaults than female Volunteers (“Peace Corps Volunteer Affidavits” 2016, 58). This is certainly problematic, as all rape survivors are deserving of support, but further, ignoring the gendered complexities of sexual violence serves to reify a settler colonial heteropatriarchal view of rape. By doing so, Peace Corps reinforces white settler views of gender dichotomy and detaches sexual violence from its contextual specificity.

One of the consequences of this detachment is that the default male rapist in the Peace Corps rape narrative is always a host country national, which strongly implies that the rapist is not white. Moreover, the default rape victim is always a white female Volunteer. This narrative is reified in the “Serving Safely” training video shown to many Volunteers (including my own cohort) during PST, which features three white female Volunteers describing their experiences of sexual violence during service at the hands of male host country nationals (“Peace Corps Volunteer Affidavits” 2016, 82). These Volunteers also explain how their poor judgment and misbehavior led to their own assaults. This training video does double work in upholding the settler colonial heteropatriarchal narrative about white women being raped by anonymous black and

brown men, and in pinpointing responsibility for sexual assault upon the individual (female) Volunteer.

However, the Liberal feminist framework does not challenge the Peace Corps narrative about sexual violence as portrayed in this video, because this framework is similarly invested in the settler colonial heteropatriarchal view of gender as dichotomous and of 'real rape' as tacitly a violation of white women by non-white men. This helps explain Peace Corps' emphasis on the need to control the bodies and behaviors of individual female Volunteers—or more precisely, to urge female Volunteers to control themselves in 'appropriately gendered' ways. Through a Liberal feminist lens, Peace Corps' expectation that Volunteers will "exercise sound judgment," "take personal responsibility," and employ "common sense" seem reasonable, especially given that PCVs operate in the so-called 'Third World,' which to the Western mind is inherently more dangerous than the 'First World.'³³ As we saw in the cases described in Chapter One, Peace Corps training tells Volunteers that they can expect to be held accountable for "the choices [they make]," even when they are the victims of violence (ibid, 14).

The fact remains that, as Liberal feminists (sometimes reluctantly) admit, we live in a dangerous and unequal world, in which we are called upon as reason-wielding individuals to assess risk and avoid harm. Liberal feminists, such as Brownmiller and

³³ Hence one reason development agencies go there to 'improve' developing nations (see Geidel 2015).

Nussbaum, regularly fall into the trap of victim-blaming to which the logic of individualism lends itself (Goodman 2010; Valenti 2015; Marcotte 2015)— a predictable outcome of liberalism. A Liberal feminist is unlikely to take issue with this persistent, if underlying, victim-blaming tone of Peace Corps publications.

Liberal Feminist Critique of Peace Corps

A Liberal feminist lens, though at heart sharing many values with Peace Corps culture, can also be used to critically interrogate Peace Corps texts. Liberal feminist theory does not perfectly align with Peace Corps values and beliefs. Some of the aspects of Peace Corps discourse with which a Liberal feminist would take issue are a lack of specificity on gender and unexamined sexism embedded in Peace Corps texts.

Liberal feminism similarly values the individual as does Peace Corps. Yet stressing the importance of the individual cuts both ways: perhaps the individual is charged with certain responsibilities, but they also carry inherent value, a fact of Liberal feminism that appears to be muddled in Peace Corps discourse. The most recent Peace Corps documents analyzed are more emphatic about the value of the Volunteer, but the agency's habit of making support conditional still remains in many texts (excepting the "Commitment to Sexual Assault Victims"). This is problematic through a Liberal feminist lens, because the frequent discussion of Volunteer obligations and responsibilities is not balanced with any discussion of Volunteer rights. Clearly, Volunteers do have rights, but as revealed in news media interviews and in my own

analysis of Volunteer victim affidavits, Peace Corps makes very little effort of inform Volunteers of the rights—even after a Volunteer has suffered a crime, let alone prior to (Schechter and Ross 2011b; CBS News 2015).

Within a Liberal feminist framework, the lack of gendered specificity in Peace Corps discourse is problematic where sexual violence is discussed, as Peace Corps seems to ignore the gendered nature of these crimes. This framework notices a discrepancy between the gender neutrality of the *PCV Handbooks* and the highly gendered “Procedures for Responding to Sexual Assault” (2015), which implies that rape victims are always female and perpetrators always male (indicated primarily through the use of gendered pronouns). As Liberal feminists frequently replicate this dichotomous view of sex, and by extension the essentialist view of rapists as ‘men’ and their victims as ‘women’ (Brownmiller 1976; Steinem and Kimmel 2014), they would view these changes in the “Procedures” document positively.

Conversely, Peace Corps recommends that, in order to avoid “harassment based on race or gender,” Volunteers “abide by local cultural norms...[and] dress conservatively” (Peace Corps 2015a, 28). Though perhaps “realistic” (Van Sykle 2015), some Liberal feminists would see this as a double standard, because examples of ‘conservative dress’ (long skirts, long sleeves, etc.) are given only for female Volunteers.

In summary, some aspects of Peace Corps language on sexual violence are problematic when viewed through a Liberal feminist lens. Nonetheless, a Liberal

feminist lens tends to sympathize with Peace Corps' close scrutiny of individual behavior and decision-making. This lens also downplays the discrepancy in treatment of different genders in preventing sexual violence, tending to see a focus on female behavior as 'realistic' rather than misogynist. A Liberal feminist framework is much more lenient with the cultural and philosophical basis underpinning this language than is a Native feminist framework, as I will explore in the following chapter.

CHAPTER SIX: A NATIVE FEMINIST ANALYSIS

Native feminists have argued that the United States is an ongoing settler colonial project that seeks to detach itself from historical violence, particularly against Native peoples (Goeman and Denetdale 2009). It is “a multi-fronted project of making the First Peoples of a place extinct; it is a relentless structure, not contained in a period of time” (Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill 2013, 13). I extend this argument to frame Peace Corps as guided by and organized around the same settler colonial impulses, values, and structures as the whole of the U.S. Federal Government.

This settler colonial and imperialist impulse is apparent in President JFK’s first State of the Union address in 1961, which Critical American Studies scholar Molly Geidel correlates with the creation of Peace Corps. JFK stressed that the United States’ “role is essential and unavoidable in the construction of a sound and expanding economy for the entire non-communist world” (2015, x). Further, Geidel links this “capitalist expansion” imperative to the need for Peace Corps, in the words of contributing founder Warren Wiggins, “to produce a psychological impact” that would be felt throughout the (so-called) developing world (ibid, xi). Indeed, the mission of Peace Corps, according to Wiggins, was ultimately “nation-building” in the image of the United States (ibid, 150). Drawing on the perspectives of Native feminists, I will analyze the evolution of Peace Corps policy as it pertains to colonial and imperialist

impulses, including sexual violence, and I will contextualize this analysis in place and time.

Reading Peace Corps texts through the lens of Native feminisms, I found that the deeply-ingrained national tendency of the U.S. to distance itself from the violence it has perpetrated carries over into a recurrent theme of minimization of violence in the *PCV Handbook* and other texts. This minimization occurs where mentions of the potential for violence or risk of 'exposure' to crime against PCVs is tempered by 'facts' and statistics made to sound small, as if the occurrence of violence is negligible. One can hardly be surprised that an entity of the Federal Government would take this tack, seeing as violence of all kinds is regularly normalized in broader American culture. This normalization and desensitization to violence is symptomatic of settler colonialism. Because the success of the settler colonial project depends upon "making the First Peoples of a place extinct" (Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill 2013, 13), violence is irrevocably imbedded in the everyday lives of inhabitants of the settler colonial state, whether we are victims, perpetrators, or both.

Normalization of violence, including sexual violence, figures throughout Peace Corps texts dating from before and after 2010. "Inherent risks" is the phrase that signals this normalization, indicating that Volunteers should *expect* some level of threat to their well-being. Even as the "Safety and Security Highlights" document congratulates Volunteers "on being invited to serve in the Peace Corps," the agency also warns

Volunteers that “health and safety risks are an inherent part of Volunteer service” (2011, 1). With the exception of host country Welcome Books, which describe the specifics of serving in a given country, most Peace Corps documents are void of any mention of the places PCVs will go. “Inherent risks” are frequently referenced, but no context-specific examples are given to illustrate these risks. They are left to the American imagination. Since violence of all kinds, but especially gendered violence such as rape, is normalized in that imaginary, it is unlikely that a prospective Volunteer would question the logic of individual rationality that pervades Peace Corps texts. A Volunteer might be reassured by Peace Corps promises of “training modules designed to reduce potential risks” that provide “techniques and strategies [needed] to adopt a safe and culturally appropriate lifestyle” (ibid, 3).

As described in the previous chapter, Peace Corps’ training video “Serving Safely” upholds the settler colonial heteropatriarchal narrative that rape is a non-white crime committed against white women’s bodies. First, this works to erase the experiences of Volunteer victims who are not white women.³⁴ Second, it overlooks the function of sexual violence in *creating and reinforcing* gender roles. Native feminist scholars such as Paula Gunn Allen and Andrea Smith explain that sexual violence is a colonial tactic of domination and control of Native women’s minds and bodies, and in

³⁴ This erasure is unfortunately echoed in mainstream media coverage of sexual violence in Peace Corps, such as the 20/20 special investigation discussed above (2011), in which all of the Volunteers featured on TV were white women. Feminist scholars must always be mindful of how this narrative serves settler colonial heteropatriarchal interests, even as we should strive for sensitivity in discussing the experiences of rape survivors.

turn, of their cultures and communities (Gunn Allen 1992; Smith 2015). Sexual violence in Peace Corps thus must be contextualized in light of the United States' long history of settler-perpetrated violence. U.S. colonial narratives about violence normalize the occurrence of violence, particularly against women of color, and over time these narratives have downplayed the appearance of racial and ethnic identity as a factor in the perpetration of violence.

This helps explain why another notable feature of Peace Corps texts is that they are devoid of racial, class, dis/ability, age, and gender specificity. Occasionally the third person Volunteer is referred to in the binary "he or she", but other aspects of identity are absent from Peace Corps documents except a brief reference each to racial appearance and to LGBTQ identity in the *PCV Handbook* (2014, 78-80). The stripping of identity markers from 'the Volunteer' who appears in Peace Corps documents would seem to make it easier for any sort of person to imagine themselves in that role: the Volunteer is 'all-American', nothing more need be imagined. That an American Indian person might ponder becoming a Volunteer has clearly not crossed Peace Corps' mind. In fact, avoiding the possibility of an American Indian PCV in its publications means that Peace Corps need not be confronted with what it means 'to be American,' to have 'American ideals,' and so forth. The cisgender, white college graduate is, by default, the identity of 'the Volunteer'.

In the *Handbooks* and other publications, there is a noticeable absence of any in-

depth discussion of the sociocultural nature of sexual violence. The consequences of including such a discussion might be that Peace Corps would have to acknowledge that different forms of violence (e.g. sexual violence, economic violence, colonial violence, etc.) are connected; that sexual violence is influenced by factors such as gender, race, location, and so on, as well as sociocultural constructs that more highly value some lives over others; and that focusing 'preventative' measures primarily upon the individual is misguided and insufficient. Peace Corps, itself, is an agency guided by imperialist directives that assume 'lesser' countries are in need of our superior guidance. The masculinist, racist, xenophobic, and settler colonial impulses that first produced and continue to sustain Peace Corps' mission also discourage the agency from confronting the sociocultural roots of violence.

When the Volunteer is genderless and raceless, this also works to justify Peace Corps' 'one-size-fits-all' approach to violence, which involves individual avoidance strategies by the "exercise of sound judgment" that (theoretically) every person possesses (*PCV Handbook* 2014, 22). It is extremely unlikely that all Americans agree on what counts as 'common sense' or 'sound judgment.' More to the point, Peace Corps' 'anonymous' Volunteer, who is at the same time cisgender and white, elides the complexities of individual cases of rape perpetrated against people who *not* cisgender and white. The anonymity of the Volunteer, capital 'V,' also makes it easier to read about the inherent risks they will potentially be exposed to, the violent crimes they

might experience. Discussions of policies and procedures feel sterile but necessary. The Volunteer is expected to feel that, of course, I need to modify my behavior in a foreign culture; of course, I need to take responsibility for my actions and exercise “sound judgment.”

The clinical, emotionless sterility of Peace Corps discourse, together with its recitation of statistical information, objectifies those Volunteers who experience violence—above all, rape survivors, whose statistics are now known to be drastically underreported (CBS News 2015). But the objectivity of this discourse also obscures the nature of violence in the Peace Corps context by imagining the only Victims to be Volunteers, and the only perpetrators to be anonymous, probably Black or brown strangers of host country origin. Peace Corps statistical reports, themselves, admit that PCVs are most likely to be raped by someone known to them, yet their ‘best practices’ function upon an understanding of sexual violence as mostly or only stranger rape (Peace Corps 2011b).³⁵

Peace Corps Volunteers, like any sort of American, can become victims of sexual violence. They can also become perpetrators. However, Peace Corps does not keep statistics on the perpetration of sexual violence against host country nationals, though it is beginning to come to light that Volunteers are in this way a reflection of their

³⁵ This is not surprising, since Peace Corps’ ‘best practices’ for dealing with sexual violence and supporting rape survivors are derived in part from practices at Peace Corps posts around the world. That is to say, some of their ‘best practices’ were developed in-house.

heteropatriarchal colonial culture: PCVs, too, are capable of sexual violence (CBS News 2015). This is not news to me, of course, and this is reality is part of my motivation for writing this paper. But for many Americans it will be extremely challenging to break through the valorized façade of the “heroic development work[er]” who serves in Peace Corps (Geidel 2015, ix). To begin keeping such statistics would be to admit, first, that Volunteers are capable of such violence, and second, that there is something deeply flawed in Peace Corps, something that “more than 30 reforms” of its policies on sexual violence and other crimes cannot change (CBS News 2015).

This is, in fact, my argument: the reason why PCVs who experience sexual violence are still mistreated, why all survivors and victims are feminized regardless of gender in the Peace Corps context (why victimhood is framed as a failure of ‘sound judgment’ and thus feminine), why the agency allows known rapists to resign instead of firing them (and even to reapply [CBS News 2015]), is because Peace Corps cultural values and beliefs remain essentially untouched and unexamined. It is because of an institutional culture saturated with a gendered colonial impulse, and profoundly divorced from its own history of contributing to colonial violence. PCVs have been called “Marines in velvet gloves” (ibid, 175), and the metaphor is apt: development enacts violences of erasure, exploitation, and assimilation abroad that are cast as noble and humanitarian Stateside. Because they are not overt forms of violence, Peace Corps’ development strategies are rarely connected to colonial or imperialist imperatives in the

American imaginary.

On the level of language, this popular oversight is understandable. Peace Corps is a brilliant self-marketer, its language is clean and thoroughly vetted before it hits the presses. When its language is insensitive, the public is forgiving, allowing the agency time to clean up its act. So long as this happens on the level of language, we accept what is set down on paper. Peace Corps, in true development form, knows what to say and how to phrase it. In this, Peace Corps discourse is aided by widespread imperialist, colonial assumptions about American superiority and 'Third World' inferiority. These assumptions partly explain Peace Corps' choice to feature only white female rape victims in its "Serving Safely" training video, not to mention why ABC News' *20/20* followed suit in its special investigation of sexual violence in Peace Corps.

CHAPTER SEVEN: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TWO FEMINIST LENSES

Liberal Feminism and Native Feminisms: Compatibilities and Challenges

Liberal and Native feminist frameworks differ in several fundamental ways. First, it is the tendency of Liberal feminists to prioritize the individual in ways that generalize or decontextualize an individual's existence relative to society and culture, even where they acknowledge that we as Americans live in a patriarchal society. When Liberal feminists such as Susan Brownmiller say that it is "unrealistic" for women to imagine they can safely drink or dress as they want to, they are functioning on a cultural universalist assumption that imagines a particular type of woman: young, able-bodied, cis, white, Western, middle class—a lot like them, in fact. In doing so, they overlook the racial, class, dis/abled, and gendered particulars at work in the phenomenon of sexual violence, and in individual cases, especially.

Native feminists address these settler colonial heteropatriarchal assumptions by noting that sexual violence, is not, as some Liberal feminists have claimed (Brownmiller 1976), a human constant (Gunn Allen 1992). This assumption is a Western colonial imposition, which is ironic given that sexual violence has regularly been employed as a tactic of colonial domination (Smith 2015). The Native feminist framework brings out colonial assumptions about the nature of violence (that it is an inherent but evadable aspect of the human environment) embedded in the most recent Peace Corps

publications that I analyzed.

Despite Liberal feminist views of rape as a form of gendered violence, Liberal feminists are unlikely to take issue with Peace Corps' recommended strategies for avoiding rape, which generally count on individual female Volunteers modifying their behavior to 'reduce their risk.' Although Liberal feminists strongly opposes patriarchy, they nonetheless regularly talk about the need for specifically *women* to take responsibility for avoiding rape (as discussed in Chapter Three). The failing of the Liberal feminist lens, then, is in noticing that Peace Corps is, itself, deeply patriarchal. Rather than asking institutions and societies to take responsibility for preventing rape, the Liberal feminist subject of responsibility tends to be the individual (woman). Further, the Liberal feminist tends to be satisfied with gestures toward change, such as revision of policies and the creation of a victims' advocate position, rather than proof of change over the long term. To that end, the Liberal feminist lens overlooks an absence of long-term accountability mechanisms to enforce the promises Peace Corps has made to this point. This is particularly important for Volunteers, because the Kate Puzey Peace Corps Volunteer Protection Act of 2011 expires in 2018.

The Native feminist lens immediately recognizes the patriarchal nature of Peace Corps' institutional culture. It also enables us to see how these patriarchal elements (minimization of sexual violence, blaming of—especially female—rape victims) interweave with, and often stem from, settler colonialism. A Native feminist perspective

tells us that until Peace Corps addresses the very assumptions about international development upon which the agency was founded (e.g. unexamined Western involvement in foreign governments, cultures, and economies; superiority of American capitalist and democratic values; etc.), violence will continue to be an endemic part of the Peace Corps Volunteer experience, and undoubtedly for peoples of the host countries where Peace Corps serves.

As seen above, a Native feminist lens draws out very different elements of discourse than does a Liberal feminist lens, which is especially salient when examining Peace Corps texts. Something that both a Liberal feminist lens and a Native feminist lens agree upon, and thus take issue with in Peace Corps texts that gloss this fact, is that violence is a gendered problem. But where Liberal feminists assume that, all rapists being men and all victims being women, violence and victimhood are somehow innately gendered, Native feminists understand sexual violence as a way of reinforcing normative gender behaviors and roles.

CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

Peace Corps has promised to employ ‘best practices’ in helping sexual assault survivors, and on paper this does indeed appear to be true. Having new policies and protocols in place is a half-measure, though, if they continue to go unused and unenforced. Despite the agency claim to have undergone a massive “culture shift” (Peace Corps "Safety & Security FAQs", 3), numbers of PCV victims appears to be higher than ever.³⁶ This ‘culture shift’ may feel drastic for an entity as static as Peace Corps, but the most fundamentally problematic aspects of Peace Corps ideology have yet to be addressed, whether in policy or elsewhere.

In addition to more seriously subjecting its institutional culture to critique, Peace Corps also needs to start tracking and making public certain kinds of information which to this point it has completely ignored. The number of Volunteer-on-Volunteer crimes, in particular sexual violence, is not public knowledge at present, nor do there appear to be any statistics about crimes committed by Volunteers against host country nationals.

It is completely unreasonable for Peace Corps to function on the assumption that such violence doesn’t occur, and I know this firsthand. Not long after my departure from Peace Corps, while I was still in country, another PCV from my group who was thinking about resigning (rather than being administratively separated) told me that he had perpetrated sexual violence against Cambodian women. He didn’t use the word

³⁶ One in five PCVs is the victim of sexual violence, according to reports leaked to CBS News (2015).

rape; he said he had sex with at least two Khmer women who had verbally told him 'no.' He clearly did not understand that he was admitting to being a rapist. He never faced any repercussions from Peace Corps regarding these rapes, and it is unlikely he was the only PCV in Cambodia to have perpetrated some form of sexual violence. But Peace Corps does not, at least to public knowledge, keep statistical data on instances of sexual violence perpetrated by Peace Corps employees, such as Volunteers, nor does it track violence perpetrated against host country nationals. In other words, the deleterious effects of gendered violence perpetrated by American PCVs and staffers against the peoples of countries of service goes undocumented and unexamined.

It goes without saying that, were this information to receive significant public attention, the image of the Peace Corps Volunteer as 'the best of America's best' would be shattered. CBS News and other media outlets have hinted at cases of sexual violence being perpetrated by PCVs, yet there has been no horrified public response, no calls for investigations or release of information from Peace Corps. Perhaps most Americans are not yet ready to digest the fact that even the 'best and brightest' among us are capable of such violence, nor to admit that maybe we shouldn't have placed Peace Corps or its Volunteers on a pedestal in the first place. Our uncritical admiration, as well as our silence, has made all of us complicit in the agency's ability to avoid scrutiny.

At present, cases of Volunteers experiencing dismissal or victim-blaming, or fearing to report their assaults, continue to be reported by the media (Koenen 2013; Mak

2014; Zaslow 2015; Frizell 2015). The sexual assault victims' advocate specially hired by Peace Corps Washington, Kellie Greene, has herself reiterated that Peace Corps' approach to sexual violence continues to be problematic and in conflict with 'industry standards' (CBS News 2015). Peace Corps suspended Greene in November 2015, accusing her of "creating 'an offensive and negative office environment'" (Leach 2016).³⁷ For her part, Greene sought protections under the Whistleblowers Act, and said she thought Peace Corps was singling her out as "creating a negative environment because 'the agency does not want a victim advocate that challenges the status quo ... I witnessed and experienced a great deal of resistance and hostility'" (ibid).

Although she is speaking of racial equality and diversity primarily within institutions of higher education, feminist scholar Sara Ahmed talks about the ideological and literal barriers that stand between self-protective institutional cultures and the people attempting to carry out change within institutions (e.g. diversity workers). Even people who are hired to analyze opportunities for and then carry out change often face incredible resistance from institutions that understand how damaging it is to their reputation to be perceived as racist, misogynist, and so forth. As seen above, victims advocate Kellie Greene came up against barriers of institutional culture when she pushed for change, despite being hired by Peace Corps specifically to address known deficits in informed and compassionate care for Volunteer rape survivors. By

³⁷ Greene was reassigned to a different position in February 2016, after three months of leave.

speaking about sexual violence and the dire need for change within Peace Corps institutional culture, Greene constitutes what Ahmed calls “the cause of injury” to the institution (Ahmed 2012, 146). “Those who speak about” problems within institutional culture (e.g. racism, sexual violence, etc.) “become the blow,” Ahmed says, “as if the institution is ‘the one’ suffering a blow to its reputation” (ibid). When Greene’s calls for change became ‘too loud,’ ‘too extreme,’ she was deemed hostile and offensive by Peace Corps as a method of institutional self-protection.

Ahmed also notes that “writing documents or having good policies becomes a substitute for action” within institutional culture. Hiring a victim’s advocate and publishing policy reform documents and ‘commitment to Volunteer victim’ documents is a way of providing an illusion of change. That is, “[t]he idea that the document is doing something can allow the institution to block recognition of the work that there is to do” (Ahmed 2012, 101). It would appear that despite Peace Corps’ claiming to have changed its policies and approaches to handling cases of sexual violence, there continues to be a pattern of victim-blaming and patronizing attitudes and behaviors. Further, Peace Corps is still not forthcoming about the occurrence of sexual violence against Volunteers—and perhaps more disturbingly, the numbers of perpetrators among its own ranks (CBS News 2015).

For Peace Corps to truly address sexual violence and other forms of violence, the agency will need to address the deeply rooted white settler, masculinist tendencies of

its institutional culture. This would not stop with merely overhauling policies that affect Volunteers, but extends to rethinking its purpose, form, and drive. Peace Corps may have to admit that its Western colonial, heteropatriarchal mission is irreconcilable with certain other desires, such as the desire to frame its Volunteers as serving in solidarity with the peoples of 'developing' nations. The desire to frame the Volunteer as the person most responsible for 'reducing risk' may be irreconcilable with the desire to provide ethical and compassionate care to Volunteer rape survivors.

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