Volunteering abroad:

An uneven path towards critical praxis in international development

by

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Abstract

Despite decades of effort, international development has failed to meaningfully address the problems it seeks to solve. Drawing on existing literature and a Marxist-feminist theoretical framework, I argue that this failure stems from an ideological approach to social change that obscures the social relations at the root of poverty and inequality. This perspective points to a need to better understand how practitioners learn to engage with international development. Accordingly, I focus my research on volunteer abroad programs as a site of learning. Through interviews with ten former volunteers, I explore how their praxis changed through their placement experience. Although the existing literature on these programs does not offer much hope that these programs can foster critical learning, my findings show that some critical learning is possible. This learning is largely self-directed, resulting in uneven movement towards critical consciousness and a praxis that contains elements of both reproduction and transformative change.
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School does not exist in a vacuum, and my Master’s studies coincided with several challenging events in my life outside of school. My parents, my sister, my husband, and several close friends provided the strength and support I needed to persevere and complete this degree. I am incredibly grateful for this circle of people.

Finally, I would never have asked the questions at the root of this thesis were it not for the rich learning environment created by my colleagues in Cameroon and the communities where we worked. It was a privilege to have this opportunity. Through critical research and action, I strive to create this kind of learning opportunity for others, in the pursuit of a more just world for all.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements........................................................................................................... iii
Table of Contents ................................................................................................................ iv

Chapter One: Introduction to the Research ....................................................................... 1
  My Research ....................................................................................................................... 2
  Clarifications ...................................................................................................................... 5
  Terms ................................................................................................................................. 5
  Exceptions ......................................................................................................................... 7
  Outline of the Thesis ....................................................................................................... 8

Chapter Two: The Social Relations of International Development .................................... 10
  Understanding the Present Moment .................................................................................. 11
    Dialectics ......................................................................................................................... 12
    Capitalist Social Relations ............................................................................................. 13
    Racist and Patriarchal Social Relations .......................................................................... 16
    Social Relations, Social Problems ................................................................................ 17
    Learning Social Change ................................................................................................. 20
  A Marxist-Feminist Analysis of International Development ............................................. 23
    Development Goals, Development Failure ................................................................... 24
    Addressing Appearances, Not Relations ....................................................................... 26
    The Social Relations of International Development ..................................................... 28
  Seeking Change within International Development ......................................................... 33

Chapter Three: Understanding and Researching Critical Praxis ...................................... 36
  Fostering Critical Praxis .................................................................................................... 37
    Initial Questioning ......................................................................................................... 38
    Discussion, Reflection, Theory ..................................................................................... 39
    Prefigurative Learning ................................................................................................. 40
    Challenges .................................................................................................................... 41
  Researching Learning in International Development .................................................... 43
    Existing Literature ........................................................................................................ 44
    Research Questions ....................................................................................................... 47
    Research Methods ....................................................................................................... 47
    Data Analysis ............................................................................................................... 50
  Summary of Participants and Placements ......................................................................... 51
    Participants .................................................................................................................... 51
    Placements ..................................................................................................................... 51
    Prior Experience .......................................................................................................... 52
  Summary of Analysis ....................................................................................................... 53

Chapter Four: Analyzing the Learning Environment .......................................................... 54
  Hegemonic Learning Environment ................................................................................ 55
    Program Purpose .......................................................................................................... 57
    Volunteer Roles ............................................................................................................. 64
Chapter One: 
Introduction to the Research

Following my undergraduate degree in International Development Studies, I wanted practical experience in my field. To obtain this experience, I participated in a six-month volunteer abroad program in Cameroon, after which I continued working with a community organization there for two years. This experience was at once educational, incredible, challenging, and confusing. Although my studies had emphasized that international development had a troubled history and I had spent a significant amount of my own time reflecting on the ethics of development work, I was still overwhelmed by the contradictions that I encountered in my work. My concerns centred predominantly around process: I felt that the methods development actors used often made it impossible for them to achieve their goals.

Given my own status as a foreigner, one particularly striking element of my experience was witnessing the interactions between other foreigners, the staff at the organization where I worked, and communities. Every year, the organization hosted a few longer-term volunteers from Europe who were taking a year off between high school and university, as well as several groups of adult volunteers who came for a few weeks to visit or assist with projects they were funding. Having been a volunteer and then being involved in hosting volunteers, I noticed tensions between the volunteers’ objective of ‘helping’ the communities they were visiting and their actual impact.

The impending arrival of a group of volunteers led to a flurry of activity totally separate from – and unnecessary for – the completion of the project itself. Staff at the organization would spend weeks arranging food, transport, accommodation, and touristic activities. They would develop a meal plan based on foods that were locally available but nonetheless familiar to Westerners; local meals that were deemed too ‘different’ were left out. Community members
would take time away from their work to provide unpaid labour cooking, delivering water, and ensuring the security of the group while they were there. Staff went out of their way to find a means of transport that would be more comfortable for the volunteers than the vehicles used locally. At the project site itself, engineers and builders were careful to leave specific portions of the work for the volunteers, portions like plastering and painting that require more enthusiasm than skill. Even still, the engineers and builders would sometimes spend their evenings at the site adding to the work done by the volunteers during the day so that everything could be completed on time.

These arrangements go far beyond the arrangements that would be necessary for hosting a group of visitors from within the country: they imply a different set of norms for white, Western visitors. Through their presence – and the special arrangements made to support them – the volunteers are unintentionally reinforcing racialized ideas of who has power, access to superior living conditions, and control over projects, and who must shoulder the bulk of the work to make this possible. How can a group of volunteers work towards improving the standard of living for community members while simultaneously reinforcing the idea that Westerners require and deserve a higher standard of living? What exactly are volunteers and community members learning through these interactions?

My Research

These experiences, and the questions that emerged from them, led me to my Master’s degree. I wanted to understand why international development continues to embrace practices that have been widely critiqued, and what role learning plays in this process. Seeking an explanatory framework that could help me to understand and answer these questions, I turned to
dialectical historical materialist anti-racist Marxist-feminism. I had only cursory knowledge of Marxism prior to my Master’s degree, but the more I read about it, the more I realized that it held the key to a deeper understanding of both international development and the way practitioners learn about and engage with their work in this field. A dialectical historical materialist Marxist-feminist analysis of international development reveals that the field has failed to achieve its stated goals in part because it relies upon an ideological approach to social change that obscures the capitalist and racist social relations from which conditions like poverty, inequality, and a lack of well-being emerge. As a result, international development has not only failed to develop appropriate interventions, it has also ended up reinforcing the very social relations that generate the problems it is trying to solve.

A dialectical historical materialist anti-racist Marxist-feminist framework also offers a way of understanding how this situation can change. By emphasizing that humans shape the social world through their interactions with each other and with the material world, dialectical historical materialism emphasizes that humans have the agency to change their material conditions. This analysis implies two types of understanding and action, or praxis: a reproductive praxis that accepts the world as it is and so reproduces this world, and a critical praxis that questions and challenges the world in order to change it. In Chapter Two, I will argue that reproductive praxis is prevalent within international development, and that this prevalence helps to explain why the field has so often aided racism and capitalism rather than challenging these systems. To move beyond this situation, international development practitioners must change their understanding and their approach; in other words, they must develop critical praxis rather than reproductive praxis.
Critical praxis emerges from a process of critical learning in which people question the way the world works and replace their ideological understanding of the world with one that sees the social world as composed of dialectical social relations. This critical understanding lays the foundation for new forms of action that address social relations themselves rather than their manifestations. For this reason, fostering critical praxis is an important step in developing more effective approaches to social change.

Therefore, for my thesis research, I wanted to focus on the way practitioners learn about international development in order to better understand what kind of praxis is emerging and identify opportunities for fostering critical praxis within the field. To do so, given my own experiences, I chose to focus on volunteer abroad programs. I interviewed ten former volunteers, asking them to reflect on their placement experience and the ways it had changed or shaped their understanding of international development and their next steps after their placement. By focusing on volunteers’ learning process, I sought to explore whether these programs offer an opportunity for volunteers to engage in a process of critical learning that can coalesce into critical praxis, or whether they reproduce hegemonic approaches to international development.

Although the existing literature on volunteer abroad programs does not offer much hope that these programs can foster critical learning, my findings show that some critical learning is possible within these spaces. This learning is largely self-directed, because the programs themselves enact existing social relations and lack many of the necessary components of critical education. As a result, participants’ critical learning was uneven and they were left with significant uncertainty about how to address the problems they had identified. They did their best to respond to their critiques through the choices they made following their placements but, given the uneven nature of their learning, these responses often had elements of both reproduction and
transformative change. Therefore, while my findings offer hope that critical learning can happen in unlikely environments, it also underscores some of the limits to self-directed processes of critical learning.

**Clarifications**

Before proceeding further, I wish to clarify a few important terms and exceptions that will aid readers in understanding the rest of the thesis.

**Terms.** First, despite the problems inherent in the term ‘developing countries’ (which I will explain more fully in Chapter 2), I use this term throughout the thesis when referring to the countries where international development interventions most commonly occur. I do so because it is the term that best describes the spaces to which I am referring. While the more recent term ‘Global South’ attempts to avoid the problematic binary of ‘developing’ and ‘developed’ countries by adding the nuance that poverty and inequality can exist even within a wealthy country, my research focused specifically on volunteers who go to countries that are considered low- or middle-income. I did not interview volunteers who had done placements at organizations working with poor or marginalized communities within Canada or other wealthy countries. For this reason, the nuanced nature of ‘Global South’ does not accurately capture the spaces in which my participants were working and learning. Furthermore, most of the participants used the term ‘developing countries’ in their reflections, and so using this term in my own writing ensures consistency.

‘Volunteer abroad’ is a very broad term that encompasses short-term, group visits to developing countries (e.g. school building trips), longer-term solo travel for high school graduates (e.g. gap years), mid- to late-career development volunteering, and employment
transition programs that target recent university graduates and young professionals. The eligibility criteria for this study limited participants to those who had done this last type of program. The terms used for these varied programs in the existing literature are inconsistent, despite efforts by Sherraden et.al. (2006) to create a typology. For this thesis, I have decided to use the term ‘volunteer abroad’ when speaking generally about the full range of programs and ‘development volunteering’ to refer to the specific category of programs that I am studying. This classification is imperfect, as ‘development volunteering’ most often refers to long-term placements and would therefore only apply to some of the placements discussed in this study. Nonetheless, I find it to be the best term available for the category of program I discuss, because it captures the idea that these programs are explicitly located in the field of international development and are often conceptualized as an entry-point into this sector, in contrast with shorter-term or gap-year trips.

Given the specific nature of the programs examined here, and the timeframes included in the eligibility criteria (explained more fully in Chapter Three), I have tried to be quite careful in removing any details that could possibly be used to identify the participants. There are a limited group of programs that participants could have undertaken, and each program sends a relatively small number of volunteers to specific countries each year. Therefore, in addition to using pseudonyms for participants, I have chosen to remove the names of the sending organizations, the locations of the placements, and in some cases, even the name of the specific role that participants held overseas. When I refer to the ‘sending organization,’ I am referring to the Canadian institution that organized the volunteer placement. ‘Placement organization’ refers to the overseas organization where the participant carried out their placement. Similarly, ‘placement country’ refers to the country in which volunteers lived during their placement.
Finally, when I refer to the specific individuals who participated in this study, I use the term ‘participant.’ In contrast, I use the term ‘volunteer’ to refer to the broader category of people who have undertaken volunteer abroad programs or to generalize beyond my specific participants.

**Exceptions.** As indicated earlier, I interviewed ten participants for this research. While I analyzed all ten interviews, I draw most heavily on nine of them. The last interview I carried out generated data that was somewhat different and much less detailed than the rest of the interviews. I attribute this result to several factors. First, some people are naturally more concise in their speech than others. Second, given that it was the last interview, I was likely tired and therefore less thorough in attempting to draw out more detailed answers from the participant. Third, we experienced a very bad Skype connection during the interview; this situation likely contributed both to the participant’s brevity and my own hesitation to follow-up and dig deeper. Finally, this participant had followed a slightly different trajectory than the other participants and undertook her placement for slightly different reasons, making it harder to compare her responses and experiences to those of the other participants, who were otherwise remarkably similar in their trajectories and experiences. These are all important lessons about recruitment and interviewing that I will incorporate into future research.

This thesis would not have been possible without the enthusiastic participation of the ten participants. I am grateful that these strangers gave me the opportunity to learn from and about their experiences, and I have tried in every way to treat their experiences and reflections with fairness and respect. From this perspective, I wish to emphasize that at no point am I judging the participants for their thoughts or choices, nor is my intent to frame their level of criticality as a personal achievement or failure. Rather, my goal is to describe and explore their experiences as a whole in order to better understand the process of critical learning and the barriers faced in this
process. While I have tried to be open in pointing to limits and barriers, participants’ reflections have also led me to emerge from this process feeling hopeful about the possibilities for generating critical praxis and creating social change, even within a hegemonic environment.

Outline of the Thesis

In the next chapter, Chapter Two, I explain the elements of dialectical historical materialist anti-racist Marxist-feminism that are most relevant to this thesis. I then draw on this theoretical framework to shape my discussion of the existing critiques of international development and the possibilities for change through critical praxis. This chapter introduces the themes and concepts that will shape the discussion of my findings in later chapters.

In Chapter Three, I review the critical adult education literature in order to identify the central components of critical learning. I then introduce my research project in more detail. I explain the research questions and methods, briefly review existing literature on volunteer abroad programs, and introduce my participants and their placements.

I present and discuss my findings in three sections. First, in Chapter Four, I draw on the interviews with participants and a review of sending organization and funder websites in order to explore the environment in which participants are learning. In Chapter Five, I explore the critiques and observations that participants developed through their placement, and attempt to understand whether these critiques are indeed ‘critical’ in the dialectical, historical materialist sense of the term. Finally, in Chapter Six, I look at how participants incorporated their emerging critiques into the decisions they made following their placements.
I conclude the thesis by discussing the ways in which my findings diverge from existing literature and some factors that could explain this divergence. I also offer a series of recommendations for both volunteer-sending programs and critical educators.
Chapter Two:  
The Social Relations of International Development

In this chapter, I lay the groundwork for my research project and data analysis by explaining core elements of my theoretical framework and applying them to an analysis of international development. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, I was motivated to pursue a Master’s degree in large part because I sought to understand why international development has failed to achieve its goals despite decades of effort, and what role learning plays in this process. As I have become more familiar with dialectical historical materialist anti-racist Marxist-feminism over the past two years, I have found it to be incredibly useful in understanding both the social world and processes of social change. It provides a solid foundation for efforts to rethink international development and build a more just world.

The theoretical context provided in this chapter is intended to establish a common starting point for the discussion of my research findings in the subsequent chapters. One of the core tenets of qualitative research is that the researcher’s assumptions and political perspective should be made clear (Kincheloe, McLaren & Steinberg 2011, p.167). By establishing my theoretical framework and the political position on social change that it implies, I hope to ensure my readers can understand and engage with the following discussion more effectively. Although some researchers may contest this idea, I do not believe that having a political position clouds the validity of my research. Indeed, in the same way that Paula Allman argues education is always prescriptive and directive (2010, p.190), I understand all research to contain within it the political perspective of the researcher. Numerous critical scholars have affirmed that research and scholarship that does not take an explicit stance on injustice often ends up implicitly supporting it (Carpenter & Mojab 2011; Kress, Malott & Porfilio, 2013). Rather than attempting to achieve an impossible ‘neutrality,’ validity in critical qualitative research stems from clearly
stating the researcher’s position, internal coherence, rich description, and the inclusion of sufficient data so that readers can evaluate the findings for themselves (Creswell 2013). I strive to achieve all of these aspects of validity while adhering to my political position that the world in its present moment is fundamentally unjust and requires transformation.

Accordingly, I begin this chapter by briefly summarizing the core elements of dialectical historical materialist anti-racist Marxist-feminism, what this theory reveals about our current moment, and the understanding of learning and social change that emerges from it. Based on this foundation, I then take a closer look at international development. I suggest that, like many other institutions and systems under capitalism, international development enacts an ideological approach to social change that addresses the appearances of social relations rather than the relations themselves, and that this approach is one of the reasons the field has failed to make meaningful progress towards its goals. Furthermore, I argue that by failing to understand the underlying social relations of the present moment, international development often ends up supporting the very social relations that drive the problems it is attempting to resolve. As a result, it reproduces these problems rather than solving them. I conclude the chapter by taking a closer look at how this pattern could be disrupted through the development of a critical praxis that reveals and intervenes upon the underlying social relations. The discussion of how critical praxis can be fostered is taken up in the next chapter and in my research.

**Understanding The Present Moment**

In this section, I provide a brief summary of the elements of Marxist theory that are most relevant to this research project. To do so, I draw on the work of scholars such as Allman (2010), Carpenter and Mojab (2017), and Ollman (2003). Readers who are interested in a more detailed
analysis of this theoretical framework could turn to any of the abovementioned works for more information. I begin my summary by explaining the dialectical method of understanding that underpins Marx’s analysis, and then take a closer look at the capitalist, racist and patriarchal social relations that are revealed by a dialectical method of inquiry. These are the social relations that define the present moment. I then explore the specific understanding of learning and social change that emerges from this perspective and what it implies about how the social relations of our present moment are reproduced, and how they can be changed.

**Dialectics.** Marx’s insightful analysis of capitalism was made possible by his dialectical method of inquiry. It is this method that rendered the patterns and interconnections of the capitalist system visible and understandable, allowing him to describe and explain these patterns and the system as a whole. A dialectical approach understands the social world as composed of sets of relations rather than things (Carpenter & Mojab 2011; Ollman 2003). These relations are dialectical, in that each relation is “a single whole comprised of a unity of two opposites, which could not exist as they presently do or have done historically outside of the way in which they are related” (Allman 2010, p.36). As a single whole comprised of two unified opposites, a dialectical relation contains two internally-related components. In other words, their relation to each other is an essential part of their composition (Ollman 2003). They are not two separate elements whose connection is external to their being; rather, their relation to each other is what constitutes and shapes their identity. What something ‘is’ cannot be understood outside of its relation with a mutually determining opposite (Allman 2010). A change in one opposite will change the other opposite, and the way they relate: it will change the dialectical relation and its constituent parts.
Allman’s definition also reveals another aspect of dialectical relations: they are constantly changing, and thus historically specific. Given that any change in one element of the relation fundamentally changes the other elements and the way they relate, dialectical relations are not static. As internally-related opposites, the phenomena in a dialectical relation define each other, and thus depend on each other. However, when the development of one phenomenon is incompatible with the development of the phenomenon with which it is dialectically related, their relationship is contradictory (Ollman 2003). In this case, “their paths of development do not only intersect in mutually supportive ways but are constantly blocking, undermining, otherwise interfering with, and in due course transforming one another” (Ollman 2003, p.17). These internal contradictions generate struggle, and, through this struggle, change. In addition, when external conditions change, these differences impact the phenomena in the relation in different ways, provoking further change and struggle (Ollman 2003). The result is that dialectical relations are in constant motion both in response to internal contradiction and struggle, and to changes in the material conditions in which they exist (Carpenter & Mojab 2011, p.5). Their essence at any given moment is unique to their relation in that moment and the historical, material conditions that shape it.

In summary, a dialectical method of inquiry understands the social world as composed of historically-specific, constantly changing, internally-related, contradictory social relations. Therefore, understanding the social world requires understanding the social relations that constitute it.

**Capitalist Social Relations.** The capitalist mode of production dominates our present moment. It shapes human activity and interaction in almost all sectors and facets of life, including international development. As a result, understanding capitalism is a necessary and
important part of understanding and analyzing social life generally and international
development specifically. Accordingly, in the following sections, I provide a brief summary of
capitalist social relations and connect these relations to international development and the
problems it tries to solve. This understanding will facilitate the discussion in later sections on
why international development has failed and how critical praxis can offer a path towards more
meaningful change. It will also provide the conceptual tools required for exploring volunteers’
learning and praxis in later chapters.

From a dialectical Marxist perspective, capitalism is much more than a mode of
production. It is a social structure, composed of “the structured relations of human beings into
which they enter routinely in order to produce their material existence” (Allman 2010, p.39).
Although these relations are concretized and legitimized by organizations, physical structures,
and political and legal systems, at its core, “the real or material substance of the structure is the
daily, sensuous activity of human beings” (Allman 2010, p.39). In order to understand
capitalism, it is necessary to understand the dialectical social relations that constitute it, and the
ways in which it is reproduced through human participation in these relations.

The capitalist mode of production is focused on the production and accumulation of
value. Value is generated by labour-power as it transforms raw materials into commodities
(Colley 2015). Accumulating value thus requires two conditions: a supply of labour-power, and a
means to ensure ownership over the value generated by this labour-power. Privatizing the means
of production facilitates both of these conditions because without access to a means of
subsistence, most people are forced to sell their labour-power to survive (Colley 2015). The
minority of the population who own the means of production purchase this labour-power and, by
doing so, gain control over both the inputs to the production process and the value that is
produced (Colley 2015). By paying labourers for only a portion of the value they produce – just enough for them to sustain themselves and reproduce the next generation of workers – capitalists are able to retain and accumulate the surplus-value (Colley 2015). The relation between labour and capital is the central relation of capitalism because it is this relation that enables the production and accumulation of value.

The relation between capital and labour is dialectical. As internally-related opposites, neither labour nor capital can be defined without reference to the other. Capital only makes sense in relation to labour, and vice versa. Similarly, they depend on each other. Labour depends on capital for its survival, while capital depends on labour to generate value. However, this relationship is also contradictory. Given the aim of accumulating capital, capitalists have little incentive to provide labour with any portion of the value generated beyond what is necessary for labour’s survival and reproduction. As a result, capital constantly exploits labour, negating what labour could be otherwise. This relation of exploitation leads labour and capital into a condition of constant struggle, as labour tries to shift the socially accepted standard of living to retain a larger portion of the value it generates, while capital works to retain as much value as possible (Allman 2010). This struggle has changed the appearance of capitalism over time, by, for example, establishing a minimum wage and other basic social protections, but it has not changed the fundamental essence of the relation. The means of production and the majority of value are still controlled by a minority of people who must exploit labour in order to retain their powerful position, while the majority must engage in waged labour – and therefore participate in their own exploitation – in order to survive. The defining relation of capitalism is, and must always be, the dialectical relation between labour and capital; this relation is intrinsically exploitative.
As a system of historically specific social relations, capitalism has changed over time in response to its internal contradictions and external changes. It has evolved from a mercantile form that relied on colonization to obtain the land, resources, and labour required to sustain and increase production, to a monopoly capitalism that relies on and is extended through imperialism. Carpenter and Mojab argue that imperialism differs from earlier stages of capitalism in several ways: production and capital are concentrated, forming monopolies; bank and industrial capital have merged to create financial capital and a financial oligarchy; the export of capital is prioritized over the export of commodities; imperialist powers attempt to establish spheres of influence that can provide access to resources and markets; and territorial division creates competition and often war (2017, pp.115-116). Imperialism has been facilitated and extended by the adoption of neoliberal policies that aim to create favourable conditions for the accumulation of capital; as I will explain shortly, international development has also been implicated in imperialist processes (Georgeou 2012). As imperialism extends capitalism’s global reach, an increasing number of people are dispossessed from their traditional means of subsistence and forced to engage in capitalist social relations of waged labour (Ferguson & McNally 2001). As a result, capital’s control over the means of production has been strengthened and the available labour reserve has increased dramatically. In the current moment, the intrinsically exploitative social relations of capitalism have been globalized.

**Racist and Patriarchal Social Relations.** Capitalism is supported by, and intertwined with, racist and patriarchal social relations that use socially-defined categories of difference as a way of exercising power. Bannerji describes socially-defined categories such as race and gender as “a way – a power-inscribed way – of reading or establishing difference, and finding a long-lasting means for reproducing such readings, organization, and practice” (2005, p.148). These
power-inscribed readings of difference are used to justify the subjugation of specific people based on ascribed characteristics such as race or gender, while affirming the superiority of other categories of people. In this sense, these relations of difference are relations of power and oppression.

Although gendered and raced oppression predates capitalism, anti-racist Marxist-feminist scholars argue that these relations were essential preconditions of capitalism and now help to organize social relations under capitalism (Carpenter & Mojab 2017). For example, the subjugation of women and people of colour facilitates capital accumulation by creating pools of cheap, disposable labour and enforcing many forms of unpaid labour (Ferguson & McNally 2001; Murphy 2015). As a result of these interconnections, relations of class, race, and gender cannot be considered separately from each other; indeed, to do so would be to ignore the particularities of how capitalism (or racism, or patriarchy) operates (Bannerji 1995). As Bannerji explains, “‘race’ cannot be disarticulated from ‘class’ any more than milk can be separated from coffee once they are mixed” (2005, p.149). It is these mutually constitutive relations that shape how individuals experience capitalism, and lead different people to experience capitalism differently. Therefore, understanding these relations, and their interactions with capitalist relations, is crucial to understanding the present moment.

**Social Relations, Social Problems.** In the preceding sections, I have explained that capitalism is a system of social relations, and one that is inherently exploitative. I have also pointed out that capitalist social relations are inseparable from, and mediated by, racialized and gendered relations of oppression. This explanation can seem abstract, so in this section I discuss some of the ways these exploitative and oppressive social relations manifest. This discussion will
also clarify the ways in which these social relations underpin the very problems that international
development attempts to address.

What does it mean that capitalist social relations are exploitative? To begin with,
inequality is inherent in a system in which a small minority accumulate most of the wealth while the majority of the population produces this wealth but does not benefit from it. In addition, capitalists can increase the proportion of surplus-value they retain in the production process by reducing the cost of the inputs (Allman 2010). Given that the major input in the value creation process is labour-power, capitalists have an incentive to cheapen the cost of labour. One way to do so is by ensuring that there is a larger pool of workers available than there are jobs for these workers. In this situation, workers are ‘disposable’ because there are unemployed workers available to take their place if they refuse to accept lower wages or bad working conditions (Ferguson & McNally 2001). As mentioned above, capitalist accumulation is dispossessing more and more people as it spreads around the world, creating an ever-larger pool of available workers. In this situation, workers are easily replaceable, and therefore capitalists do not need to acquiesce to worker demands for better wages or working conditions. When wages are low or stagnant, workers are often forced to live in poverty. Furthermore, with more workers than there are jobs, unemployment is unavoidable, increasing the number of people in poverty. Finally, it is worth noting that in an intrinsically unequal system, even workers with decent jobs experience relative poverty: they are poor in comparison to those who control the means of production and the resulting wealth. Poverty and inequality, therefore, emerge out of the exploitation that is inherent within capitalist social relations.

There is significant overlap between the individuals who control government and those who control the means of production; for this reason, government often ends up supporting the
needs of capital rather than those of workers (Hanieh 2013). For example, in the current era, governments have consistently advanced neoliberal policies such as deregulation, liberalization, and privatization that are intended to create better conditions for capital (Georgeou 2012). Deregulation and trade liberalization allow companies to move their operations to environments with abundant materials and cheap labour, and to move goods freely across borders to markets (Chang 2000). Deregulation also means that governments cannot enforce better working conditions, further cheapening the cost of labour and worsening the living conditions of the majority. In addition, the privatization of social services like healthcare or education creates another sphere for capital accumulation; however, it also renders these services inaccessible to many people, who must now pay for access to services that fulfill basic human rights. In these ways, policies intended to support and extend capitalism also end up worsening the well-being and conditions of life for the majority of the world’s population. In this way, they perpetuate and aggravate the problems that international development attempts to resolve.

Finally, all of the circumstances described above are mediated by racialized and gendered relations. For example, while goods can move freely across borders, people cannot. Processes of dispossession displace people and neoliberal policies make it hard for them to survive, forcing them to migrate (Ferguson & McNally 2001). However, the immigration regimes of Western nations set out strict rules about who can legally live and work in these countries (Ferguson & McNally 2001). The result is an enforced precarity, in which mostly racialized people are placed in tenuous positions that prevent them from accessing good jobs or fighting for better conditions at the jobs they can get. Another example is the gender pay gap, in which women are systematically paid less than men for doing equivalent work. Patriarchal and racist social relations heighten and shape the impacts of capitalist social relations for specific groups,
worsening the conditions of life for racialized and gendered groups of people. Conditions like poverty, inequality, and lack of well-being are fundamentally social problems, emerging out of the engrained patriarchal, racist, capitalist social relations of the present moment. Therefore, addressing these conditions effectively requires addressing the underlying social relations.

**Learning Social Change.** As I have just described, the present moment is defined by oppressive and exploitative social relations that force millions of people into poverty and remove their ability to live a meaningful, secure life. I, like the volunteers I interviewed for this thesis, refuse to accept these conditions. We seek a way of relating to each other and to the material world that allows everyone’s needs to be met in a sustainable manner, rather than guaranteeing the destruction of people and the planet. My participants and I chose to pursue this objective by engaging in international development through volunteer abroad programs. However, participants’ experiences, discussed in Chapters Four to Six, reveal that this method of intervention can often reproduce the existing system rather than changing it. To understand why our efforts to generate social change can end up reproducing the status quo, it is first necessary to have a deeper understanding of how human activity shapes the world.

A dialectical historical materialist Marxist-feminist theoretical framework offers a specific understanding of social change as a process rooted in human consciousness and action, or praxis. As discussed earlier in this chapter, this theoretical perspective sees the world as composed of social relations. In other words, social reality is not a discrete, independent structure; rather, it is composed of human activity (Allman 2010; Carpenter & Mojab 2017). If human activity is central in shaping and re-shaping the social world, it means that humans can change their social world. However, the way humans act in the world is shaped by the way they understand the world, or their consciousness. This consciousness, in turn, emerges from experience in and of the
world. Therefore, action and thought are unified in a dialectical relation referred to as praxis. This theory of praxis connects learning and social change as two components of the same unified process. Humans are constantly learning through their actions in the world, and these actions generate social change. This theory emphasizes the centrality of human agency in creating change; the question, then, is what type of change is created.

Allman argues that there are two different types of praxis (2010). When we participate unquestioningly in the world as we find it, we reproduce that world. In contrast, if we consciously alter the way we act within the world, we are changing ourselves and our relations with others and, by doing so, re-shaping the world. Allman referred to these two possibilities as reproductive or uncritical praxis and revolutionary or critical praxis, respectively (2010, p.155). While reproductive praxis can describe the effects of capitalist social relations, it does not connect these effects to the social relations that are their root cause; as a result, it tends to reproduce these relations (Carpenter & Mojab 2017). Critical praxis, on the other hand, attempts to understand the relations and contradictions at the heart of capitalism; this understanding provides a better foundation for attempting to address these relations and move beyond them (Carpenter & Mojab 2017).

Reproductive praxis is by far the most common type of learning to emerge within capitalist social relations, both because it arises naturally from our experiences of capitalist social relations and because it is reinforced by the capitalist actors it benefits. Reproductive praxis is facilitated by, and emerges from, an ideological method of understanding the world. Ideological reasoning separates elements of the social world from their intrinsic relations, theorizes them as abstract concepts, and then uses these abstractions to explain the world around us (Carpenter & Mojab 2017, p.15). This method of reasoning is powerful, because it aligns with the fragmented way in
which we experience social relations within capitalism. It appears to be true, despite offering only a partial understanding of the world around us (Allman 2010). Carpenter and Mojab offer the example of purchasing cereal at a grocery store (2017, p.5). Our experience of purchasing cereal at a store is totally disconnected from an awareness of the other people involved in the process of producing cereal and of our relation to these people. Experiencing the world in this fragmented way makes it easy to think of ‘things’ rather than the relations that produce them.

This way of thinking, and the ideas it generates, are further reinforced by education, media, and other systems organized and controlled by capitalist actors, because ideological thinking benefits this class. By obscuring social relations, ideological thinking obscures both capitalism’s inherently exploitative nature and the role of human agency in shaping the social world (Carpenter & Mojab 2011). From this perspective, the social world appears natural and efforts to change it appear futile (Ng 1993). In this way, ideological thinking leads to an acceptance of the way the world is now. Having accepted the world the way it is, people do not question the accepted ways of acting in this world, and so they continue to act in a way that reproduces capitalist social relations. This method of thinking and the praxis it generates benefit the capitalist elite by maintaining the current system of social relations, and is thus encouraged by them. In this way, it becomes a pervasive way of thinking about the world and our place in it.

In contrast, critical praxis works to identify the social relations that shape the world, understand our role in upholding or changing them, and change the way we act in the world accordingly. Developing this understanding requires deconstructing the engrained ideological way of thinking and developing a dialectical understanding of the world (Allman, 2010). This understanding allows us to consider the way we act in the world in the context of the social relations our actions participate in and perpetuate, and to begin to seek ways to change our
actions based on the world we wish to create (Allman 2010). In Allman’s words, critical praxis enables us to “critically question the existing relations and conditions and actively seek to transform or abolish them and to create relations and conditions that will lead to a better future” (Allman 2010, p.155). Developing critical praxis is not easy within the context of the existing social order, because this order surrounds us and thus continues to influence our consciousness and actions even as we struggle to question and change the existing order (Allman 2010). Therefore, while critical praxis is a necessary step in moving towards social change, it is difficult to achieve. I will return to the question of how it can be fostered in the next chapter.

So far, I have established that the present moment is characterized by exploitative and oppressive social relations, and that these relations are reproduced through human praxis. I have also differentiated between reproductive praxis that reproduces the world as it is, and critical praxis that works to transform the world. In the next section of this chapter, I apply this theoretical understanding to an analysis of international development to reveal the impact of reproductive praxis and the potential of critical praxis.

**A Marxist-Feminist Analysis of International Development**

For decades, international development actors have been attempting to improve the quality of life in marginalized communities around the world. Despite these years of effort, progress towards these goals remains disappointing. In this section, I apply the theoretical framework described above to existing critiques of international development in an attempt to understand why problems such as poverty and inequality persist, despite growth and innovation in the field of international development. I argue that international development has failed to achieve significant progress towards its goals because it has focused on the manifestations of
capitalist and oppressive social relations, rather than the relations themselves. By failing to understand and intervene on these relations, international development has often ended up perpetuating the very problems they are attempting to solve. In other words, by relying on an ideological understanding of the world, international development has reproduced rather the social world rather than changing it. By the end of this section, I will have introduced two core themes that shape my understanding of the problems with international development, and offered my understanding of what a ‘critical’ approach to international development might look like. These elements will frame the discussion of my findings in later chapters.

**Development Goals, Development Failure.** Since the late 1940s, international development has been framed as a way to achieve a better world by reducing poverty and increasing well-being for poor and marginalized communities. Of course, there are a multitude of actors within international development representing a wide range of perspectives and approaches. As such, it can be difficult to discuss the sector as a whole. I have chosen to use the United Nations (UN) as a representation of the field’s overall goals and approach. Despite its imperfections, the UN represents one of the few forums where all countries can participate actively, if not equally. In addition, many non-governmental organizations and funding bodies contribute to these discussions and use the goals and standards set out by the UN to shape their programming. From this perspective, UN goals and resolutions can be seen to represent areas of general consensus among international development actors.

At its founding in 1945, the UN was given a mandate to, among other things, secure peace, protect human rights, and promote social progress (United Nations 1945). Over the decades, the dominant approach to achieving these goals has shifted and evolved. From a focus on economic growth through infrastructure development in the 1950s and 1960s, the
development sector shifted to a more nuanced approach that prioritized the basic needs of the poor rather than overall growth in the 1970s and 1980s, a focus on the economic and institutional contexts that could enable development in the 1980s and 1990s, and, most recently, towards the more holistic idea of sustainable development (Morrison 1998). Despite these changes in approach, the overall goals have remained strikingly similar. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted at the UN in 2015, sets out a series of goals for the international community that will allow them to “free the human race from the tyranny of poverty and want, and to heal and secure our planet” by 2030 (United Nations 2015a). The Agenda includes goals such as ending poverty, reducing inequality, and providing good health and quality education to all (United Nations 2015b). Despite changes in approach and methodology between 1945 and 2015, the overarching goals of the international development sector have remained consistently focused on ending poverty, reducing inequality, and promoting well-being.

However, despite decades of effort, progress has been disappointing. Millions of people around the world still live in poverty (World Bank 2018), and claims that the number of people living in poverty has gone down sometimes owe more to changes in measurement tools than actual reductions in poverty (Smillie 2016, pp.91-92). Meanwhile, inequality is increasing, as a small minority captures an increasingly significant portion of global wealth (OECD 2018). Furthermore, many people around the world, even in ‘developed’ countries, do not have access to adequate social services such as healthcare and education. Of course, the world has changed over the past 70 years and living conditions have improved for many. Nonetheless, as Paula Allman points out, incredible technological advances and massive increases in wealth and resources mean that we have the capacity to ensure everyone’s basic needs are met (2010, p.1). In this context, the progress made towards ending poverty and reducing inequality over the past
decades has been shockingly slow and inadequate. So why is it that, despite the capacity that exists worldwide, the goals of international development have remained out of reach?

**Addressing Appearances, Not Relations.** As I discussed in the ‘Social Relations, Social Problems’ section above, poverty, inequality, and lack of well-being are all rooted in patriarchal, racist capitalist social relations. In other words, the problems that international development is attempting to address emerge from the social relations that define the present moment. As a result, addressing these problems will require addressing the social relations that generate them.

However, international development interventions most often approach these social problems as technical ones, ignoring and obscuring the underlying social relations. Ferguson’s (1990) case study of a CIDA project in Lesotho offers perhaps the most detailed and complex description of how development projects come to be understood as disconnected from the historical material reality in which they operate. Ferguson’s thorough analysis of a World Bank country report on Lesotho reveals that development practitioners conceptualize developing countries in a way that ignores, misinterprets, or obfuscates historical, social and political relations; by removing these relations, the problem becomes a technical one, clearing the way for technocratic development interventions (1990). For example, the World Bank report ignores Lesotho’s role as a reserve of racialized labour for South Africa’s extractive sector, instead presenting the country as:

a nation of farmers, not wage labourers; a country with geography, but no history; with people, but no classes; values, but no structures; administrators but no rulers; bureaucracy but no politics. Political and structural causes of poverty in Lesotho are systematically erased and replaced with technical ones, and the ‘modern’, capitalist, industrialised nature of the society is systematically understated or concealed. One arrives at a picture of a basically agricultural economy which, although potentially prosperous, is now producing under primitive, ancient conditions lacking basic infrastructure and modern techniques, and so has been unable to accommodate record population growth. (Ferguson 1990, p.66)
Such a representation clears the way for development interventions that target agricultural production, infrastructure improvements, and market access. Development becomes a fundamentally technical, depoliticized endeavour.

Of course, the problems are not technical, and so these interventions often fail to have their intended effect. However, as Ferguson points out, they have an impact nonetheless. In Ferguson’s study, although the development project achieved none of its objectives, it did extend the reach of the state and, by doing so, the political-capitalist elite’s control over rural production (1990, p.253). Based on his case study, Ferguson argues that development is “an ‘anti-politics machine’, depoliticizing everything it touches, everywhere whisking political realities out of sight, all the while performing, almost unnoticed, its own pre-eminently political operation” (1990, p.xv). This case study makes it clear that ignoring or failing to understand social relations does not allow one to act outside of them; instead, it can lead to unintended consequences such as reproducing or advancing exploitation and oppression.

Although Ferguson’s analysis is now more than thirty years old, his conclusions still aptly describe the way international development is practiced. In the 1990s, the concept of ‘results-based management’ became the main organizing principle within international development (Morrison 1998). This framework evaluates the success of projects based on their results, rather than inputs and activities (Smillie 2016). Although measuring for results seems like a good idea, the results-based management framework is not well-suited to conceptualizing and addressing complex social relations. Instead, to ensure their work can be conveyed within this framework, practitioners and funders prioritize projects that can generate tangible, quantifiable results within the duration of the project cycle (Morrison 1998). As a result, current ‘best practices’ within the development sector continue to favour technocratic interventions.
What Ferguson refers to as ‘anti-politics’ is, in Marxist terms, an ideological understanding of international development that abstracts development practice from the relations within which it is embedded, and disconnects development problems from the underlying relations that generate them.

**The Social Relations of International Development.** Although an ideological understanding fails to see social relations, it nonetheless acts within and on them. Conceptualizing international development interventions as technical does not mean they exist outside of social relations; it simply obscures the ways in which these interventions are implicated in social relations. Therefore, in this section, I explore how international development interventions interact with the social relations of our present moment. I argue that development interventions tend to reproduce and extend the dominant racist and capitalist social relations of our time, and therefore the very problems they intend to resolve. To facilitate the analysis, I have divided it into two parts. First, I focus on the presence and importance of a racial division of power within international development. I suggest that international development relies on a dialectical relation between white expertise and racialized need to justify continued intervention. Second, I examine the impact of the interventions facilitated by these racialized relations, and suggest that these interventions predominantly benefit capitalist actors. These two sets of relations intertwine to constitute international development practice in its current form. The themes of racialized expertise and advancing capitalism will shape the discussion of my data in later chapters, and facilitate an analysis of what constitutes critical praxis within the field of international development.

**Expertise as a Racialized Relation.** In its current form, international development relies on the idea that the Western model of development is the only model possible. This assumption
can be seen in – and is perpetuated by – the categorization of Western countries as developed and other countries as developing. This categorization has been so normalized that it appears natural; however, it relies on socially created distinctions between ‘races’ and the erasure of non-Western understandings of development. This distinction preserves the powerful position of Western actors within international development specifically and the international system more generally.

Although the categorization of countries as ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ appears to be based in ‘objective’ data collection processes, it has its roots in colonization. Before the data-based ranking system was developed, decisions about which countries could be considered as ‘developing’ countries were based largely on colonial geographies and memories (Sobocinska 2017). These colonial geographies were based on racial differences constructed and advanced by colonizers to justify their presence in other countries as a ‘civilizing mission’ (Stanford 2015). Through these racial categories, violent processes of colonization took on moral and ethical connotations, allowing governments to explain away the underlying brutality and exploitation and maintain popular support at home. By drawing on colonial geographies to categorize countries, international development is also drawing on and perpetuating socially-constructed ideas of race that have been used to oppress people in developing countries for centuries.

Categorizing Western countries as ‘developed’ conflates ‘development’ with the Western model of development. In order to uphold the Western model as the singular form of development, other concepts of development must be erased (Dei 2014). This erasure continues the decimation of indigenous ways of life initiated through processes of colonization. Colonization violently disrupted the non-capitalist relations that had previously sustained indigenous societies and forcibly incorporated them into capitalism through enslavement and
dispossession (Coulthard 2014, pp.7-8). Once alternative concepts of development disappear, development becomes the purview of the West: they are the only ones who have experience and knowledge of development. Rather than a meeting between equals with different concepts of development, development interactions become a space in which Western actors can enforce a particular concept of ‘development.’ When the Western model of development is framed as the only possible model, it creates a unique and powerful position for Western actors. As the only countries and people to have achieved development, they must have special insight into the processes, attitudes, and behaviours required for such development. The singular understanding of development thus facilitates the control of Western actors over development processes and secures their pre-eminent position in international relations.

This control is enforced by racialized ideas of expertise and need. Although race is hardly ever mentioned in development work, White argues that this silence actually demonstrates the importance of race to the field and the extent to which racialized roles have been normalized within the field:

As feminist critiques have argued, the failure of development to take gender explicitly into account does not indicate the absence, but rather the unquestioned hegemony, of patriarchal perspectives. My argument on race is allied to this: rather than indicating its irrelevance, the silence on race is a determining silence that both masks and marks its centrality to the development project. (2002, p.408)

The national narrative and dominant history of Western countries conceptualizes them as predominantly ‘white’ societies, although this framing often requires the erasure of indigenous peoples and immigrants. Therefore, by conflating ‘development’ with the West, ‘development’ is also being conflated with whiteness. Indeed, Loftsdottir has observed that the prominence of white, Western actors within development activities has generated an association between whiteness and expertise and framed development as a process belonging to white people (2009).
In contrast to the white expert, racialized people within developing countries are framed as needing the help of these outside experts. These racialized associations are powerful because they build on the deeply engrained ideas of race that justified colonization as a ‘civilizing mission’ (Sobocinska 2017). The powerful position of, and continued intervention by, Western actors within international development is rooted in and maintained by racialized ideas of who has expertise, and who is in need.

**Advancing Capitalism Through Development.** The development interventions that are justified and facilitated by these racialized relations of expertise and need advance a capitalist model of development. The Western model of development is, fundamentally, a capitalist model of development. By upholding this model as the singular form of development, international development interventions have consistently supported the interests of capitalists over those of marginalized communities, and facilitated the extension of capitalist social relations throughout the world.

In Canada, for example, many of the benefits of aid have actually accrued to Canadian companies. In the 1950s and 1960s, when much of development work focused on infrastructure development, the Canadian government often contracted Canadian companies to undertake these infrastructure projects (Morrison 1998). The result was that development funding was actually being spent on Canadian companies and supporting the Canadian economy, rather than the economy of the official recipient country (Morrison 1998). Even after the end of the infrastructure era, Canadian companies continued to benefit from development assistance intended to support development in other countries. Up until the early 2000s, much of Canada’s aid was ‘tied’ to the procurement of Canadian goods and services (Brown 2016; Morrison 1998). Even after Canadian aid was officially untied, most aid contracts continued to go to Canadian
contractors and consultants (Smillie 2016). Even when aid money has not gone directly to Canadian companies, these companies have nonetheless seen benefits. For example, under the recent Conservative government, development funding was used to support aid projects in communities where Canadian extractive companies had operations, in order to soften the image of these companies and retain support for their presence within the communities (Brown 2016; Goyette 2016). In various ways, Canadian development assistance has often subsidised the operations of Canadian companies and facilitated their ability to accumulate capital, rather than prioritizing the needs of marginalized communities.

While Canada’s development assistance has consistently supported Canadian businesses and commercial interests, it has perhaps shifted even further towards supporting the capitalist class in recent years. As Brown points out, currently

aid is promoting Canadian companies’ foreign investment and overseas operations far more than the export of Canadian products. On current trends, benefits will therefore accrue to shareholders and not support job-creating manufacturing industries and agricultural production in Canada. The benefits of the recommercialization of aid are thus likely to be more concentrated among wealthy Canadians, along with foreign shareholders, than was previously the case. (2016, pp.284-285)

Even if there was previously an argument to be made that Canada’s aid was, at the very least, supporting the well-being of working-class Canadians if not that of its intended recipients, such an argument no longer applies. By supporting Canadian multinationals, Canadian aid now supports major commercial interests rather than the well-being of poor and marginalized communities, whether in Canada or elsewhere.

The situation in Canada is not unique; rather, it mirrors worldwide trends in international development. During the Cold War, decisions about who received aid were shaped by security imperatives and efforts to prevent the spread of communism (Morrison 1998). The rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s and 1990s was accompanied by a shift in international development
towards an emphasis on market-led development. During this period, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund made aid contingent upon the implementation of Structural Adjustment Programs, which prescribed a neoliberal policy package including deregulation, privatization, and cuts to public services (Morrison 1998). As discussed earlier, these policies led to land reform, an influx of cheap imports, and pay-for-use social services, forcing an increasing number of people away from subsistence activity and towards market-based economic activity (Chang 2000). Development programming has facilitated this transition in many ways, such as agricultural extension programs that shift farmers from subsistence crops to cash crops, infrastructure projects that extend the reach of cheap, imported goods that undercut local farmers, and education projects that develop reserves of labour trained for the international economy. Taken together, these interventions have grown the reserve of cheap labour available to multinational companies, who can take advantage of this supply by moving their operations to newly liberalized economies (Ferguson & McNally 2001). More recently, international development has shifted to a focus on promoting good governance by spreading liberal democracy, perceived to be the political system best able to guarantee a free market (Georgeou 2012). Clearly, Dei (2014) is quite right in arguing that development has a long history of meeting the needs of global capital rather than local communities.

**Seeking Change within International Development**

International development is currently shaped by an ideological understanding of poverty, inequality, and well-being that separates these conditions from the relations that create and reproduce them. This understanding generates depoliticized, technocratic interventions that not only fail to address the problems, but also participate in and extend the very relations that
produced these problems in the first place. As long as international development continues to participate in, and reproduce, racist, capitalist social relations, it will be unable to resolve the problems it has set out to address.

A dialectical historical materialist anti-racist Marxist-feminist perspective makes it clear that moving past this ideological approach to international development requires developing critical praxis. As I explained above, critical praxis deconstructs ideological thinking and sees the world as composed of social relations. It conceptualizes these relations as dialectical, meaning that they are contradictory, constantly changing, historically-specific internal relations. It also understands that humans are dialectically related to the material world, implying that humans can change the world by changing the way they act within it.

Based on this definition of critical praxis, a critical understanding of international development is one that goes beyond appearances to identify the social relations behind poverty, inequality, and a lack of well-being. It recognizes that these problems emerge from racist, capitalist social relations, and that international development is implicated in these relations. Furthermore, it understands developed and developing countries as internally related: one cannot exist without the other. Such an understanding reveals the necessity of addressing one’s own position within relations of racism and capitalism, and the ways in which the actions of Western actors and countries can perpetuate these relations and the problems that emerge from them. In this way, a critical understanding of international development would allow practitioners to develop a plan of action that goes beyond attempts to reform the existing system of social relations to focus on transforming these relations so that we can move beyond a world characterized by oppression and exploitation.
In this chapter, I introduced several important theoretical concepts and applied them to the field of international development. Doing so revealed the social relations that shape international development and the problems it attempts to solve, and the ways in which efforts to create social change can instead reproduce the status quo. I established that substantive change – change that addresses and transforms social relations – requires moving from reproductive to critical praxis, and I offered an explanation of what a critical understanding of international development would reveal. In later chapters, I will draw on this explanation to explore whether, and how, participants were able to move towards critical praxis through their placements.
Chapter Three: Understanding and Researching Critical Praxis

In the preceding chapter, I applied a Marxist-feminist theoretical lens to existing critiques of international development in an attempt to better understand the persistence of poverty, inequality, and a lack of well-being despite decades of efforts to eradicate them. Doing so revealed that common practices within the sector are shaped by an ideological understanding of social problems and social change, and that as a result, development interventions have often ended up reproducing oppressive and exploitative social relations rather than addressing them. Based on this analysis, I suggested that fostering critical praxis within the sector could help development actors recognize and more effectively address the social relations that are at the root of the problems they are attempting to address in their work. Both of these arguments point to the importance of understanding how development practitioners are learning about international development, and the way this learning shapes their actions.

Accordingly, in this chapter, I look more closely at learning. To begin, I review existing literature on critical adult education and learning in social action in order to identify the core elements required to generate critical praxis. I also examine potential challenges or barriers that can arise in these critical learning processes. This review reveals that although a pedagogical process exists for fostering critical praxis, it is difficult for this process to occur within existing social relations. To understand how learning unfolds in practice, I then turn to my research project. My research explored volunteer abroad programs as a site of learning for emerging international development practitioners, with the aim of understanding what type of praxis is being fostered. In this chapter, I explain my research questions and methods, and introduce the research participants. The discussion of my findings follows in the next few chapters.
Fostering Critical Praxis

As discussed in Chapter 2, developing critical praxis involves learning to deconstruct ideological thinking and develop a dialectical way of thinking. A dialectical approach reveals the social relations at the heart of oppression and exploitation, identifying these relations as a site of action for transforming the social world. From this perspective, developing critical praxis is a necessary – although not sufficient – step in the journey towards creating a more just and equitable world. Therefore, in this section I review the work of critical adult educators and learning in social action scholars in order to understand what kind of learning process can generate critical praxis. Based on this review, it appears that developing critical praxis requires learners to question the current conditions of their lives through collective dialogue and reflection, informed by the application of theory. To be effective, this process should prefigure transformed social relations. However, given that the learning process occurs within the hegemonic conditions of the current social world, developing and maintaining critical praxis is a constant struggle.

Freire (1970) and Allman (2010) offer perhaps the most detailed descriptions of pedagogies aimed at fostering critical praxis. Freire developed a ‘pedagogy of the oppressed’ that was intended to enable oppressed people to understand their situation in a critical way and recognize that they can change these conditions (1970). Paula Allman (2010) picked up on Freire’s work, offering a detailed account of her attempt to both use and teach Freirean pedagogy in the context of an adult education program at a university. Both Freire and Allman were attempting to foster critical praxis as educators, in spaces explicitly intended for learning and education. Other scholars have taken up the question of how – and whether – critical learning can occur in spaces that are not intended to be educational. In this vein, both Foley (1999) and
Choudry (2015) discuss learning in social movements and non-profits. Finally, Mezirow’s transformative learning theory, although not explicitly concerned with the development of critical praxis, draws on many of the same sources and ideas, and shares a similar goal of facilitating a change in the way people understand the world around them and their own agency (1981). Therefore, I have chosen to include his work in the discussion below. Despite the varied contexts discussed in these scholars’ works, they all reached very similar conclusions. In this way, their combined works generate a fairly clear picture of how critical praxis can be fostered, and the challenges that can arise in this process.

**Initial Questioning.** According to Mezirow’s ten-step process, transformative learning begins with a ‘disorienting dilemma’ that forces people to realize that their existing framework for understanding their circumstances and the world around them is not sufficient (1981, p.7). This realization leads people to seek out a new explanatory framework and develop a new way of acting in the world; in other words, it leads people to engage in a learning process (ibid).

Similarly, in her work, Allman emphasizes that learners must choose to participate in the critical learning process, because for it to be effective, participants must be open to new ideas and new processes, and willing to participate actively in the learning process (2010). From this perspective, it makes sense that scholars such as Choudry and Foley have identified social movements and non-profits as potentially rich environments for critical learning, as an individual’s choice to engage in efforts to generate social change illustrates that they have realized the world around them requires change, and that they have agency to change it. In other words, they have begun to question the world around them, and are therefore open to the idea of change and willing to engage in discussions about alternatives to the current social world. For these scholars, the ‘disorienting dilemma’ draws learners into the learning process. Freire offers
a slight variation: his problem-posing methodology is effectively a way of provoking disorienting dilemmas. Indeed, while he admits that people can begin to raise questions on their own, he feels that this process will be too slow if it is left to unfold naturally (1970). For Freire, critical adult educators must prompt people to engage in critical learning by presenting them with the problems and contradictions of their lives in a way that invites their discussion and engagement. Although there is some variation in how disorienting dilemmas can or should occur, these educators and scholars all agree that the process of critical learning begins with learners becoming open to questioning their assumptions and pre-existing explanatory frameworks.

**Discussion, Reflection, Theory.** Once learners begin to question the conditions of their lives and the world around them, critical learning can be fostered through discussion, reflection, and the application of theory. Freire used a problem-posing pedagogical technique that presented learners with familiar situations and problems and prompted them to interrogate how these situations come about and are maintained (1970). Freire argued that through this process students would come to see the conditions of their lives and the world around them as actionable, paving the way for collective action to change these conditions (1970). Allman used a similar process of collectively discussing themes that could reveal something about the world (2010). Mezirow’s ten steps include several stages that encapsulate similar ideas, such as self-examination, analysing internalized ideas, recognizing that one’s problems are shared by other people, and exploring new ways of acting in the world (1981, p.7). Choudry points out that in social movements, participants spend a significant amount of time discussing how to create change and reflecting on how their past actions have failed or succeeded, and that this process can offer a rich learning environment (2015). Therefore, all of the critical learning processes described by these authors involve reflecting on the conditions of the world and how these conditions generate
the problems learners have noticed. Such reflection generates discussion on how to act on these conditions to change them.

These descriptions also make clear that the process of seeing the world differently requires the application of theory, or knowledge from outside one’s own life or perspective. Allman drew on Gramscian and Marxist theory to expand on Freirean pedagogy and help clarify many of the themes they discussed in class (2010). In addition, as the learning group identified the themes they wished to discuss, Allman carried out extensive research on each theme to provide students with resources that could support and aid their discussion by pushing them to go beyond their own ideas and experiences (2010). Choudry emphasizes that for the discussion and reflection that occurs in social movements to generate deep visions of social change, the group must have access to what others have learned by carrying out similar activities in the past (2015). In this way, he introduces a slightly different concept of theory than Allman: whereas Allman drew on social and political theorists to support discussion, Choudry calls for the recognition of the knowledge and experience generated through decades of social struggle as theory (2015). Similarly, Foley emphasizes that the learning that occurs in spaces of struggle will remain partial or incomplete as long as people are unable to “gain theoretical distance from their subjective experience” by standing back and reflecting on their experiences together (pp.50-51). Drawing on different concepts of theory, these scholars nonetheless agree that critical learning requires the application of outside ideas to the reflection and discussion occurring among learners, to push learners beyond their own impressions and immediate conclusions.

Prefigurative Learning. Importantly, critical learning requires attention not just to the content of learning but also the process of learning itself. Allman emphasizes that critical education is “not only intended to prepare people to engage in social transformation, but it is also
meant to serve as a prefigurative experience of the type of social relations that would lie at the heart of a transformed society” (2010, p.155). In this way, this educational approach accounts for the dialectical relation between consciousness and matter: recognizing that consciousness emerges from experience, it offers an experience of alternate social relations that can begin reshaping consciousness. For this reason, Allman emphasizes the importance of creating a democratized learning space in which teachers and students alike bring knowledge to the table and are involved in critiquing this knowledge, and where learning happens through collectively controlled dialogue (2010). Freire emphasizes that the learning process needs to be undertaken with oppressed people and be enacted by them, rather than for them (1970). Choudry’s work reveals that, in their best iteration, social movements can offer an experience of alternate social relations; he also warns social movements to be vigilant about not reproducing hegemonic relations within their movement by, for example, prioritizing certain voices over others (2015). The reflection and discussion at the heart of the critical learning process must occur through transformed relations in which all learners can participate actively and equally, allowing them to experience alternate social relations in addition to thinking about them.

**Challenges.** Unsurprisingly, it is this last element that offers the most substantial challenge to critical learning processes. Allman emphasizes the difficulties of fostering critical praxis and maintaining a critical education space within the broader context of capitalist social relations. The transformed social relations initially only exist within the learning space, and therefore must be recreated at each learning session (Allman 2010, p.163). Learners are still participating in the existing social world in their daily lives, and must struggle to retain and develop their emerging critical perspective. This situation only heightens the importance of engaging in critical learning with a community of learners, so that learners can assist each other
in not slipping back into old, comfortable ways of thinking. Choudry emphasizes that many NGOs now support capitalism and have internalized neoliberal understandings of social problems. Therefore, although people may have turned to these spaces hoping to challenge or improve the way the world is now, they may nonetheless find themselves entering a hegemonic space. In this context, it is easy for those struggling to create social change to end up reproducing or colluding with the very systems they are trying to critique and change (Choudry 2015, p.24).

Indeed, numerous scholars who have studied the learning that occurs in NGOs have observed that people often simultaneously learn to transgress existing relations in some ways, while supporting them in other ways (e.g. Church et.al. 2008; Foley 1999). For example, when people are forced to enact social change in a hegemonic context, it is easy to dilute their critical approach as they attempt to communicate their work, obtain funding, and generate support. Indeed, the field of international development is rife with examples of radical concepts being emptied of their political content in an effort to render them useable within existing structures and appealing to funders and outside actors (for example, see Parfitt 2004 on participation or Batliwala 2007 on empowerment). As Allman affirmed, while there may be critical reflection and discussion, daily activities are still occurring within existing social relations. As a result, consciousness is continually being shaped by these existing social relations, making it much harder for critical learning to take hold and evolve.

Overall, it appears that critical education requires learners to experience a disorienting dilemma or recognize an unresolved tension in their conceptual framework that leads them to seek out a new way of understanding the world. Achieving a critical understanding of the world in response to this dilemma requires a process reflection, discussion, and application of theory in order to identify social relations and our place in these relations. This process requires not only
changing the way we think, but also the way we act; this change should begin with the learning process itself, which should model transformed social relations and allow learners to experience and learn from this alternative way of being. However, these scholars also emphasize that, because this learning process necessarily occurs in the existing hegemonic context, it is very easy to slip back into ideological thinking and capitalist social relations. As a result, critical learning often remains “half-realized” (Foley 1999) or “diffuse” (Church et.al 2008) without a constant struggle to develop and maintain this altered praxis.

**Researching Learning in International Development**

For many people, the choice to become involved in international development activities represents a recognition that there are problems in the world that need to be addressed. In other words, it implies that practitioners have experienced some kind of disorienting dilemma that has forced them to acknowledge that our current systems are not enabling everyone to live well. However, despite the presence of an initial concern about the way the world works, my analysis in Chapter Two revealed that much of the work within the sector is based in an ideological understanding of the world that addresses the manifestations of social relations rather than the relations themselves. This paradox points to a need to better understand how practitioners learn about international development and the problems it tries to address, to identify how their initial questions and concerns are addressed and incorporated in their consciousness and praxis. Understanding this process can help reveal how ideological approaches co-opt initial questions and point to spaces where critical learning might be possible.

Therefore, for my thesis research I decided to take a closer look at how emerging practitioners learn about international development. Although there are a wide variety of learning
environments that I could have studied, such as international development studies programs or people’s first jobs in the sector, I have chosen to focus on volunteer abroad placements. My own experience as a volunteer and working with volunteers indicated that these placements often generated significant questions, but with mixed results. Some volunteers became more critical, while others solidified pre-existing ideas. For this reason, these placements struck me as worthy of further study.

**Existing Literature.** The existing literature paints a picture of volunteer abroad programs as sites in which ideological understandings of poverty and related challenges are reinforced and reproduced, rather than challenged. First of all, the programs themselves are often not intended to be critical spaces. Simpson argues that volunteer abroad programs are increasingly commodified, marketing a specific experience to volunteers and creating an idea of development as something volunteers can ‘do’ through their trips abroad (2004; 2005). The programs also lack explicit educational frameworks, instead assuming that volunteers will learn simply by coming into contact with ‘other’ people and conditions (Simpson 2005). Therefore, rather than creating space for reflection on the complexity of the problems being faced, they push volunteers into action (MacDonald 2014). In this way, they assume volunteers inherently know how to ‘do’ development, perpetuating the idea that being white and from the West comes with automatic expertise on development (Roddick 2014).

In these circumstances, it is perhaps unsurprising that numerous scholars have found that, through these trips, volunteers’ pre-existing understanding of poverty and development are reinforced rather than challenged. Simpson (2004) and MacDonald (2014) both identify that volunteers come out of these programs feeling ‘lucky’ that they were not born poor, rather than questioning their own role in sustaining poverty. Cameron supports this finding by asserting that
most volunteer programs promote ideas of global citizenship defined by ‘doing good,’ without pushing volunteers to consider how to ‘do no harm’ (2014). The latter approach would require taking a more holistic look at the ways in which Western countries exploit the people and resources of developing countries for their own economic gain (Cameron 2014). Similarly, Smith and Laurie (2011) argue that these programs create an idea of global citizenship as something that can be enacted on or in developing countries rather than in relation to these countries.

Based on these studies, it appears that volunteer abroad programs are reinforcing ideological understandings of poverty and exploitation rather than contextualizing them within racist, capitalist social relations. Indeed, Hickel (2013) argues that these programs actually capture and depoliticize youth resistance by selling them a specific, packaged experience of helping others. Although many authors have called for more explicit learning frameworks within volunteer abroad programs (e.g. Simpson 2005) that incorporate critical, ongoing reflection (Agyeyomah & Langdon 2014) and political action (Cameron 2014), there are very few examples of how this could be done. Agyeyomah and Langdon (2014) and MacDonald (2014) describe their attempts to move towards a critical approach in the programs they are involved with, but with mixed success. Overall, the existing literature paints a picture of volunteer abroad as hegemonic environments in which reproductive learning is the most likely outcome.

However, much of the literature focuses on shorter-term trips or gap-year programs aimed at high school graduates. There are very few studies focused on longer-term volunteering done by people with more experience and prior knowledge. It seems possible that the experience level of volunteers in these programs and the longer time spent abroad could create more fertile ground for critical learning by extending the possibilities for reflection and theoretical application. There is some support for this idea: Georgeou found that volunteers who spent at
least a year overseas were able to speak about development in a more complex way that recognized the surrounding political context (2012). Nonetheless, Georgeou also found that, overall, volunteers continued to see their role as one of service-provision, in which they had skills and expertise that could help the community (2012). She attributed the strength of this understanding – despite volunteers’ increasingly complex understanding – to the prevalence of neoliberal ideas and manangerialism within sending organizations, enforced by government funding requirements (Georgeou 2012, p.140). Similarly, Heron (2007), who looked specifically at white Canadian women who did long-term development volunteer contracts in Africa, found that although they critiqued and questioned their experiences, very few were able to position themselves within these critiques and challenge their role or participation in development. She argued that this limit was due to the fact that questioning their place in development would have required fundamentally rethinking their own moral selves and identity (Heron 2007).

Based on the literature, it appears that shorter-term or gap-year style programs tend to reinforce existing hegemonic understandings and practices of international development. The few studies of longer-term volunteer programs show mixed results, with volunteers beginning to question the way international development occurs and the problems they have noticed, but without fully questioning their own role or developing a more political understanding of international development. However, none of these studies examine the impact of volunteer abroad programs on volunteers’ career choices, or how the understanding of international development they gain through their placement emerges in their practice. In other words, none of these studies approach volunteer abroad programs from the perspective of praxis, nor do they consider the impact of these programs on the broader field of international development and the way it is practiced.
**Research Questions.** Building on these gaps in the literature, my main research question was: What kind of praxis emerges through volunteers’ participation in development volunteering programs? I broke this primary question down into several secondary questions that attempted to get at the inter-related components of praxis: What do volunteers learn about international development through their participation in these programs? How does their understanding of international development change or shift through their participation? In what ways does the learning that occurs during these placements shape their engagement with international development afterwards?

Through this approach, I hoped to better understand *how* learning occurs during volunteer placements. If the placements are indeed solidifying ideological understandings of international development, how and why does this happen, and what are the implications for the field of international development? Alternatively, if critical praxis is emerging, how and why is it happening in this study as opposed to in the existing literature? In these ways, my research seeks to build on the existing literature on volunteer abroad programs by approaching these programs from a dialectical, Marxist-feminist perspective and by situating these programs more squarely within the field of international development.

**Research Methods.** To answer my research questions, I carried out ten semi-structured interviews with former volunteers. I chose to limit myself to ten interviews both for logistical reasons and because small sample sizes are well-suited to research that aims to explore specific experiences in some depth, rather than generate representative, generalizable conclusions (Crouch & McKenzie 2006). To be eligible, participants had to have done a volunteer placement of at least four months organized through a Canadian organization or institution, during or after their post-secondary studies. They must have completed this placement within the last five years.
The eligibility criteria were shaped by several factors. First, I wanted to speak with people whose placements would impact their career choices. For this reason, I sought out participants who had completed at least a portion of their post-secondary studies and were thus closer to entering the workforce. I limited the participants to those who had done a program run by a Canadian institution in order to provide some consistency to the interviews, as program structures vary quite widely across countries. Although I had initially hoped to focus on volunteers who had spent at least six months in a developing country, as longer placements have been shown to increase the likelihood that volunteers will question preconceived ideas (Georgeou 2012), I reduced this to four months. This decision was based on the recognition that many people choose to do four-month placements in order to fit them into a university semester; I felt that by setting the length at six months I would lose a large pool of potential participants. Finally, I chose a time period of five years to balance the need for volunteers to have clear memories of their experience with my interest in seeing how their placements had shaped their decisions following their placement, which necessarily required the interviews to take place at some distance from placement completion. In retrospect, I should have set a lower limit to the timeframe as well, for example by seeking out participants who had completed their placements between one and five years ago; as it was, one of my participants had returned from her placement too recently to speak about her next steps.

These criteria effectively limited the pool of potential participants to those who had participated in a specific type of volunteer abroad program aimed at young professionals; this was intentional, as these programs are more purposefully geared towards preparation for an international career than those aimed at either younger volunteers (e.g. high school graduates) or
more experienced volunteers (e.g. retirees). These development volunteering programs are discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

I recruited participants through several listservs that are used to share job postings and other information relevant to international development and non-profit sector professionals, and by asking several individuals in my professional network who have participated in volunteer abroad placements to circulate the recruitment information to other alumni of their program. I did not interview any former volunteers that I knew, whether personally or professionally. I interviewed each participant once. Interviews lasted between one and one-and-a-half hours and were mostly carried out over Skype.

I used an interview schedule as a loose guide, but it acted more as a reminder of the topics I wanted to cover than a strict script. In each interview, I would draw on the participant’s previous answers to ask questions in a relevant way, adapted to each participant’s specific experience. I sought information on the program and placement they participated in, their motivation for participating, how their placement differed from their expectations, challenges they had faced, thought-provoking moments during their placements, whether their placement had changed the way they think about development, what they had done since their placement ended, and whether these choices had been informed by their placement experience. In this way, the interviews combined descriptions of the placement and program with reflections on participants’ experience. Providing this opportunity for reflection can help participants gain further insight into their experiences while also offering a better way of engaging with complex experiences and reactions than simple description (Crouch & McKenzie 2006). I also wanted to allow space for topics to emerge out of their experience and our discussion, rather than adhering strictly to pre-set conceptual boundaries. In this way, I attempted to avoid relying on abstractions
and thus avoid conducting my research in an ideological way. I wanted to pay attention to the knowledge production process and allow for knowledge to emerge from experience and out of the interactions between the participant and the researcher.

**Data Analysis.** Following the interviews, I transcribed each interview recording. I then carried out data analysis in two stages. First, I read through each transcript and marked notable passages while paying attention to the narrative of the entire interview. Based on this read-through, I created a summary of each interview that highlighted program details, key observations made by the participant, noticeable shifts in their understanding, and details of their engagement in development following their placement. Analyzing each transcript as a whole allowed me to understand each participant’s trajectory, making visible the shifts in understanding and engagement that emerged through their placement. In addition, I felt it was important to have a contextualized understanding of the data before dividing it up into codes or comparing across participants. Based on these summaries, I developed a three-page summary of my initial findings and shared this with participants, so that they had the opportunity to provide feedback and stay abreast of the research process. While several participants acknowledged receipt of the summary, none of them offered feedback on the findings.

For the second stage of data analysis, I revisited each transcript and (re)marked relevant passages. I used my research questions to guide this process, but allowed the codes or categories to emerge from the data itself. For example, based on my research questions, I knew I was looking for examples of learning and passages that indicated changes in ideas or actions, but the specific areas of learning emerged from the data. I then organized these passages according to codes that emerged out of the commonalities between interviews. I reviewed all the passages within each code, and developed a second summary of my findings based on this stage of data
analysis, which I then compared to the first summary. This process allowed me to develop a deep understanding of and familiarity with my data, both in the context of each person’s unique experience and in the broader context of the interviews as a whole.

**Summary of Participants and their Placements**

**Participants.** As mentioned, I interviewed ten participants. Among the ten participants there were nine women and one man. This breakdown is unsurprising given the disproportionate number of women who pursue volunteer abroad opportunities. There were no notable differences in the responses provided by the one man who participated, and so in the interests of ensuring anonymity I have chosen to use several gender-neutral pseudonyms rather than clearly identify the one male participant. Although I did not ask participants to identify their race or background, three participants spoke about either growing up in or having family connections to a developing country. This number was higher than I had expected, given the prominence of white actors within international development more broadly and volunteer placements specifically. Where relevant, I will point out any differences between the responses of those participants who had connections to developing countries and those who did not. However, such differences were minimal, perhaps because all participants had completed post-secondary studies in Canada and were undertaking the same kind of volunteer program, making their experiences more common than different.

**Placements.** The placements ranged from four to twelve months in duration, with most placements falling in the six to eight-month range. Half of the participants undertook their placements in order to fulfill a co-op or internship requirement for their degree, while half undertook their placements following their post-secondary studies. The participants who did their
placements during their studies were all in the upper years of their programs. Three of the participants had done more than one placement fitting the eligibility criteria. In these cases, our discussion focused mostly on the first placement, in order to discuss the portion of their experience that was most similar to the other participants. However, later in these interviews, I did ask each of these three participants to compare their later experiences to their first placement, to understand how their engagement and understanding had shifted over time. The placements had taken place in countries across Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, and Central and East Asia.

**Prior Experience.** At the time of their placements, four participants had studied or were studying international development, four had studied or were studying a related subject (e.g. global health), while the remaining two studied unrelated subjects but had some exposure to global issues through research projects or electives. Therefore, all participants had some prior knowledge of international development and the issues the field attempts to address, although to varying degrees of depth. In addition, nine of the ten participants had previously been to other countries, whether from growing up there, tourism, work, research trips, or previous short-term volunteer trips. Of these nine, eight participants had previously travelled to developing countries. For many participants, this prior experience was one of the reasons they were interested in a career in international development. The tenth participant may also have had prior travel experience that did not come up during the interview, as I did not explicitly ask about prior travel. The combination of their academic backgrounds and travel experience means that this group of participants came to their placements with significant prior knowledge and experience. This background may have contributed to the depth of their insights and observations, a point I will return to in the final chapter of this thesis.
Summary of Analysis

I have divided the discussion of my research findings into three chapters. Each chapter incorporates existing literature and data from my research. The next chapter, Chapter Four, focuses on the context of participants’ learning. It examines the program structure, the roles participants were assigned, the training they received, the learning spaces available during their placement, and their reasons for volunteering. In Chapter Five, I discuss what participants learned about international development during their placements, and explore whether participants’ observations moved towards critical understanding or solidified ideological understandings. Finally, in Chapter Six, I look at what participants did after their placements, and how these choices incorporated the lessons they had learned during their placements. In the final chapter, I discuss the implications of my findings, and offer some caveats.
Chapter Four:
Analyzing the Learning Environment

Understanding the context in which learning occurs is important because consciousness emerges in relation to the material conditions in which actions and interactions occur. It is for this reason that critical praxis emerges most effectively in a context that embodies and prefigures transformed social relations, and that hegemonic learning environments can easily undo progress towards critical learning. Therefore, to understand the context in which participants learned during their placements, I draw on existing literature, the interviews with participants, and the websites of the funder and the sending organizations. Using this data, I explore the history of these programs, their intended purpose, the roles assigned to volunteers, the training volunteers receive, and the learning tools available to them. I conclude that the placements provided a hegemonic context that reproduced the problematic relations of racialized expertise and capitalist benefit that are prominent within international development, and that the learning framework offered to participants encouraged an ideological approach to development. Given these conditions, it would seem that the programs offer an unlikely environment for critical learning.

I then discuss participants’ motivations for participating in the volunteer abroad programs, in order to illuminate their initial understandings of international development. Although participants’ motivations before entering the program adhere roughly to the motivations described in existing literature and draw on some of the same assumptions as the programs themselves, they were slightly more nuanced. Therefore, I conclude that although participants’ initial perspectives were largely in line with hegemonic ideas of development, they were already questioning standard practices. I explore what happens when these questions come up against the hegemonic context of the programs in the next chapter.
**Hegemonic Learning Environment**

Development volunteering programs have a mixed history. Although these programs were often seen by governments as a way to achieve their own objectives, initially volunteers and civil society organizations saw them as counter-hegemonic programs that fostered global solidarity in the pursuit of justice. In her case study of Palms Australia volunteers, Georgeou offers an extensive and detailed history of development volunteering (2012). She argues that these programs were “originally a collective, citizen-driven initiative based on notions of egalitarianism and ideals of solidarity” (Georgeou 2012, p.25). Sobocinska’s review of the emergence of these programs corroborates this assertion: she points out that many of these programs were either initiated by concerned citizens or in response to direct requests from developing country governments (2017). The programs were based on idea that collective action towards common goals could generate a more just and equitable future (Georgeou 2012). Many of the volunteers in these early years chose to participate based on these same assumptions.

However, even at this stage, when the programs were conceptualised and framed as a site for collective action towards a common good, they had much more varied effects. First of all, although the programs were framed around ideas of global solidarity and global justice, they often structured their operations around the ideas of ‘need’ and ‘lack’ in developing countries (Georgeou 2012). In this way, they reproduced colonial relations and assumptions of Western superiority and expertise. In addition, these programs were often understood by governments in the sending country as a way to meet their own national agenda. For example, Sobocinska argues that in the 1950s and 1960s, development volunteering “was implicated in global systems of power, influence, and governmentality at the intersection of decolonization and the Cold War” (2017, p.50). In Australia, the programs were seen as a way to counter accusations of racism in
their treatment of other countries in their region (Sobocinska 2017). In the United Kingdom, the programs offered a way of softening memories of colonial repression throughout the former British empire (ibid). Finally, in the United States, these programs were seen as a way of countering charges of neo-colonialism as America attempted to establish its global influence (ibid). As governments recognized the utility of these programs in promoting their image and work abroad, they began to offer funding.

This trend is also visible in the history of Canadian volunteer-sending organizations. In 1965, Canadian Universities Services Overseas (CUSO) became the first development NGO to receive funding from the Canadian government for development activities (Morrison 1998, p.21). One of the reasons CUSO was able to convince the Canadian government to begin funding their volunteer-sending programming was because the government was in dire need of people with development experience and expertise. In the early years of Canada’s development agency, the government lacked an adequate supply of public servants with experience in what was then a fledgling field. Most CIDA personnel were former military employees or missionaries, or people with specific technical qualifications such as engineers (Morrison 1998). Therefore, supporting CUSO’s programming was a way of generating a cadre of people with the expertise required to work in Canada’s emerging development sector (Morrison 1998, p.55). Indeed, in a period of rapid growth in the late 1960s and early 1970s, CIDA’s staff nearly doubled, in large part by drawing on returned CUSO volunteers (Morrison 1998, p.57). The Canadian government was essentially using volunteer-sending programs as a way of fulfilling their human resources needs.

The role of development volunteering programs in advancing the priorities of the capitalist state has only increased in the neoliberal era. Georgeou describes how, as neoliberalism gained prominence, civil society organizations were re-conceptualised as another form of
privatized service provision that could take up responsibilities that had formerly been the purview of the state (2012). In addition, concepts of action and responsibility were individualised, so that individuals became responsible for ensuring their own well-being and security (ibid; Hickel 2013). In the context of development volunteering, these trends shifted the focus of volunteer programs away from grassroots community work towards service provision, and emphasized that individuals should take responsibility for their own development by increasing their social capital or becoming entrepreneurs (Georgeou 2012). The influence of neoliberalism on volunteer-sending programs, and their heightened role in reproducing relations of racialized expertise and capitalist benefit, can be seen in the purpose of these programs, the roles they assign to volunteers, and the training they offer.

**Program Purpose.** As mentioned above, volunteer-sending programs have always been somewhat implicated in advancing the agendas of the sending country overseas. The role these programs play in supporting capitalist interests has only increased in recent decades. In Canada, funding for volunteer-sending programs had initially been provided under the auspices of development education or international cooperation. Even though these programs were indirectly used to bolster the capacity of the government’s development agency, the programs were also intended to educate volunteers about development and promote cooperation for development. However, in the mid-1990s, in the context of drastic cuts to official development assistance and a refashioning of CIDA’s approach to aid, the amount of funding available for NGOs was reduced significantly. These cuts included totally eliminating the Global Education program and the Public Participation Program, both of which provided funding for volunteer sending organizations (Morrison 1998). In response to public outcry and a need to facilitate employment for young Canadians in tough economic times, the government re-established funding for these
programs in 1997. However, the new funding fell under the government’s youth employment strategy (Morrison 1998, p.416). From this point onwards, the developmental goals of volunteer-sending programs were, at least in the government’s eyes, secondary. Instead, the primary purpose of these programs became one of preparing young people for employment.

A closer look at one of the main funding mechanisms for volunteer-sending organizations illustrates this transition. The International Youth Internship Program (IYIP) is operated and administered by Global Affairs Canada (GAC), but falls under the umbrella of the Government of Canada’s Youth Employment Strategy (Government of Canada 2018a). Although not all of the placements undertaken by participants are currently funded by IYIP, many of these programs have received IYIP funding in the past. As a result, the programs may have been receiving IYIP funding at the time the research participants were involved. In addition, many of the programs continue to use the same eligibility requirements and program structures (in terms of training provided, stipends, etc.) set out by the IYIP program. These similarities could reflect the fact that their programs were designed while receiving IYIP funding, or that they hope to receive this funding again in the future. Therefore, even though some of the programs my participants undertook were funded from other areas of GAC programming, IYIP has clearly made its mark and continues to play a role in setting standards for these programs. For this reason, I focus on IYIP as an indicator of how the government perceives these programs.

The Government of Canada’s overall Youth Employment Strategy takes a very specific approach to increasing youth employment. It aims to “provid[e] Canadian youth with the tools and experience they need to launch successful careers” (Government of Canada 2018a). In other words, rather than focusing on job creation, incentivizing employers to hire youth, or facilitating the hiring process for young people, this strategy focuses on providing opportunities for young
people to gain skills and experience. In this sense, it places the responsibility for improving employment prospects on youth themselves, rather than attempting to change surrounding conditions. This approach is reflective of the wider neoliberal trend towards offloading government responsibilities onto private citizens, described earlier. In this sense, the government’s Youth Employment Strategy is a neoliberal policy tool that provides a pool of trained employees for employers, without providing any guarantee of employment to young people. It prioritizes capital over workers by subsidizing companies’ human resources needs.

Within this overarching policy framework, IYIP plays the role of providing training for young people interested in international careers. The aims of the IYIP program are to:

- provide eligible Canadian youth with international experience, skills and knowledge that will prepare them for future employment; increase employment opportunities by promoting awareness among Canadian organizations of the advantages of integrating young Canadian professionals into their structures and programs; and, provide opportunities for Canadian youth to promote Canada’s international development efforts both in Canada and abroad (Government of Canada 2018a, n.p.).

It is telling that the first goal aligns with the neoliberal approach of the overall Youth Employment Strategy by focusing on preparing youth for employment by providing experience and skills development opportunities. The second goal is equally employment-oriented, although in this case the government does appear to be making an effort to create job opportunities for young people by raising awareness among employers. Of course, this limited approach to employment creation still avoids any attempt to address the structural conditions that generate unemployment. Interestingly, when these first two goals are combined, it becomes clear that the government is preparing youth for future employment with Canadian organizations specifically. This aim reveals the degree to which the government is prioritizing the Canadian economy and Canadian businesses, rather than stable livelihoods for young people or support for organizations in developing countries. It is only after the two employment-oriented goals that a development
goal appears. This order is revealing in terms of establishing the priorities of the Canadian government in funding volunteer-sending programs. Furthermore, even the development-related goal is focused on supporting Canadian development activities rather than broader development goals or the priorities of marginalized communities.

This emphasis on employment over development impact is further emphasized by IYIP’s reporting requirements and impact statements. IYIP requires funding recipients to measure success based on the percentage of former participants who are employed following the program, disaggregated by those who find employment in development versus other sectors; the percentage of those seeking employment; and, the percentage of those using the job-seeking skills they learned during the program (Government of Canada 2017). In these indicators, the international development role of the program has been almost entirely eliminated in favour of employment-oriented measurements. Organizations applying for funding through the IYIP program are not allowed to diverge from the project outcomes or measurements that GAC sets out (Government of Canada 2017). In this way, IYIP becomes a means of enforcing the use of volunteer placements to prepare Canadian youth to seek out employment.

IYIP is structured to prioritize the potential benefits to Canada’s economy from volunteer-sending programs and minimize the potential developmental impact. It supports Canadian companies by training future workers to function in a globalized marketplace and prioritizes the development approach laid out by the Canadian government over priorities established by communities themselves. In this way, not only does it appear to be aimed more towards benefits for Canadian companies than young people themselves or marginalized communities, it also reinforces the idea that Western nations like Canada have the unique expertise required to set development priorities. In this way, it adheres to the tendency for
international development programs to advance capitalist social relations and racialized concepts of expertise.

Interestingly, on documents that are oriented towards potential volunteers rather than the organizations that are seeking funding, the government uses a slightly different approach. On these pages, the potential development impact that volunteers can have is emphasized and prioritized, rather than the employment experience they will gain. For example, on a page promoting the various internship and volunteer opportunities available to young Canadians, the opening line for international internships is: “Are you thinking about going abroad and making a difference?” (Government of Canada 2018b). Only after this hook does the page go on to discuss the program as an opportunity to gain employment skills and international experience. This altered approach may reflect an assumption on the part of the government that the Canadian public expects GAC funding to generate some sort of development impact, or that potential volunteers are seeking a specific type of employment experience that includes the opportunity to ‘make a difference.’ This emphasis makes it appear as though the program is more focused on development impact than its goals and indicators would imply, obscuring its actual priorities. In addition, by emphasizing the potential of volunteers to make a difference, GAC is reinforcing the idea that young white people can make a transformative difference in racialized communities, despite the fact that the program objectives recognize that these volunteers are still developing their skills.

This dualistic approach to promoting the programs is mirrored by the sending organizations themselves. Following the interviews with participants, I sought out further information on the sending organizations that had administered their placements by reviewing their websites. It was not possible to carry out an exhaustive review, as several organizations no
longer run volunteer programs and have removed the relevant content from their websites. In addition, the level of detail provided about the programs in publicly available documents is quite varied. Nonetheless, the available content offered a basic understanding of how the sending organizations promote and understand their programs. Overall, the sending organizations focus far more than the government on the potential development impact volunteers can have during their placements. They also make fewer explicit connections between their programs and youth employment. Nonetheless, these organizations do emphasize that volunteers will gain skills and experience by participating in these programs.

Where the various sending organizations place the most emphasis appears to depend on their primary mission as an organization. Universities are much more focused on placements as a form of employment experience than are NGOs, regardless of whether the university is administering the placements themselves or simply advertising them as a possible co-op option. For example, university websites framed these placements as an opportunity to “gain skills and experience” or as an “overseas work experience” (University 1, excerpt from website; University 2, excerpt from website). They also emphasize the placements as a continuation of in-class lessons, as a way to “learn by exposure, applying classroom lessons to a real-life setting” (University 1, excerpt from website). In the neoliberal era, universities have faced increasing pressure to demonstrate that higher education provides tangible value for students by increasing their employability and potential income (Chatterton 2010). The emphasis on volunteer and internship placements as opportunities to increase employability may stem from this pressure, and aligns quite closely with the government’s aims for the programs.

In contrast, programs run by NGOs emphasized both the potential development impact volunteers could have overseas and the skills they could gain while doing so. For example, one
organization emphasized that their volunteers “work on specific projects that are designed to help communities thrive and grow,” but also emphasized that volunteers will “gain the experience [they] need to launch a successful career” (Organization 1, excerpt from website). This emphasis on development impact can be explained by the fact that these organizations are located within the development sector. Unlike either Canadian universities or the Canadian government, these organizations are explicitly mandated to achieve specific development outcomes, and they must align their programming with these missions. That these organizations nonetheless emphasize skills development attests to both a recognition that young professionals are concerned about their employability and a need to adhere to the conditions and priorities of their funder, in this case, the government of Canada. The way NGOs frame their programs reveals a tension between their developmental missions and the broader context in which they carry out their missions.

Nonetheless, the emphasis on the developmental impact volunteers can potentially create through their participation reinforces existing social relations within the field, in that it sets up volunteers as experts who have the right and the ability to intervene to help those in need. One program describes itself as the “experience of a lifetime” in which volunteers can “share [their] expertise by collaborating with young people seeking new, job-ready skills. It’s a transformative experience that will stay with you for life” (Organization 2, excerpt from website). This description simultaneously emphasizes both the sizeable impact volunteers can have on others by sharing their assumed expertise and the transformative impact that doing so will have on volunteers themselves. Given that the program is targeting young, relatively inexperienced people to become volunteers, this assumption of expertise emerges not from the qualifications of the individuals in question, but from the conflation of development expertise with Western-ness
and whiteness. By emphasizing the impact that volunteering will have on the volunteer, this marketing also reproduces the common pattern in which the net benefit of development activities accrues to the Western actor. In this way, volunteer-sending programs are re-enacting the oppressive and exploitative social relations that have long characterized development work.

Reviewing the purpose of these programs and the way they are marketed reveals that volunteer-sending programs participate in the same racist, capitalist social relations that characterize the broader field. The government uses the programs to strengthen the Canadian economy by providing a pool of trained employees, subsidizing the human resources needs of Canadian companies. When the government does mention developmental objectives for these programs, the focus is on supporting the Canadian development agenda rather than community priorities. This focus demonstrates a presumed expertise in setting the goals and processes of development. In their marketing to volunteers, both the government and the sending organizations emphasize the developmental impact volunteers can expect to have in addition to the gains in their employability. By doing so, not only do they obscure the government’s primary intention for theses programs, they also emphasize the agency and expertise of Westerners and reduce recipient communities to a ‘backdrop’ for transformative experiences for the volunteers. It appears that the benefits of these programs are overwhelmingly oriented towards Canadian employers and Canadian young people, far more than to the communities where volunteers work. The programs appear to unquestioningly participate in existing social relations, rather than attempting to take a different approach.

**Volunteer Roles.** The roles assigned to volunteers during their placements emphasize the degree to which these programs support a capitalist, racist form of international development. In order of most to least common, study participants were assigned to roles in the following areas:
economic development, employability, and entrepreneurship; research; capacity-building; monitoring and evaluation; capacity assessment and planning; policy advising; and teaching. In many cases, participants held roles that combined several of the above areas, for example, researching a specific economic sector, or carrying out monitoring and evaluation for an entrepreneurship and employment program. In total, eight of the ten participants were involved in one or more of capacity-building, research, or economic development.

At their core, research, capacity-building, teaching, and policy advising are about knowledge production and knowledge sharing. These roles assume that the volunteer has the skills to generate knowledge and, by asking the volunteer to share knowledge through capacity-building or teaching, place the volunteer in a position of authority. It is interesting that the role of generating the knowledge that shapes the design of development projects falls to individuals who are not familiar with the local environment and often do not speak the local language. Under these conditions, it would be quite difficult for the volunteer to incorporate local knowledge into their knowledge production activities. In this situation, it seems likely that volunteers will instead draw predominantly on Western sources that they can easily access and understand. For example, one participant who was placed in a role requiring both research and capacity-building had the following impression of her work:

"we just found that the skill set that we were teaching was just very like Western, like the goal-setting, the problem-solving, the critical thinking, they were just like, they’re all very…like, very Western, and we’re just like we’re not actually learning what these students need, like we’re not talking to the [local] students being like what things would help you in the job force, it was very much like these are the skills we think you need, these are the skills we’re going to teach you, but in a very Western context. (Taylor, excerpt from interview)"

Having been set up as experts, participants must draw on their existing knowledge base to fulfill the role; this knowledge is rooted in Western epistemologies and ontologies, which, in our
present moment, are fundamentally capitalist. In this way, placing participants in knowledge production roles not only reinforces the association of whiteness with expertise, it also leads to the further extension of capitalist social relations.

The participation of volunteers in the extension of capitalist relations becomes even clearer when looking at roles that involved some type of economic development program. Although economic development activities can be oriented towards building inclusive economies and sustainable livelihoods, many of the economic development activities undertaken by participants were focused on bringing people into a market-based economy or changing the way they interact with this economy. In this way, they were clearly oriented towards the needs of global capital rather than local communities. Sam’s detailed description reveals this focus:

what I mostly did was, well aside from conducting different kinds of research, so primary research on [placement country]’s economic, um, IT economic subsector, so basically trying to find, um, trying to create an economic intervention strategy [pause] um, for the um, for [placement country] itself, and how our organization could work with that to um, to dictate their future programming [pause] And then afterwards, and so after the research was finished, that was [pause] about 6 months in, I spent the next um couple of months just creating these different programs based on what we, what we found. And I thought it was really interesting because we found that most, if not all [placement country]’s clients, were, in the IT sector, were either government or internationals, um, international clients and companies as a whole, and the biggest complaint people had with [placement country]’s output was that it wasn’t really that good. Like, they could do everything, they could code and everything, but nobody was creative, nobody really stood out from anything else, and they thought that was a big issue. And all the businessmen, all the CEOs, the government officials, told us that it was because they lacked soft skills and everything, those things that they need to be creative. And so the capacity building and development workshops and seminars I developed basically focused on helping youth gain those soft skills…So yeah! (Sam, excerpt from interview)

This description emphasizes the mixed roles many volunteers took on. Sam was involved in research, capacity-building, and economic development all at once. These activities were clearly focused on ensuring people could be incorporated into the capitalist market more effectively. The programming responded to the needs of corporations and states rather than employees.
themselves, and the former perspectives were prioritized in the programming that emerged from the research. This development program appears to be subsidizing the activities of international companies by providing training to the local workforce so they can better meet the needs of these companies. Given that this program receives GAC funding, it would appear that the government of Canada is using international development to subsidize the work of Canadian multinationals abroad.

The projects to which participants were assigned highlight the prominence of market-based approaches to economic development within the international development sector and the conflation of economic development with development overall. Furthermore, by placing participants in roles that assume expertise and offer them authority, these programs are reinforcing the racist relations that locate authority and expertise with white Westerners and Western forms of knowledge. In their goals and marketing, as well as the roles assigned to participants, these programs are participating in the hegemonic relations of development rather than attempting to challenge this model as they might have done in earlier decades.

**An Ideological Approach to Learning**

The examples above demonstrate that volunteer-sending programs are participating in racist, capitalist social relations; as a result, the material conditions of these programs do not offer a promising environment for critical learning. Of course, the sending organizations are, to a certain extent, constrained by the requirements of their funders. However, even in the areas over which they have more control, such as the training they offer and the activities they build into the program, most organizations fail to challenge existing social relations. To understand what kind of learning framework these programs offer to volunteers to help them interpret and understand
their experience, in this section I examine the training provided and the learning activities that arise during placement. I conclude that the pedagogical approach of these programs promotes an ideological understanding of development and does not provide space for the reflection and discussion that are so crucial to critical learning processes.

**Training.** In the interviews, I asked participants about the training they received, including its duration and main focus. I did not ask for an exhaustive account, and unfortunately, most of the organizations’ websites say little about the training volunteers receive. As a result, the descriptions of the training provided by volunteers represent the components of training that made the most impression on them, rather than a summary of the entire training program. Nonetheless, the consistency in their descriptions speaks to a common approach and focus by the sending organizations. All of the participants received some training prior to their departure, although these trainings varied widely in duration and depth. One participant had a single Skype call before leaving and three days of debriefing upon her return, whereas several other participants received almost a full month of training prior to their departure. Between these two extremes, the most common duration was one week. Overall, participants’ recollections paint a picture of an approach to training that fails to provide context for development work or a framework for understanding its complexity. Instead, the training focuses on developing countries as sites of ‘danger’ and offers cultural understanding as a framework for undertaking and analyzing development work. In this way it perpetuates the ‘othering’ of developing countries and promotes a depoliticized idea of development work.

Participants recalled two focuses to the training they received: logistics and security, and cross-cultural communication. Jessica’s description of the training she received from her university illustrates the logistics and security focus common to many of the training programs:
that one kind of went over basic, like you know, talking about how you need to get your shots, if there’s like vaccines, um, how it’s covered through the university health plan if you have that, um, just kind of, uh, how to check security warnings, um, and a little bit, yeah more so university liability stuff and less like, how to be a person. (Jessica, excerpt from interview)

Clearly, Jessica was not impressed by this training. Her statement that this training focused more on university liability than “how to be a person” implies that she felt the focus on safety came at the expense of training on how they could act appropriately and respectfully in a developing country and their new workplace. Obviously, it is important for participants to have an understanding of how to keep themselves safe and logistical arrangements are necessary for any trip. However, emphasizing these components reinforces the idea that developing countries are ‘dangerous.’ This idea has been part of the imaginary about developing countries since the colonial era and plays a central role in perpetuating an understanding of developing countries as fundamentally ‘different’ and in need of ‘civilizing’ or developmental intervention (Heron 2007). Although these topics were likely covered in some form by all organizations, they seemed to receive more emphasis from universities, perhaps indicating that universities hold a more stereotypical understanding of developing countries as sites of ‘danger’ compared to development NGOs that likely have more experience working overseas.

The second component of the training recalled by participants was a primer on cross-cultural communication. That this topic was so prevalent is unsurprising given that GAC requires organizations that receive IYIP funding to provide volunteers with a three-day Intercultural Communication session prior to their departure. This training session is designed and facilitated by the Centre for Intercultural Learning, which is run by GAC. The goal of the course is “to increase the intercultural effectiveness of interns preparing to live and work in a different cultural context” (Global Affairs Canada 2014). Some of the activities included in the training include:
describing the influence of culture on human behaviour, learning to decode and bridge intercultural situations, planning strategies for adjusting to life elsewhere, discussing the meaning of international development from a personal, national, and international perspective, and exploring tools that can contribute to an effective internship (Global Affairs Canada 2014). This emphasis on understanding how one’s upbringing and environment impacts one’s perception of the world has the potential to act as an important step in beginning to deconstruct engrained understandings of the world.

However, participants’ recollections raise questions about whether the approach to culture taken in these trainings could actually lead to this kind of critical analysis. Comments made by participants emphasize that the training tended to focus on superficial cultural differences. Ashley recalled “we have like this orientation week where they talk about the culture and the way of thinking and the Africa time, like 2pm it’s 6pm” (excerpt from interview). Certainly, being aware of different approaches to time is useful when working in a different environment. However, it is only the most superficial level of understanding one’s experience overseas: beyond these superficial differences, there is the fundamental difference in the way volunteers will be seen because of their whiteness and Western-ness, the power they will be assigned because of these qualities, and many other more substantive elements. Focusing on the most visible and shocking aspects of cultural difference contributes to the conceptualization of people in developing countries as fundamentally different from the volunteers; this separation makes it harder to see the ways in which volunteers’ position and identity is related to the position and identity of ‘others’ and, indeed, is created in relation to these others. Furthermore, without grounding the discussion of the cross-cultural interactions in an understanding of privilege and power, they are portrayed as interactions between people who are different but
equal. Such an understanding prevents an analysis of the position that volunteers hold overseas, and a critical interrogation of the ways in which their presence might be reinforcing racial hierarchies or racialized ideas of superiority and agency.

Beyond concentrating on the superficial aspects of difference, the trainings also relied on an understanding of culture as static and unchanging. One of the common activities in these training sessions is to have volunteers speak to someone from the country where they are being sent, but who now lives in Canada. This conversation is meant to be an opportunity to ask questions about the culture one is entering, in order to prepare volunteers for their experience. One participant recalled being paired with:

a local person who you can talk to who can give you all the insider information. And for, you know, for myself, they just took some, [laughs] they literally took a random lady [from the placement country], who barely showed us, who barely told us anything, and she hasn’t been in [placement country] for about 10, 15 years, so all of her information was very outdated, like, you know, she told, um, my, my friend who, and said that ‘yeah so you need, everybody’s very conservative so you need to wear long skirts and you need to cover your shoulders’ and we got to the office and everyone was wearing spaghetti straps, shorts and flip flops [laughs]! (Sam, excerpt from interview)

Selecting advisors who have been in Canada for more than a decade reveals an assumption that culture does not change. Such an understanding obscures the constant change occurring in all parts of the world, and places developing countries outside of this movement. By creating an image of developing countries’ culture as static, this training builds on colonial ideas of other cultures as ‘backwards’ or ‘primitive.’ This conceptualization opens space for intervention aimed at fostering ‘progress.’ It also presents culture in an abstracted way, rather than as something that changes in response to our relations with one another.

As can be seen in the quotes above, participants generally felt these trainings were insufficient. Only two organizations received more positive reviews of their training practices. These organizations were also the only two organizations that offered more substantive training
that covered the history and context of international development and focused on understanding privilege rather than just difference. One participant described the training she received as follows:

So the training included kind of a lot about, um, cultural sensitivity, as well as the, um, kind of the dangers of, of coming into a community and not, um, being prepared to handle the different, different issues that typically arose, and also like a lot of it kind of, um, sensitivity training and understanding your own privilege when working in these communities. (Jennifer, excerpt from interview)

While this training shared the same starting point as the others, in that it framed the training as equipping volunteers to live and work in a different culture, it clearly went further than superficial differences, adding discussions about privilege. This same participant was one of the only people who felt the training she received had adequately prepared her for understanding and questioning her experience and position abroad:

I felt that it was beneficial with the week leading up, that we did have, um…we did have training that did discuss like white privilege, and the privilege of being from Canada, and the ability to travel to these places, and I think that was important, and I think that type of training did open all of us up to really learning more and showing the group that we were with, of fellow interns, that we had learned, um…things about the countries that we lived in, and connected with people within the communities that we worked while we were there. (Jennifer, excerpt from interview)

Participants’ reports of the cross-cultural training they received reveal two very different approaches. The first uses a superficial, static, and depoliticized understanding of culture that contributes to an ideological understanding of difference and development. Participants generally felt this training was inadequate in preparing them to understand their experience abroad, and indeed, it seems ill-equipped to foster critical interrogation and learning. In contrast, the few organizations that offered a more substantive and nuanced understanding of culture and difference received positive reviews from participants who felt they had been challenged to learn more about their position overseas and the country they were to live in.
Learning During Placement. As discussed in Chapter Three, collective discussion and reflection and the application of theory are important components of critical learning. Unfortunately, the programs did not appear to provide an effective educational framework that would allow participants to reflect on their experience. In this way, these programs appear to be consistent with existing research that suggests volunteer abroad programs tend to lack explicit educational frameworks, instead assuming that volunteers will learn simply by coming into contact with ‘other’ people and conditions (Simpson 2005). Based on the interviews, it appears that participants had to create their own opportunities to reflect, either on their own or with the other volunteers on placement alongside them. The programs did not create structured space for this kind of learning activity. Instead, as Sam notes, “most of the time it was, it was, you know, us, just us as a group of students who were talking about our placements” (excerpt from interview). Leaving it up to volunteers to create their own spaces for reflection and discussion means that not every volunteer will be able to participate in these activities. For example, Elizabeth, who was the only volunteer in her area during her placement, noted several times throughout the interview that she felt her placement would have been improved by having someone else to talk with who was going through the same experiences. By not building in structured opportunities for reflection and discussion, volunteer-sending programs are missing an opportunity to foster critical learning among volunteers. Although some volunteers created this space for themselves, not all of them were in a position to do so.

A few participants had assignments to complete for school while they were on their placement. While these assignments provided a space for reflection and the application of theory to their experiences, they were often limited to very specific topics that could be related back to their coursework. Taylor reflected that:
I think international development sort of teaches you to ask a lot of questions, so it was it wasn’t I would say probably only 25% of it came from coursework, and the rest of it was just from like living there and seeing all the stuff that was so different from Canada and all these things that we had seen in our studies leading up to it, and just like, kind of bridging the two real world and schoolwork, like, with the four years of university, all the things we learned about in class. (Taylor, excerpt from interview)

Although her ability to reflect and ask questions was clearly strengthened by her previous studies, the actual assignments she had to do during her placement were far less useful in promoting reflection and learning than the experience itself. Here too, the programs are not structured to facilitate critical learning, and any questioning and reflection that occurs is of the volunteer’s own making and largely self-directed.

The purpose of these programs, the roles they offer volunteers, and the training they provide paint a picture of programs that adhere to conventional ways of enacting and understanding international development. Few of the programs attempted to foster critical engagement. Instead, most programs aligned with conventional practices that promote capitalist development and affirm Western expertise and agency, while emphasizing the ways in which developing countries are ‘different’ and in need of intervention. Although some volunteers found their own ways to discuss and reflect on their experience, such opportunities were not facilitated by the programs themselves. Taking all these aspects of the program structure together, it seems likely that these programs would lead volunteers to internalize and enact conventional development practice, rather than fostering critical learning and praxis.

**Becoming a Volunteer**

The existing literature on volunteer programs reveals that volunteers often choose to volunteer abroad in order to test out career goals and improve their employability (Tiessen
2014), as part of a quest for adventure and a ‘real experience’ of life in developing countries (Hickel 2013), and a desire to help those in need (Rehberg 2005). Participants in this research undertook their placements for very similar reasons: they were motivated by career advancement, travel and adventure, and altruism. These motivations, like the program marketing, combine personal gains for volunteers with presumed developmental impact, and do not question whether these can co-exist. Interestingly, participants felt conflicted about their altruistic motivations, often appearing reluctant to share them. Their understandings of altruism also varied between conventional ideas of charitably addressing need and more critical ideas of righting systemic injustices. Altruism was also the area in which there was the most difference between Western participants and those with connections to developing countries. Overall, volunteers’ motivations for participating in these programs reveal an understanding of development and their place as development practitioners that largely adheres to conventional understandings, although one that is slightly complicated by their prior studies or travel.

**Career Advancement.** When asked about their reasons for participating in a volunteer abroad placement, almost all of the participants offered at least one career-related factor, although often in combination with other motivations. For some participants, the placements were a way of testing out a career in international development:

I saw it as a way, because I thought like I eventually wanted to work overseas, so I saw it as a way to kind of try it out, see if I liked it so I could maybe pursue a further career in that direction. (Jessica, excerpt from interview)

Other participants, who felt more certain about their career choice, saw the placement as a way to gain practical experience and develop skills that would improve their job prospects after the placement:

It’s a step one, you don’t have to have the coolest job right away, but you really need this, you know, if you want to volunteer you have to get as much as you can out of it,
especially on your work life, so you need to gain these skills, you need to gain, you
know, these experiences that you can put on your resume later on, so you can get a really
good job and get everything. (Sam, excerpt from interview)

Whether to learn about a potential career, practice applying skills discussed in class, or to gain
experience required for later jobs, overwhelmingly participants understood volunteer placements
as a learning opportunity that could offer the training, skills and experience required to access a
career in international development. In this sense, their motivation for participating aligns very
closely with the intended purpose of the programs as laid out by the government and the sending
organizations. Like the government and universities, participants saw these placements as a
bridge between academic learning and the workplace. Like sending organizations, they assume
that they will receive some kind of personal benefit in the form of skills development or clarity
about their career choice. At least initially, participants did not question the implications of these
assumptions or recognize the relations from which they emerge.

**Travel.** Seven of the participants were also interested in volunteering abroad because they saw it as a chance to travel and have an adventure. Their interest in travel was generally
connected to a desire to discover new cultures, have new experiences, see new places, and meet
new people. It was also connected to a desire for a challenge, in that they felt work that occurred
within a different cultural context would be more challenging than work in Canada and therefore
more rewarding. Jennifer expresses several of these variations in explaining her choice to
volunteer:

> I think at that point, um, and maybe on a personal, kind of selfish level, I was eager to go
out and see a new country, and I, I was kind of willing to go anywhere, um [pause] so,
um, I, it was something to do after, or while I was writing my thesis, and I guess in some
ways too I wanted a bit of adventure, and to see what development looks like on the
ground. (Jennifer, excerpt from interview)
The emphasis on travel and adventure as part of development work has motivated volunteers, development workers, and colonial actors for decades (Heron 2007). It relies on a conceptualization of developing countries as fundamentally different and available to be discovered by the volunteers. This framing objectifies developing countries and the people in them, converting them into a backdrop for personal adventure. This motivation also emphasizes the expectation of personal gain through volunteer placements, this time in the form of an interesting challenge and new life experiences. It draws on similar ideas and assumptions as the sending organizations who promote the volunteer placement as a transformative experience.

**Altruism.** Although more than half of the volunteers I spoke with shared that they had been motivated by some kind of desire to do good or make an impact, they offered a more nuanced and reserved perspective on this point than the sending organizations. Conventional assumptions that volunteers can ‘help’ was mixed with an awareness of their own privilege and the West’s role in fostering underdevelopment. For example, Jessica explained her altruistic desire in the following terms:

But I think I thought it was, you know basically there’s, you know, inequality in the world, and so it’s kind of the right, not the right, the duty of countries that are more affluent to help, you know, countries that are struggling more to get to a better place, whatever that means for them [pause] yeah I think I just kind of saw it as a way of people who have the opportunity and the privilege to be able to help to like help out in some way and give resources to places that need more resources, um [pause] and to kind of correct some of the systemic injustices that we’ve had with colonialism and all the stuff we messed up with, our trade systems and just [pause] yeah all that stuff. (Jessica, excerpt from interview)

In this quote, Jessica incorporates conventional narratives about her own agency and ability alongside recognition of her own privilege and role in systemic injustice. Although she sees the role of the West as ‘giving’ resources, which is indicative of a traditional ‘hand-out’ approach to charity, the purpose of these hand-outs is to address systemic injustice that emerges from the
actions of Western countries. Jessica is offering a far more complex understanding of the volunteer’s role in development than the sending organizations do in their marketing of the programs, albeit a somewhat contradictory one. It is also interesting that Jessica originally said that affluent countries have the ‘right’ to intervene to help other countries, before correcting herself to ‘duty’. While this adjustment might be simply a slip of the tongue, it could also reveal a tension between internalized ideas about the ability and authority of Western actors in development with a recognition that this role is problematic. It is difficult to determine whether this complexity would have been present before her placement, or if she is adjusting her motivation in the retelling, based on the ideas that emerged during her placement.

In another example of the conflicted relationship participants had with altruistic aspects of development work, many volunteers were reluctant to list altruism as a motivating factor. Some participants even explicitly distanced themselves from altruism:

Um, yeah, I definitely have always done it more so for…not necessarily an altruistic means, as a lot of people probably do, but more so for interest in travel as well, and just like career experience, which has been really helpful, and I have a lot of cultural competency and understanding different regions of the world. (Brittany, excerpt from interview)

This distancing may come from an awareness of some of the critiques of charity and paternalism within the development sector, or it may demonstrate that volunteers, like the government, see these programs first and foremost as a means to advance their careers and only peripherally as a way of achieving some kind of development goal.

Diaspora Exception. As mentioned earlier, there were noticeable differences in motivation between those volunteers who were members of the diaspora and those from a Western background. First, while all seven of the Western volunteers listed travel as a motivating factor, none of the three members of the diaspora did so. This difference reveals the extent to
which the perception of developing countries as a space for adventure and discovery relies upon seeing these spaces as fundamentally different and ‘other.’ The participants who could relate more closely to developing countries did not have the same level of separation from these spaces, even though none of them did their placements in a country that they had been to previously.

Furthermore, these participants were less reluctant to express altruistic motivations for pursuing a placement or a career in international development. However, they used different terminology to express their desire to help. For example, Ashley emphasized that her work in development was about ‘giving back’ rather than filling needs:

So I’ve always had one foot here, one foot there, so it has always been important for me in my work or in my experiences to, to give back, yeah to give back, to go back there, and to be involved as much as I can there, like I’m involved here. (Ashley, excerpt from interview)

when I say to give back, it’s to give back what you’ve learned, it’s to give back…um, give back what you’ve received here, and um, so, so yeah. The process of giving back. And I’ve, I don’t know, it almost feels like an obligation, but it’s not an obligation it’s more like I think it’s the right thing to do, so um, you can always be helpful here but I personally felt like I want to be helpful also over there. So um, so yeah, that’s the process of giving back. (Ashley, excerpt from interview)

For Ashley, participating in development work is a chance to pay forward her own success by sharing it with communities like the one where she grew up. This explanation starts from the idea of sharing and contributing, rather than filling needs. In this way, it is quite different from the way Western participants spoke about altruism or helping through development work.

With the exception of the few participants who were members of the diaspora, the motivations described by participants in this study broadly align with other studies that have shown volunteers to be motivated by a mix of self-interest and altruism. It also aligns with the way the government and sending organizations frame these programs, although it is impossible to determine whether it is participants who have internalized this framing or governments and
organizations who are responding to desires expressed by volunteers. Despite some nuances, participants largely adhered to conventional understandings of these programs as spaces where Western volunteers can exercise agency while discovering the ‘other’ and gaining experience that will benefit them at home.

Conclusion

Based on the review of funder and program websites and data on volunteer roles, it appears that the volunteer-sending programs undertaken by research participants adhere to a form of international development that is based in, and perpetuates, racist, capitalist social relations. Participants too, despite some nuances and exceptions, appear to have entered these programs without questioning these relations. Furthermore, the programs do not offer a pedagogical framework that seems likely to promote critical questioning; indeed, most training programs relied on ideological processes of ‘othering’ and there were very few structured learning opportunities that could facilitate collective reflection and discussion. In this context, it seems likely that volunteers’ conventional understandings of development would be reinforced through their participation in these programs, rather than being challenged.
Chapter Five:
Analyzing Participants’ Learning

I concluded the previous chapter by suggesting that the program and training structure, combined with participants’ initial assumptions, does not appear to offer fertile ground for critical learning. This observation aligns with other studies of volunteer abroad programs, in which the lack of an explicit educational framework led to volunteers’ pre-existing ideas and stereotypes being reinforced rather than challenged (e.g. Simpson 2004). However, my research findings depart both from existing literature and my own expectations. Over the course of their placements, participants developed numerous critiques, both of their specific placement experience and of the sector more broadly. These critiques initially emerged out of frustrating work experiences; then, as participants sought to understand why these challenges arose, they began to question and interrogate the practices of their sending organizations. Many participants proceeded to draw connections between the practices of the sending organizations and problems within the broader sector. Overall, participants’ critiques were quite insightful, and identified some of the main challenges facing the field of international development.

However, from a dialectical, historical materialist Marxist-feminist perspective, developing critiques does not necessarily indicate a critical understanding (Carpenter & Mojab 2017). It is entirely possible to critique something based solely on its appearance, without recognizing or addressing the relations in which it is implicated. When this happens, the critique describes social conditions without explaining them (Carpenter & Mojab 2017, p.33). This kind of critique will likely result in attempts to address the manifestations of a problem rather than the relations that perpetuate it. In contrast, being critical in a dialectical historical materialist sense requires identifying and explaining the social relations that give rise to specific material and social conditions (Carpenter & Mojab 2017). This kind of critical critique offers a stronger basis
for planning and enacting transformative change. As discussed in Chapter Two, the prevalence of non-critical critique within international development is perhaps one of the reasons development interventions have failed to generate meaningful change. Therefore, the question I explore in this chapter is: to what extent do participants’ critiques indicate criticality in the dialectical Marxist-feminist sense of the concept?

To answer this question, I trace the progress of participants’ critiques from their origin in frustrations at work to participants’ interrogation of sending organization practices, and finally, to their generalization of these critiques to encompass the broader field of international development. After tracing this progression, I attempt to understand whether these critiques demonstrate a critical understanding of international development. Doing so requires analyzing whether, and how, participants are articulating social relations in their critiques. To facilitate this analysis, I have grouped the critiques according to the two sets of relations I identified in Chapter Two: relations of racialized expertise and relations generating capitalist benefits. Although these relations are in reality mutually constitutive, here I examine each one in turn for the sake of clarity and focus. I argue that participants’ critiques hint at an emerging relational understanding of the world but that, given the self-directed nature of the learning process and the surrounding hegemonic environment, this critical understanding did not fully coalesce. As a result, participants were left with great uncertainty, struggling on their own to identify a coherent vision of change. I examine the results of this struggle in Chapter Six.

Racialized Expertise: Participants’ Relations to Others

One of the most common concerns raised by participants about their placements was that they had been placed in roles for which they did not have the necessary experience or
qualifications. Seven of the ten participants expressed feeling unqualified for their role at the placement organization. For some, like Jessica, the placement they were assigned did not match their skill-set or experience:

They were like you can tell us what you’re interested in and we’ll put you where there’s a need, and I’d originally thought I was going to be doing community tourism development, which is like cool, sounds cool, and then a couple days before I left they were like ‘actually, we’re putting you on the reproductive health project’, and I was like ‘I have zero expertise in that, but sure.’ (Jessica, excerpt from interview)

Jessica’s experience reveals several interesting elements of the placement process. They initially wanted to base her placement on her interests. While it makes sense to try to match volunteers to roles that interest them, relying on this aspect over skills and experience raises the possibility that volunteers will be assigned to work that they cannot do. Not only would this situation impact the volunteer’s experience, it would also be detrimental to the placement organization, which would be left with a volunteer unable to perform the required tasks. Furthermore, even if one argues that people’s interests often match their skills, in this case the organization ended up disregarding both interest and skills in the final placement, assigning Jessica to a role that she did not feel she could do effectively. By assigning Jessica to a role she is not qualified for, the organization is acting on an assumption that interest and enthusiasm are more important than skills. This assumption emerges from the conflation of whiteness and expertise discussed in earlier chapters.

For the volunteers, being placed in a role they could not fill was frustrating. Jessica described feeling “useless,” while other volunteers in similar situations recalled feelings of “frustration” (Taylor, excerpt from interview) and “insecurity” (Jennifer, excerpt from interview). Seeking to identify the source of their frustration, many volunteers pointed to the ways in which the sending organizations had framed the placement experience and their roles.
For example, Sam contrasted the information received during earlier studies in international development with the way the sending organization framed the placement and role:

for me, ummm, coming into [placement country] my perspective of development was being one of those people who knew what they were going to do, who knew the theories, who knew a lot of things that, we thought, I mean as a researcher and as, you know, versus as a practitioner, you know, we thought we had all the answers, we thought everything, even though they [at school] tried to tell us, ‘look you don’t have all the answers’, but then, [sending organization] was saying ‘look you people are the ones who are being taught this [laughs] this, you know, this practice, this notion and everything, this model,’ saying ‘you have to teach it to people.’ So I said ‘ok so we know,’ we get there, it’s a completely different story, we found out we know absolutely nothing, right? And seeing how development works, you know, in practice and in theory, and how it is on paper versus how it actually is going, it’s [pause] completely different.” (Sam, excerpt from interview)

In this case, the sending organization contradicts earlier advice not to consider oneself an expert.

It would appear that, at least in this case, sending organization practices and approaches have not kept pace with the academic critiques presented in international development studies classrooms.

Sending organizations appear to be actively enforcing the idea that volunteers have expertise, setting the volunteers up for frustrating experiences during their placement.

Clearly, the practices of the sending organization have an impact on the volunteers. Sam entered the placement with an assumption of expertise that was then challenged, generating some uncertainty. Other participants felt that by emphasizing the expertise of volunteers, sending organizations push volunteers to take on this persona. Sarah describes how she felt pressure to live up to the role in which she had been placed:

you know, an organization will say ‘oh we’re sending these great, highly-skilled volunteers abroad to build capacity of these local organizations in this and that,’ and then you go there and you think to yourself – what the heck, like why am I building capacity? Like what does that even mean and what does that look like in this context? Um, and how are you in good conscience sending me, um, you know, someone who’s fairly inexperienced, um, in the large scheme of things, to, you know, build capacity and um, it’s, in, at least in the beginning I remember I felt like maybe it almost created this dynamic where I had this title as a [trainer] and so I wanted to appear professional and knowledgeable and so I also wanted to, um [pause] I wanted to, um, I guess I didn’t want
to be as upfront about certain things like how old I was, for a big one, so my colleagues would ask me how old I was or how many years of experience I had or something like that, and I would try to beat around the bush because I thought they’re not going to take me seriously if I say I’m a 23 or 24 year old [trainer], right? I’ve literally come from halfway across the world, I know nothing about your country, and hi I’m here to train you. (Sarah, excerpt from interview)

The pressure to take on an expert persona led Sarah to act in ways she herself critiques in hindsight. By pushing volunteers to act as experts, sending organizations are drawing them into the reproduction of relations of racialized expertise within development work. The discomfort participants felt about not being sufficiently qualified for their work and falling short of the expectations set by the sending organization led them to question their own behaviour and the behaviour of the sending organization.

This questioning led some participants to consider how this scenario was related to broader trends within international development. In some cases, the explanations or questions they developed show evidence of an emerging critical understanding. For example, reflecting on the anecdote quoted in the last paragraph, Sarah makes a general observation about expertise in international development work:

I find that people [pause] um, I don’t know whether they get braver, but they tend to take on roles abroad that they wouldn’t even take on here, um, lots of times people get asked to be, you know, guest speakers, ‘oh come into the school and speak to these children and motivate these people and do this and that,’ and I’m thinking, like, these are people who don’t even do that locally [at home], and they wouldn’t, because they’re not necessarily seen as experts to go speak to a school, and a room full of kids and that sort of thing, um, so that’s part of it, um, and I think part of it is also, um, just that it’s quite condescending and patronizing to, um [pause] to have the approach of building capacity. um [pause] there’s an implied message within that, um, that if you’re building capacity that means that there is no capacity, or there’s little capacity, um, and [pause] it’s not that I’m trying to be politically correct, there are certainly contexts where there is very little capacity, um, but I think [pause] local solutions even to building capacity would, would be better and more relatable than um [pause] than international ones. (Sarah, excerpt from interview)
In this quote, Sarah recognizes that it is common for foreigners abroad to take on roles they would not occupy in their home community. Importantly, she also recognizes that the idea of building capacity contains within it an assumption that other people lack capacity and require intervention. Although she does not use these terms, this observation expresses the dialectical relation in which the identity of ‘developed’ relies on the existence of others who are ‘developing.’ She then challenges the assumption of Western expertise by affirming that local residents do indeed have capacity, and that ‘international’ solutions are not the only – or even the best – solutions. By affirming the potential of locally-developed solutions, Sarah is destabilizing the singularity of the Western model of development.

A critical understanding implies not only recognizing relations, but also the ways in which, in our present moment, these relations are oppressive and exploitative. In this vein, some of the participants drew a connection between their assumed expertise and their whiteness:

I think that maybe I thought it would be a lot easier, um, perhaps I was naïve, or maybe arrogant, um, just to think that [pause] like 20, young 20-year-old me had knowledge and qualifications to just go abroad in this very like [pause] I don’t know if I actually executed this, but that kind of standard sentence, like white is right, um. (Elizabeth, excerpt from interview)

Like Sarah, Elizabeth is questioning her initial assumptions and actions. She recognizes that some of the confidence she initially felt in her own knowledge emerged from her position as a white person. During her placement she was forced to confront the inadequacy of her knowledge and qualifications, and thus the underlying assumptions that had led her to think she was qualified. One of the ways in which ‘whiteness’ sustains or reveals its dominance is by presenting itself as the default; by recognizing her whiteness and the role it plays in shaping her assumptions and actions, Elizabeth is rendering visible the racialized relations at play in her work and in her identity.
Similarly, Taylor recognized that the presumption of expertise is often connected to being white or from the West. Interestingly, she explicitly identified this connection as having an oppressive effect:

I don’t know, that’s how I felt going into university, I was like I want to make a difference, and I think that a lot of people think that making a difference means that you, and like studying international development means that you know, just by, because you’re from like a developed, or like, a Western country that you know [pause] more, and you should be able to tell people like how to do things, and in the end we just found [pause] these like volunteer organizations just to be very like oppressive and [pause] just trying to morph [placement country] into something that it isn’t (Taylor, excerpt from interview)

In this quote, Taylor recognizes that Western knowledge is prioritized within international development because it is Western, and not because of any inherent value in the knowledge itself. She then takes this recognition a step further, suggesting that upholding one form of knowledge forces other people to conform to that set of ideas and that this erasure is oppressive. By recognizing that they were not as ‘expert’ as they had been led to believe, participants began unravelling the concept of expertise itself, and why it is assigned to some people rather than others. In this way, they moved towards a relational understanding of expertise and were able to express the oppressive impact of this relation.

Of course, there were variations among participants in terms of how far they took their analysis. In addition, the unconscious nature of the analysis may limit its utility in terms of generating new approaches and solutions. Although the quotes shared above demonstrate an emerging understanding of the world as relational and of volunteer’s own positionality within racist relations, participants themselves did not use these terms. It is not clear that they recognized the ways in which these shifts in analysis depart from some of their initial assumptions. Without recognizing the ways in which their emerging analysis differs from conventional assumptions, it may be difficult to push this analysis further or avoid falling back
on conventional solutions. For example, Ashley, similar to Sarah above, recognized that her presence as an ‘expert’ was displacing local expertise:

   sending people abroad is [pause] kind of taking the jobs of the people that are there, like there was sometime I was like, the work that I’m doing here, a [local person] could do it, so, I don’t know, I was sometimes, I really had like, am I really needed here? Like this is the thing, the 600+ volunteers that are being sent, we can just give those jobs to 600 [local people] that are competent to do those things, so…it’s like, uh, I, I don’t know. (Ashley, excerpt from interview)

However, the solution she offers is simply to replace the volunteers with local employees. Such a move could act as a way of challenging Western expertise, and in this way it would certainly destabilize existing social relations. However, Ashley’s statement does not acknowledge the reasons why such a replacement has not yet happened, or the barriers and resistance that would arise if attempting to enact this solution. In other words, although she has recognized that her expertise is not required, it is not clear whether she has recognized why, in that case, it continues to be sent and sought out. It is also unclear whether she has recognized the degree to which upholding Western expertise plays a role in upholding an existing world order. Furthermore, simply switching foreigners for local people may challenge racialized notions of expertise, but it would not necessarily challenge capitalist social relations, given that these have now been extended around the world and that many local elites play an active role in maintaining capitalism and benefitting from it (Hanich 2013). As noted earlier, race and capitalism are deeply intertwined, and addressing one set of relations without addressing the other will not be sufficient to create transformative change. Therefore, although participants clearly began to articulate some of the elements of a critical understanding of racialized relations of expertise, there were limits to this understanding.

These examples demonstrate the progression of volunteers’ thinking throughout their placements. Volunteers began by identifying a specific problem with their work placement: they
had been placed in roles beyond their level or area of expertise. They were then able to identify the source of this challenge in the practices of their sending organizations. Most of the volunteers then applied this problem to their understanding of international development more broadly. During this process, several participants identified an association between expertise and whiteness or Western-ness, and recognized that their position as experts was related to assumptions about a lack of expertise among local people. Many of them challenged this assumption by affirming that expertise does exist locally, and that they did not automatically deserve the expertise they were assigned. However, participants did not necessarily recognize the degree to which these statements and reflections challenge the very foundation of international development specifically, and the existing world order more broadly. Without this awareness, there is a risk that any solutions proposed will remain superficial, or that attempts to create change would be easily co-opted when encountering unexpected resistance.

**International Development’s Relation to Capitalism**

In addition to being assigned roles for which they did not feel qualified, participants were also frustrated by changes to their roles once they arrived in the placement country. All of the participants were presented with a job description before leaving for their placement. Six of them felt that this job description did not accurately describe the work that they were then asked to do during their placement. For example, Amanda recalled the following anecdote:

so for example, one thing they wanted me to do was they’re like, ‘well can you do an economic evaluation of this?’ I’m like, ‘first of all, I’m not an economist and have never taken an economics class in my life,’ like this was in no way part of the description, and I understand that you have to do things outside the description of your job, obviously, but I’m like, this is not what I do. (Amanda, excerpt from interview)
Although Amanda recognizes that it is normal to do tasks beyond one’s written job description, the request to do an economic evaluation goes so far beyond the initial description and her range of skills that it is no longer an understandable or realistic request. In this case, the changes made to the job description compound the concerns about being unqualified that were discussed earlier. Furthermore, in addition to having concerns about the content of their work, half of the participants I spoke with also felt that they did not have enough work to do during their placements. Ashley captures the sentiment of many of the participants by stating that the combination of these factors meant that “work-wise [the placement] was very challenging” (Ashley, excerpt from interview).

These challenges led participants to question whether they were really having an impact through their placements. As noted earlier, volunteers who undertake placements abroad appear to be motivated not simply by the opportunity to gain work experience, but, more specifically, by the opportunity to gain work experience while making a difference in the world. As a result, when participants began to question how useful they were at work, they also started to question their broader impact as volunteers. In total, eight of the ten participants ended up questioning the impact they had overseas. Some participants, like Jessica, came to the conclusion that they had not had any impact through their placement:

So [pause] yeah, I don’t know, it was, interesting, and a learning experience, but yeah, it was one of those things where at the end of the day I was like ‘probably didn’t make much of a difference.’ (Jessica, excerpt from interview)

Interestingly, in this statement Jessica recognizes that the placement was a learning experience for her, but does not count this outcome as ‘impact.’ Instead, for her and other participants, ‘impact’ is about affecting the lives of other people. As they discovered during their placements, however, this type of impact is much harder to ascertain:
I honestly can’t pinpoint the impact of my work overseas. Um, it, I don’t do tangible type of work, where I can say, I built a school so the impact is, you know. 1000 bricks physically, or the impact is these kids going to school, or [pause] whatever it is. Um [pause] so I, I struggle to really say um, this has been [pause] the impact that’s created because I went abroad, or because [pause] I volunteered through these organizations or something like that. (Sarah, excerpt from interview)

Compared to other areas of their placement experience, such as their expertise, participants appeared far more reluctant to give up on the idea that they could have an impact as volunteers. Instead, they sought out ways of maintaining the sense that they were having some sort of impact through their work. Two coping mechanisms became apparent through the interviews. The first coping mechanism involved re-focusing on small actions and outcomes, rather than sweeping changes:

I tried to help the organization as much as I could, I tried to help the youth as much as I could, and I only have, like, little stories, I only have like one time I helped a guy get an interview for a job. I don’t even know if he got the job, but that’s like really, like I’m trying to, when I think of this, it’s like really tiny, tiny, tiny and hopefully I’m not the only one, and, another person does a tiny thing, and my colleague that was there was doing also her thing, and hopefully it will give something very beautiful at the end of all of this, but [pause] I, I actually don’t know what I did, like I don’t know. But I did my work, for sure, I did my work. And [pause] But regarding development, it’s ah, no, I don’t think I solved anything over there. So yeah. (Ashley, excerpt from interview)

Rather than the larger goal of ‘solving’ problems, Ashley has chosen to focus on smaller, more tangible actions that she was able to take. She assumes that in combination with actions taken by other people these small actions will cumulatively have an impact.

The focus on smaller actions is connected to the second coping mechanism developed by participants. Several participants spoke about impact as something cumulative that should be measured over the course of one’s career, rather than on the basis of a single placement or role. Often, participants framed this idea by positioning their placement as a learning experience that could offer them the skills necessary to have more of an impact later on in their career: “the impact from, from volunteer placements: minimal if not negative, whereas like the [pause]
impact of the experience and learning and stuff like that can be really transformational for sure” (Amanda, excerpt from interview). From this perspective, the placements are not intended to generate development impact, but rather to set the volunteer up for a career that would be impactful overall. In some ways, this reconceptualization of impact as something that emerges from an accumulation of smaller actions is entirely reasonable: social change is generally a gradual process. Nonetheless, it is notable in that it represents a significant departure from the sweeping statements of transformative impact that are prominent in the marketing for these programs.

This reconceptualization appears to be at once a readjusting of expectations towards a more realistic idea of one’s potential impact and an effort to retain the idea of oneself as having a positive impact. In this latter sense, it is similar to what Heron observed in her conversations with returned development volunteers (2007). Heron argued that their very identities as middle-class white women depended on their ability to help the less fortunate and, in the process, define themselves in contrast to these other groups. As a result, her participants came up with containment strategies that allowed them to question development broadly while stopping short of anything that would fundamentally challenge their own identity (Heron 2007). In a similar way, it appears that the participants I spoke with have come up with a way of thinking about impact that can explain the limited or negative results of their placements without challenging their ultimate ability to do good or have an impact in a broader sense.

Although there were limits to participants’ self-interrogation in this area, their concerns and questions about impact did allow them to ask bigger questions about the programs and the field in general. Like in the earlier example, participants sought ways of explaining the discrepancy between larger notions of impact and the smaller impacts they felt they had. This
search led them to question the degree to which the sending organizations were actually committed to development impact:

I mean like, the project that I was on in the [placement country] was a particularly [pause] not great project, and then you know when I got there I discovered that like [pause] [the funder] hadn’t like done any visits, which is really strange, in three years [pause] and, you know, the volunteers who were there the year before me had also, they had, you know, brought these, these same concerns that I was bringing forward to the organization, like they had heard all of this stuff before, so they’d known that this is going on, they just chose not to do anything about it, because oh this is what we do, we have a volunteer program where we send Canadians, and the [local people] love having Canadians here, so it’s great [pause] not paying attention to the fact that like the actual project [pause] that you’re funding like barely exists. (Amanda, excerpt from interview)

At first I really judged them because I was like ‘oh well this is a horrible use of tax dollars, and this could be, this could be improved, like why aren’t they doing things,’ you know what I mean, if they know these things, why aren’t they doing things to try to improve it, yada yada yada, but now I’m seeing that like that’s more common, and now I’m also understanding that like as an educational institution in Canada, their focus is more on, their focus, and their abilities, like I don’t know if they had the ability to like [pause] make that that much better of a project, you know? But they do, but they are kind of fulfilling their intention with it, which is [pause] experiences for students, you know? (Amanda, excerpt from interview)

Amanda came to understand that the sending organization was not addressing some of the problems with the development project because their focus was not on the project’s development impact, but rather on the experience such placements offer to students. This observation begins to unmask the dualistic marketing described above, in which developmental impact and employment experience are simultaneously possible. In doing so, it reveals the true priority of these programs in generating benefits for the volunteers themselves, rather than local communities.

Participants did not lay blame solely at the feet of the sending organizations. Rather, they identified funding arrangements as enforcing specific aims and methods that constrained sending organizations and led them to perpetuate ‘bad’ practices:
it’s like, um, I don’t know, in order to get funding for whatever, the program has to send 600 volunteers in five years’ time. So it’s not about sending the most passionate, it’s not about sending the most qualified or whatever, it’s only about sending 600 volunteers, it’s about ‘ok we need to send those people’. And to have placements of two weeks somewhere, I don’t [pause] frankly I don’t know what anybody could do in 2 weeks. To have placements of one month or, I don’t know, I feel like [pause] there’s just something, and maybe it’s not their fault, like I said sometimes it’s related to funding and that’s what you need to do to get money. (Ashley, excerpt from interview)

In this quote, Ashley draws a connection between sending unqualified volunteers or continuing to offer short term programs and the requirements set out by funders regarding how many young people must be sent overseas in a given year.

Participants also generalized their critique of the funding system and its impacts on development work beyond volunteer abroad programs. Most of the critiques offered substantive interrogations of the relations at the core of the funding system. Numerous participants argued that the funding system enforced the priorities of funders over those of communities:

[sending organization] is an NGO but it’s also funded by the government, which is sort of what we thought was a bit fishy because the government of Canada gives money to organizations that work towards, like, benefitting the Canadian government in some way? So it’s like, we want to apply for the grant, you write your program to what the grant is trying to do [pause] So it’s like, even in the council that I work on, like when we want a grant, we’re like ok well how can we change the objectives of this, this event so that it can run and meet the expectations of this grant, and I think that’s what [sending organization] is trying to do, like they’re trying to get money and meet the expectations that like, like the requirements for the funding that they’re getting. (Taylor, excerpt from interview)

In this passage, Taylor clearly identifies the funding system as a relation of power, in which the funder has the power to adjust the priorities and methods of recipient organizations through the requirements that they place on the funding available to organizations. She also emphasizes that funders give money to causes that forward their own agenda. In a later quote, she is even more explicit about the agenda that the Canadian government, as the funder, is pursuing through their support for these programs:
going away, um, and seeing the ways in which the Canadian government used [sending organization] to kind of push a Canadian agenda, as opposed to like actually working for [placement country], it was just, like, it was very weird, because it [pause] what I was doing in [placement country] sort of was masked by, that it was going to be better for the [local] population, when meanwhile it was actually to attract foreign investment, which would in turn bring money back to Canada. (Taylor, excerpt from interview)

[sending organization] had just implemented this like big push on the tourism sector, and it was trying to, um [pause] like train people to work at hotels, but the hotels were, like, owned and built by a foreign country, so you’re just kind of like, well you’re creating jobs for the [local] population, but they’re only service level jobs, like the higher jobs are still maintained by, by like Western businesses. (Taylor, excerpt from interview)

Not only has Taylor identified the funding system as a way for funders to exercise and maintain power, she has also identified that the interests of the Canadian government are centred around generating capital for Canadian companies and providing them with a cheap labour force. This analysis identifies the relations at work within the funding system, and also identifies the relationship between development and capitalism. In this way, it certainly exhibits movement towards a critical understanding of international development.

Interestingly, several participants also saw the funding system as pushing NGOs to act more like businesses or corporations. For example, Elizabeth explained that the limited funds available have forced NGOs to compete with each other instead of collaborating or supporting each other:

say for example there was 1000 organizations here in Toronto that are working on agricultural sustainability, women’s rights, access to education, but there’s a thousand organizations doing the same thing, and they’re all writing in to the federal government, formerly like CIDA, for funds, and that’s being sparsely spread out around these 1000 organizations, but if they kind of collated their resources and their time instead of competing with one another then there might be more profitability for the projects that they’re working on internationally, but instead there’s just this rigorous process of useless paperwork, and, um [pause] underpaying their own staff, and [pause] the implementation of their projects takes longer, and then they don’t get followed through because their funding gets cut. (Elizabeth, excerpt from interview)
Elizabeth clearly feels that competing for funds has a detrimental impact on NGOs’ ability to uphold their values and meet their goals. In this way, the competitive nature of the funding system is extending capitalist relations by forcing NGOs to mimic them and think like capitalists, diverting their attention from more effective ways of addressing social problems.

Participants’ observations on the funding system and its role in shifting the priorities of NGOs reflect an emerging critical understanding in that they identify the power relations at the core of this system and their specific role in extending capitalism. Just like in the discussion of expertise, however, there were variations and limits within these emerging critical understandings that illustrated the difficulty in moving beyond the pervasiveness of capitalist social relations. For example, in the statement by Elizabeth quoted above, she states that collaboration between NGOs would enable projects to be more ‘profitable.’ This word choice demonstrates the pervasiveness of the language and framing of business and capital within our current moment: even when critiquing corporatization, the alternative is presented using capitalist language. This tendency was evident throughout the interviews. For example, Taylor described the reporting done by her sending organization as follows: “it’s just kind of like by-the-numbers, it’s to look good to like Canadian investors, and to the government” (Taylor, excerpt from interview). In this sentence, she conflates ‘investors’ who invest in companies with ‘donors’ who support NGOs. This conflation is at once a slip of the tongue and a revealing statement about the accountability structures of NGOs: rather than being accountable to the communities in which they work, NGOs report back to their donors (Jacobs 2010) in much the same way that companies report to their investors and shareholders rather than their employees or the surrounding communities (Malleson 2014). Therefore, although participants are critiquing the funding system for its role in corporatizing the NGO sector and advancing capitalist interests,
their phrasing of these critiques emphasizes the pervasiveness of the capitalist system and the
difficulty they encountered in their attempts to conceptualize an alternative system.

The challenge of thinking beyond capitalism also showed in their proposed solutions to
some of the problems they had identified. For example, one participant suggested the funding
system could prioritize the needs of communities if funders were more aware of these needs:

you know, an ideal world of development for me would be, is if those people, the ones
who are actually giving these grants and these fundings, and you know, everything,
would actually see what’s it’s like on the ground, and would actually see what it’s like,
un, in those countries, who would know the contexts and everything, who would at least
visit – visit! – their beneficiaries for a month. Then, that’s when, then that’s how
development, and how all of this could actually move forward in a positive way. (Sam,
excerpt from interview)

While more awareness on the part of funders would certainly be helpful, increasing the
awareness of existing funders does not change or challenge the relations that set some people up
with the wealth and power to act as funders, while others are relegated to the status of recipient.
It also assumes that the problems with the funding system are based on a lack of information or
misunderstanding, rather than self-interested efforts to advance a capitalist form of development,
as identified in the quotes from other participants above. Thus, while many participants offered
critical interpretations of the funding system, there were, once again, limits to their analysis.

Seeking Alternatives

As described in the two themes above, although participants at times approached or
demonstrated a critical understanding of international development through reflection on their
placement experience, this understanding was inconsistent. This partial process of critical
learning created a situation in which participants’ initial ideological understandings of
development had been disrupted to the extent that they were no longer sufficient to explain away
the questions and critiques that had emerged from their placements, but this framework had not been replaced with a coherent alternative. As a result, participants were left in a situation of great uncertainty. They emerged from their placements feeling that development in its current form is both more complicated than they originally thought, and also inadequate to address the challenges of the world. However, most participants felt uncertain about solutions and alternatives.

Interestingly, the participants who came closest to understanding and confronting the racist, capitalist social relations at the heart of international development also had a harder time identifying alternatives. They had reached a point where they recognized ideological solutions as insufficient, but had not been able to identify alternatives on their own. For example, Jessica explicitly connected development to colonialism and pointed to trade practices as one way in which developed countries continued to exploit developing countries through capitalist practices. In this sense, she had identified some of the ways in which international development is implicated in relations of racism and capitalism. However, she did not know where to go from this point:

I think I still, I still believe that affluent countries have a responsibility to clean up some of the mess that we’ve made, um [pause] and [pause] help, but I, I just don’t, I’m not sure [pause] what the best way is to do that. (Jessica, excerpt from interview)

In this quote, it is clear that Jessica is struggling not only to come up with an answer about how to address the ‘mess’ that has been created, but also to find words and terms that can adequately convey a different kind of social relation. Her earlier comments made it clear that she is aware of the problematic connotations surrounding the idea of developed countries ‘helping’ developing countries, but here, although she pauses to consider how to phrase the idea of developed countries addressing the ‘mess’ they have made, she still comes up with ‘helping’ as the framing
concept. She has identified problems, but cannot articulate what alternative relations might look like.

Other participants had vague ideas of potential alternatives or approaches to move towards change, but were unsure what these alternatives would look like in practice. For example, Jennifer reflected:

I guess, yeah, I don’t really have a, a coherent solution, like I’m not sure what could be better, and then also [sighs] [pause] perhaps it is just, just the nature of development work, um [pause] or, the idea of development itself, like I think without [pause] ever [pause] I guess considering the larger political issues that are, that have contributed to making, or putting [placement country] into the state that it is right now, I think like until then it’s going to be people showing up with visions from Canada, and, um, a notebook, and telling them to write down how much they’ve earned, and how much they’ve saved, and how much they’ve spent for each, or in their day-to-day basis, whereas um [pause] I think, like, yeah, and it’s obviously a lot harder to deal with those historical injustices, and not politically, not politically motivating for Western countries, um, but, I do think until that, something like that happens, it’s gonna be people, kind of from the West, telling, expecting, placing expectations on, um, [local] people, or [local] organizations, or, development organizations in developing countries more broadly, to do things that could not even be achieved in, in the donor countries. (Jennifer, excerpt from interview)

In previous comments, Jennifer had identified colonial relations and capitalism as the source of the massive challenges facing communities in her placement country. In the passage above, she wavers between asserting that she does not know how to approach these challenges and presenting a general idea of how it could be done: through Western actors considering and addressing larger political issues, even to the point where it becomes uncomfortable for them. She also identifies that these changes need to go beyond the specific sector of international development. Despite these general ideas, Jennifer still feels unsure what this would look like in practice, or how it could begin to happen.

Participants’ partial movement towards a critical analysis destabilized their existing ideas. However, because the learning process was varied and inconsistent, they were not able to move beyond a state of uncertainty towards a coherent vision of the problems or solutions.
Likely summing up the feeling of many participants, Taylor observed “I still feel like I’m just very confused obviously, at how these things can work and what they mean, and how we can all make it better” (excerpt from interview). I would suggest that this partial learning process and remaining uncertainty stem from the hegemonic environment in which participants were learning, and the lack of structured opportunity for collective reflection, discussion, and action planning. Except for when they sought out conversations with other volunteers or additional reading material on their own, participants did not have access to a space in which to reflect on their experiences or to theory that would help advance the analysis they had developed on their own. Perhaps most importantly, rather than participating in a prefigurative experience, participants were attempting to critique while continuing to participate in hegemonic social relations. In these conditions, it is remarkable that participants moved so far along the path to a critical understanding, and entirely unsurprising that their movement towards this understanding was uneven. In the next chapter, I explore how this state of uncertainty and partial criticality influenced the actions that participants took after their placements.
Chapter Six:
Analyzing Participants’ Praxis

As I explained in Chapter Two, praxis is unified thought and action. It captures the idea that our consciousness is constantly being shaped through our actions, while these actions are in turn shaped by our consciousness. In this sense, both consciousness and action are continually evolving in a responsive way. From this perspective, it would be insufficient to limit the analysis to changes in participants’ understandings. In order to understand how their experiences shaped their praxis, it is also necessary to look at shifts in action and the way participants’ relate to the world. Accordingly, in this chapter I explore how participants shifted their engagement with international development in response to the changes in their thinking about the sector. I also try to understand how the uncertainty they felt at the end of their placements impacted their ability to identify next steps that could address their critiques.

Of course, given the constant movement implied in a dialectical relationship, participants’ actions likely would have begun changing over the course of their placement, as they reflected and learned. However, I was particularly interested in what participants did after their placements, as this would have been one of the first opportunities for them to make significant, noticeable choices about how to enact their new understandings – or not. As such, it would offer a window into understanding how they had internalized their critiques and how they are managing their altered – but uncertain – consciousness. Examining their trajectories after their placements is also a crucial component in understanding how these placements shape the ways in which practitioners engage with international development. Therefore, in this chapter I describe the steps participants took after their placements and analyze how these choices reflect both the critiques they developed during their placements and the resulting uncertainty.
Participants followed different paths after completing their placements. Two participants chose to disengage from international development and focus on Canadian issues instead. Two participants remained peripherally involved in development, working on development issues but from different fields. Finally, six participants remained directly engaged in the field of development, although several of them had also worked in other fields while seeking out the right type of opportunity within international development. With only two exceptions, participants’ trajectories quite clearly reflected attempts to address or respond to some of the critiques that participants had developed during their placements.

Of the two participants who did not demonstrate noticeable shifts, one had returned from her placement quite recently, and as a result she was still seeking out her next opportunity. For this reason, it was too soon to really examine how she is incorporating or responding to shifts in understanding that developed during her placement. The other participant appeared to be continuing on with the same type of work and position she undertook during her placement, although she reflected that she had become more discerning about the organizations she chose to work with. Therefore, even though there were no dramatic changes or critical interventions emerging from her placement, there were nonetheless clear examples of praxis, or the relation between learning and action. This participant had been working in corporate social responsibility before undertaking her placement. She noted during the interview that she saw huge differences in the way NGOs engage with international development compared to private companies, and that she found the NGO methods more effective. Perhaps this comparison made her less likely to critique the non-profit sector or to seek out a further shift in direction.

For the remainder of this chapter, I focus on the eight participants whose trajectories shifted more dramatically, as I am particularly interested in how these shifts reflect and
incorporate the critiques participants developed during their placements and what limits or challenges they encountered when trying to enact their altered understandings. I have divided the discussion according to the three strategies that participants’ used in their attempts to enact their critiques: disengaging from development, creating change from within the system, and building an alternative.

**Disengaging from development**

Following their placements, two of the participants chose to disengage from international development entirely, instead shifting their focus to issues in Canada. Both of these participants had developed significant concerns during their placement regarding the validity and ethics of their presence as foreigners and the perception that they were ‘experts.’ They had both identified the dominance of Western expertise as oppressive and one participant had explicitly connected it to colonial relations. In other words, both participants had identified the oppressive nature of the racialized relations that underpin development work. Their discomfort with their own implication in these relations led to the decision to disengage from the field. In the quote below, Taylor explains her decision:

> Well, when I came back, I, like, I wanted to take a break from development, um, which I still am, like I, my degree was great, and I like, it really taught me how to think, um, but when I came back I was like, I want to focus on Canada, because going to [placement country] just made me realize that we have no right to try and dictate how a country should, um, like what trajectory it should take, because like Canada still has tons of issues, and so like, in my mind, Canada is still like a developing country, just in the sense that like we haven’t got there yet, like we’re not [pause] so I was like I want to work in Canada, I want to help us be better, instead of like trying to like go somewhere where I’m not the most knowledgeable, and try to [pause] like, and try to act like I know how an organization should do things just because I’m from Canada. (Taylor, excerpt from interview)
Taylor is clearly uncomfortable with the ‘expert’ role that Westerners take on in development work and the power relations that shape what model of development is prioritized. Her decision to focus on Canadian issues was directly related to this discomfort; it was an effort to seek out a role where she was not participating in these relations.

Also visible in the quote above is the idea that Taylor’s time abroad also changed the way she thought about Canada. In breaking down the idea that Westerners are experts on development, she was forced to question preconceived ideas of what ‘development’ looks like and whether Canada really deserves its status as a ‘developed’ country. This rethinking of engrained ideas was also present in Jessica’s decision-making process after her placement:

I think previously I was like oh well they, like these countries that are considered, you know, um, the third world or less developed or whatever, they need the most help so that’s where I should go, because that is like the most dramatic kind of atmosphere, places in probably the most need, I guess, in that sense. So that’s kind of why I focused on that, I was like obviously why would I do work here when there’s like people who need it more. And then, I think through my learning in [placement] I started to realize how much things were connected, and how much of what’s going on here is impacting, um, impacts things around the world, and, um, yeah, just still how much work we have to do in, in North America, and so um [pause] I think I kind of shifted the focus to like it’s probably better for everyone to do what they can, um, where they are, instead of like, like going everywhere, um…and, yeah. And, and part of that is like learning about, um [pause] yeah all the, all the racial issues and um, and indigenous issues in Canada, and kind of seeing, um, how, yeah, the inequality in our society and learning more about that. (Jessica, excerpt from interview)

Like Taylor, Jessica’s time overseas led her to reflect on her assumptions about who needs help and who has the agency and expertise to carry out development work. By re-thinking these ideas and the ways in which these concepts have been racialized, she came to recognize not only that there are problems within Canada itself, but also that actions and decisions in Canada impact conditions elsewhere. By recognizing these interconnections, she comes to the conclusion that, by working in Canada, she can address the problematic relations she identified during her
placement without reproducing them by taking on the persona of a development worker addressing need abroad.

Interestingly, the work that Jessica and Taylor took on in Canada is more ‘political’ than the work they did during their placements. For example, Jessica discusses the type of work she would be interested in doing in the future as follows:

I’m definitely passionate about like feminist and feminism and those kinds of issues so any kind of organization that promotes that I’m all for, but I also think working with, um [pause] working on issues of like [pause] um, confronting colonialism and uh, the indigenous issues in Canada is super important, so I would also be interested in getting involved in that, like any kind of organization that’s kind of raising that dialogue and helping, like, settler Canada be aware of all that stuff, I think that’s really important…so like, yeah, I don’t know, there’s just, there’s just a lot of things, uh that I, and yeah, like anti-racism work, like also, yeah. (Jessica, excerpt from interview)

Jessica is committed to addressing relations of racism, but appears to see more scope for this work within Canada. Although she recognized the presence and impact of race within development, she has been unable to determine a way to address or change these relations within the field as it exists, and so has shifted her focus to a sector where this kind of political work is possible.

For both Jessica and Taylor, the shift in focus to Canadian issues can be read as a protest against the oppressive relations that shape development projects, in the form of a refusal to participate in these relations (for more on the politics of refusal see for example Vieta 2017). It is also a recognition that these relations are present in Canada and can be acted on from here. In these ways, their decision to disengage from international development can be interpreted as a critical action that responds to their emerging critical understanding of the relations that shape international development, and the ways in which these relations are connected to relations in Canada.
However, there are hints that the decision to disengage from development work is also motivated by a desire to avoid dealing with the complexity and fraught relations of this field:

could I really be that effective [pause] being not from there. And so I kind of thought, I was like it’s probably better to be, try to do things in a context that I’m more familiar with, so like North America…um [pause] and so, I kind of, I think I came to the decision I think it’s probably more effective to be working in a culture I understand, and working with issues I understand more than trying to do all this extra work to learn about another place, um, and then probably messing it up anyway. (Jessica, excerpt from interview)

In this quote, the choice to disengage is connected to uncertainty about how to address the challenges identified through their placements, and a lack of confidence that this could be done without ‘messing up.’ From this perspective, it appears that the choice to re-focus on Canadian issues is based on a desire to avoid complexity, rather than a decision about the best way to engage with this complexity. A search for an ‘easier’ way to engage with these issues could lead participants to overlook the complexity of race and their own positionality in Canada, while the assumption that the Canadian context is ‘familiar’ may make it harder for them to question engrained social relations in this location. Although the movement towards political work in Canada makes these risks appear unlikely at the moment, they do point to some of the potential limits of participants’ emerging critical consciousness.

For the most part, it appears that participants’ decision to shift their attention to political work in Canada represents a simultaneous refusal to participate in the problematic relations they identified during their placements and commitment to address these relations in their Canadian form. In this way, it is an enactment of their emerging critical consciousness. However, there are also signs that their decision is partially motivated by a desire to avoid the complexity and discomfort of engaging with their own positionality in these racialized relations. If this motivation gains strength when they encounter complexity in efforts to address racism in Canada, it could divert their political work. Furthermore, disengaging from international
development entirely, what Jessica referred to as an “avoidance response,” makes it hard to challenge the field itself (excerpt from interview). Rather, it allows the field to continue as it is, in its current oppressive form. Therefore, in the same way that participants’ critical consciousness is uneven and emergent, the actions that result appear to be at once critical and potentially reproductive. These participants have made a clear, intentional choice about the best way to address the critiques they developed; whether these choices will generate truly critical action perhaps depends on the extent to which participants are able to find opportunities in their current work to deepen the critical consciousness that began to emerge during their placements.

Changing the System from Within

As opposed to disengaging from international development, four participants instead shifted the focus of their work within the sector. Experiences during their placements had led Sam, Brittany, Amanda, and Jennifer to critique the funding system and its role in advancing funder priorities rather than community priorities. Several of them had also explicitly noted that the funders’ priorities were most often aligned with the interests of capitalist actors. As a result, these participants had emerged from their placements feeling that the type of development work they had been involved in was inadequate to address what were really systemic problems. Following their placements, these four participants shifted their focus away from development projects towards the systems and institutions that shape these projects. Some of these participants did so from within the field of international development, while others took on more of a public policy focus. Rather than disengaging from international development, these four participants are attempting to engage in a way that will allow them to bring new perspectives to the institutions and systems with the most power over the field.
Brittany and Amanda pursued or returned to further studies following their placements. Both of these participants switched from fields or areas of study that focused on specific technical interventions to ones that focused on institutions and systems as a whole. During her placement, Brittany had noted that international development work would only act as a ‘band-aid’ as long as it failed to generate institutional change that could prevent individuals from enriching themselves through their political positions. She switched her area of study to focus more on public policy and how policy can strengthen an entire sector, rather than looking at specific programs and interventions. Meanwhile, Amanda shifted her focus to look specifically at development institutions, moving away from her previous work on technical interventions and capacity building. Both of these participants were actively seeking out further knowledge to help them understand how institutional and systems-level change can happen and the barriers to this type of broader change. In this way, their choices demonstrate a recognition of the need for further reflection and theory in order to generate a more coherent explanatory framework, as well as a plan of action for how to create the type of broader institutional change they wanted to see.

The other two participants pursued further placement and work opportunities following their initial volunteer placements. In both cases, their choices demonstrate an attempt to get closer to the type of role or focus that they feel would allow them to address the issues they identified during their placement. For example, during his placement, Sam had critiqued the influence of funders over the work of NGOs and identified that funder priorities often end up benefitting funders in addition to – or instead of – recipients. He felt that funders need to have more awareness of the area where they work, and that funding needed to prioritize the needs of those receiving the funding. A little while after his initial placement, he spent time working with
a multilateral organization. He enjoyed this work at least in part because he felt that, as a multilateral organization, the focus was more on the recipient country:

the big difference is, at least from what I saw, I mean, ok so for [placement country] they were doing something because a country, because Canada said ok we’re gonna, we need to create an investment, you need to set out the field for this kind of investment in [placement country], so you’re gonna have to improve this and do that. For the [multilateral organization], it wasn’t really representing one country’s interest, right? You’re really doing it because a bunch of these countries have gone together and said look, this is what their government wants, this is how we can help them, so this is how we’re going to help them, right, based exactly on what they want. (Sam, excerpt from interview)

Working with this organization offered Sam the chance to experience what it looked like for a funding organization to prioritize the needs of a recipient. Based on this experience and the problems he had identified during his placement, his longer-term goal was to try to find a job that would allow him to try to change the way bilateral funders operate:

I would, you know, be the funder themselves of these programs, you know, where the money comes from, and [pause] being that is my dream job because that way, like I said earlier, that’s the big, those are the people who control everything but then they don’t know anything, and being one of those people and trying to make a change at that level, I think would be, I would be set for life. (Sam, excerpt from interview)

Sam had a clear idea of what needed to change in the funding system and, in his career choices, was trying to reach a place where he could begin to implement these changes. Interestingly, while Sam identified similar challenges with the funding system as other participants, he perceived these challenges as stemming from a lack of understanding on the part of funders, and therefore a need to raise awareness among funders. As noted earlier, while this approach is important, as it could begin to shift the consciousness of people involved in the funding system, it does not change the fundamental structure of how funding happens, who has money, and who is assigned power within international development. This example demonstrates the ease with which efforts to generate change in the way a system operates can end up focusing on the reform
of existing systems rather than addressing underlying relations. The uneven nature of participants’ emerging critical consciousness heightens this risk, as participants do not have an alternative vision against which to measure their attempts to create change.

During her placement, Jennifer had quite explicitly identified underlying relations of capitalism and colonialism as driving underdevelopment, and critiqued international development for offering inadequate solutions that failed to address these relations. However, she also expressed confusion about how to address these relations in a more meaningful way. Following her placement, she took on a series of roles that involved researching various governance and foreign policy issues and generating knowledge for policy-makers and other institutions and actors. She describes what interested her about this type of role in the following quote:

what interested me about [research organization] was that it did focus a lot on governance, and I think, while I was doing my internship in [placement country], you kind of realize that governance does affect a lot of what happens in these countries, and, and not just with corruption, but, um, things like Free Trade Agreements, or, um [pause] or being able to implement environmental laws, or relations with other governments, that, that has a huge impact on, um, the welfare of citizens within the country, so, I think it was, um, what interested me about [research organization] was that I wanted to learn more about what type of governance tends to [pause] bring about better welfare in citizens. (Jennifer, excerpt from interview)

Like Sam, Jennifer is trying to bring greater awareness to existing institutions and powerful actors on how they can change their approach to better support communities. It is notable that despite offering an analysis that more clearly identified underlying social relations than Sam, Jennifer has identified a similar approach to addressing development’s inadequacies. Both have essentially taken on (or aim to take on) educative roles within existing institutions to try to raise awareness and change the way decision-makers think about their development work. Although
neither of them use these terms, this strategy represents a recognition of the need to change consciousness in order to change actions and conditions.

While this approach is an interesting example of an emerging critical consciousness, working within institutions also raises the risk that their work will be largely reformist or easily co-opted by other actors or lost in engrained patterns of behaviour. Furthermore, when participating in a system – even with the intention of changing it – one is arguably also reproducing this system. It is difficult to preserve or attain a critical approach within a hegemonic institution and as isolated individuals it will certainly be difficult for them to create change. Once again, the importance of a space for collective support when undertaking critical action is clear. Although these four participants took on a very different approach in reaction to their critiques than the two participants who chose to disengage from development, the emergent nature of their critical consciousness made itself clear in a similar way by generating actions that have the potential to be either critical or reproductive, depending on the extent to which participants can retain and solidify their emerging critical consciousness.

**Building an Alternative**

The last two participants who demonstrated clear shifts in their trajectories following their placements decided to launch their own initiatives that would allow them to do development differently. This decision was clearly influenced by their experiences during their placements:

I started to learn about all these other organizations doing really interesting work, and um, even you know within [placement country], I would go to co-working spaces and meet social entrepreneurs, and um, all of that would just broaden my perspective and, um, when I was there I felt particularly inspired wanting to like start my own organization or do something, and um [pause] that ended up turning into um, the company that I started…so yeah, that’s been like directly influenced by, um, the experiences that I’ve
had overseas, and um, and the people I’ve met overseas who I wanted to [pause] continue working with on a long-term basis, but um, an important thing to note is I didn’t see room for that in any of the organizations that I went with. (Sarah, excerpt from interview)

Throughout our interview, Sarah emphasized the importance of developing long-term relationships and continuing to support people and communities in a reciprocal manner. As she notes above, volunteer-sending organizations do not create space for this kind of long term engagement and so she felt a need to create a way to do it for herself. For her, creating her own company allowed her to do development differently by emphasizing mutual support and long-term, community-driven engagement. In her work, she explicitly tries to operate differently than the organizations she encountered during her multiple volunteer placements:

So essentially, um [pause] I spoke a lot about like the power dynamic and how I thought about that really critically, and, and so essentially what I wanted to do when starting something was have, like, a very different, almost like the opposite approach that most organizations and people take…like, I will always think like what is their approach and how can my approach be different, and one of the big things is [pause] um, flipping the power dynamic. (Sarah, excerpt from interview)

She is working towards changing this power dynamic by changing the way people involved in her company in Canada think about and engage with people in the developing country where the organization runs its programming. Once again, her next steps incorporate a recognition of the importance of changing people’s understanding of development work while changing their actions. Furthermore, like Taylor and Jessica, Sarah’s decision to create a new organization that is structurally different from other development NGOs can be read as a refusal to participate in conventional development practice. Unlike Taylor and Jessica, however, Sarah’s refusal to participate also involves building an alternative, as she attempts to create a new way to engage with communities in developing countries.

However, the decision to create something new does not always result in an alternative to the existing social relations of development. The second participant who started her own social
initiative focused on diverting corporate money towards development activities. This approach was based on her observations during her placement and later travels that development organizations often lacked money, while corporate organizations had plenty of money but were not always conscientious in how they work with communities through their corporate social responsibility programming. Therefore, she wanted to start an enterprise that would provide a service to corporations and then channel this money into a community that could direct its use:

So yeah, I want to have more of my staff based in the countries that I’m working in, and I want them to be relaying to me what the needs are, what’s fair practices, what [pause] I don’t know, but then I [pause] I know too that working with corporations or like trying to target like the big four like Deloitte or PwC or whatever it might be, I do have the opportunity, they’re going to go spend a ton of money wherever they’re going…so I can have like costs associated with it, but less administrative costs like going into my own pocket, and just going into the communities I want to work with. (Elizabeth, excerpt from interview)

This initiative does not try to change the existing capitalist structure, but rather attempts to redistribute some capital towards marginalized communities. Once again, the uneveness of participants’ emergent critical consciousness resulted in mixed reactions that are both reproductive and critical.

Conclusion

Overall, volunteers did their best to respond to the critiques they had developed during their placements. However, the uneven nature of their emerging critical consciousness led them to develop plans of action that had the potential to be both critical and reproductive. The direction in which their actions proceed depends greatly on the degree to which they can retain their emergent critical consciousness in these new settings. From this perspective, it is notable that all of the participants were attempting to create change largely on their own. These isolated attempts at change are more likely to be easily co-opted or ignored by engrained actors and
institutions within the field. That individuals were able to respond to their critiques in some form even in isolation is encouraging; at the same time, if they had been able to reflect collectively and plan actions in collaboration with others, these responses could have an even greater impact.
Chapter Seven: Conclusion

This thesis emerged out of the questions and observations that arose during my own time as a volunteer in a developing country: questions about why international development has been so slow and ineffective at ending poverty and inequality and improving well-being, and what role volunteer placements play in this process. To answer these questions, I examined international development from the perspective of a dialectical historical-materialist anti-racist Marxist-feminist theoretical framework. I suggested that international development interventions have been shaped by an ideological understanding of the world that fragments ‘problems’ like poverty from the social relations that shape and perpetuate them. Examining the social relations in which international development is implicated reveals that development interventions are rooted in racialized assumptions of expertise and have often ended up extending capitalism and benefiting capitalist actors. As a result, in its conventional form, international development is perpetuating rather than addressing poverty, inequality and a lack of well-being.

The dialectical historical materialist framework also illuminates the role of human agency in either reproducing or changing the material conditions in which we live. Humans act in the world based on their understandings of the world, and these actions in turn shape the world and their understandings. Whereas reproductive praxis, based on ideological consciousness, leads people to reproduce the world as it is by participating in it unquestioningly, critical praxis, based on critical consciousness, enables people to recognize social relations, question the world around them, and intervene meaningfully to change these social relations. Based on this foundation, I approached volunteer abroad programs as a site in which emerging practitioners learn how to understand and practice international development. I wanted to better understand how this learning occurs and whether it generates a reproductive praxis that perpetuates the problems
within the field of international development or a critical praxis that can begin to change these relations.

Reviewing the literature on critical adult education, I proposed that a disorienting dilemma, reflection, discussion and the application of theory, and prefigurative experience are all necessary components in fostering critical praxis. Although the literature on volunteer abroad programs does not offer a hopeful picture of volunteer placements’ potential to foster critical praxis, I wanted to explore the learning process further in an environment in which volunteering is explicitly understood as a site of preparation for a career in international development.

Through interviews with ten former volunteers, a review of the relevant sending organizations’ websites, and a closer look at one of the main funding instruments for these programs, I found that despite the hegemonic environment offered by these volunteer programs, participants did indeed move towards critical consciousness through their placements. This movement was uneven and emergent: participants articulated social relations in some cases but not others, or they articulated the relations without connecting them to the problems that emerge in international development or their own positionality. Above all, these changes were ‘unconscious’ in the sense that participants did not see their emergent consciousness as significantly different from existing understandings of international development.

As a result of this unevenness, participants were left with a great degree of uncertainty about how international development could be approached differently or how the problems and relations that they had identified could be addressed more effectively. As a result, the emergent criticality of their consciousness is not stable or guaranteed. While most participants attempted to incorporate their critiques into their next steps following their placements, the lack of a clear alternative vision meant that their actions contained possibilities for both reproductive and
critical praxis. Overall, participants emerged from their placements sitting uncomfortably between reproductive and critical praxis. While their prior understandings were no longer sufficient to address and explain their concerns and critiques, they had not yet found a cohesive, convincing alternative. Similarly, while existing modes of engagement were no longer adequate, their attempts to develop new or altered ways of engaging often reproduced existing relations while trying to challenge these relations.

Although participants had shown evidence of a disorienting dilemma through their choice to engage in a field that implies, in its very existence, that the existing social world is not meeting everyone’s needs, the placements did not offer a learning environment that could build on this disorienting dilemma. The training provided to participants offered an ideological framework for understanding the placement experience, and the placement structure did not offer opportunities for collective reflection, discussion or the application of theory. Furthermore, the placement structure reproduced existing relations rather than prefiguring alternative ones. From this perspective, the uneven movement towards critical consciousness that participants were able to achieve is both unexpected and encouraging. Overall, this research has revealed both the possibilities and the limits of self-directed critical learning. In the remainder of this concluding chapter, I offer some recommendations based on these findings and consider whether a similar learning process would be likely to occur among other volunteers.

Recommendations

**Recommendations for Volunteer Abroad Programs.** Based on participants’ experiences and the existing literature on fostering critical praxis, I can make several recommendations regarding how volunteer abroad programs could alter their programming
structures so as to encourage critical learning rather than letting it happen at random, and so that volunteers who do begin to question their surroundings have the opportunity to solidify their emerging praxis. I have divided these according to the stages of the placement experience.

Training. As I explained in Chapter Four, the training that most organizations currently provide fails to offer an adequate framework for understanding and analyzing complexity during participants’ placements. However, there were two notable exceptions where sending organizations provided a slightly longer and much more thorough training. This training provided participants with an overview of international development, helping them to understand the field they were about to enter and providing more context for their experiences. Importantly, it also grounded their participation in an understanding of power and privilege. This foundation allows participants to enter their placements aware of their own positionality and with a more complex framework for analyzing their relations with other people. It can provide an important starting point for questions about how power is conveyed and reinforced through development interventions. Finally, this training also required participants to study the historical and present-day conditions in their placement country. In this way, from the very beginning, participants were applying additional knowledge to their experiences. I would recommend that other organizations adopt similar training programs in order to ground the placement experience in an understanding of the historical and current conditions of international development, the placement country, and their own positionality. Furthermore, lengthening the training portion at the beginning of the placement would enable closer relationships to develop between volunteers, providing them with a stronger network of people with whom they can discuss and analyze their experiences while overseas, even if they in different placements.
**During placement.** Perhaps one of the most important changes that sending organizations can make would be to offer more opportunities for reflection and discussion *during* the placements themselves, rather than simply bookending the placements with a training and a debrief in Canada. For universities, these activities could build on existing assignments, but perhaps offer more latitude for volunteers to shape the assignments based on their particular placement experience. For example, rather than requiring essays connected to particular courses offered at the host university, universities could offer volunteers a range of sites or topics that they can choose to go into in more detail depending on what is most relevant to their experiences. Some sites to examine would be the placement organization, social or historical conditions in the placement country, Canada’s policies and interactions with the placement country, or the specific area of work the volunteer is carrying out (e.g. micro-credit, monitoring and evaluation).

While it might be harder to require ‘assignments’ in the programs run by NGOs, there are still numerous ways to encourage reflection and the application of theory. Some possibilities would be to ask volunteers to research and write mock (or real) news articles touching on some of the same topics I listed above, or to write regular journal entries. However, organizations should be careful to structure these requirements to optimize the chance for thoughtful reflection. For example, journal entries can easily act as a way to record or describe experiences rather than a way to reflect on them. NGOs could offer volunteers some kind of framework for their journal entries that prompts them to pick a specific experience, list the questions and thoughts that emerged from this experience, and then pick one to write about in more detail, drawing on external reading where necessary. NGOs could also offer volunteers access to some sort of central repository of documents and articles they might find useful, given that volunteers who are
not associated with a university may not have access to the information required to help them write about and understand their experiences.

Both universities and NGOs could also make efforts to foster collective reflection and discussion among volunteers. For example, they could set up an online forum for discussion between participants, such as the platforms many offices and workplaces use for communication between employees. In this way, volunteers would be able to communicate and discuss with other volunteers, even if they are in different countries. Such a forum could also be used by the program staff to prompt reflection and discussion on particular topics by posting a weekly question for volunteers to discuss. Alternatively, volunteers could form themselves into ‘discussion groups’ during training and organize monthly conversations over Skype or some other call technology throughout the placement to provide a chance to pause and reflect on their experiences.

After Placement. Many organizations also offer some kind of ‘debrief’ session once volunteers have returned to Canada, although these sessions are sometimes optional and often quite short. The few participants who mentioned these sessions during the interviews recalled that the focus was largely on job-seeking skills. However, the uncertainty that participants felt coming out of their placements and the isolated nature of their responses afterwards imply that there is a need for a debrief session that includes a chance to reflect on how their perspectives have changed and how these changes influence what they want to do next. Creating a space for collective consideration on the best way to respond to emerging critiques could be invaluable in generating more collaborative responses to these critiques.

Of course, many of these suggestions entail either more resources (e.g. for a longer training session) or more effort on the part of program staff (e.g. for facilitating discussion
during placement). The need for resources may create barriers to change given the rigid structure of IYIP and likely of other funding mechanisms. In addition, although many individual staff are deeply committed to the learning aspects of these programs, it would be naïve to underestimate the weight of institutional culture. It can be quite difficult to challenge the way things have always been done within an organization and these engrained habits and attitudes could pose significant challenges to efforts to adjust program structures. Indeed, given the corporatization of many NGOs, the neoliberalization of universities, and the interconnections between the state and the capitalist class, it may be overly optimistic to assume that these programs can be made into spaces for critical learning, or that the desire to do so exists within these institutions. Given this situation, I make several recommendations below for people outside of these programs who are interested in facilitating and fostering critical education.

**Recommendations for Critical Educators.** From the perspective of critical education, it is noteworthy that these programs appear to have created cracks in participants’ understandings of international development and generated some movement towards a critical understanding of and engagement with international development. Also noteworthy is the possibility that participants may have gone as far as they can on their own: several of them explicitly sought out further education in the hopes of answering some of their emerging questions and addressing remaining uncertainty, while others found it difficult to find their own alternatives to current development practice or to understand the practical implications of their emerging critical consciousness. In this sense, these programs have created an opening for critical education that is currently not being adequately filled by volunteer programs themselves.

For critical educators or people working towards social change who are not part of these programs, there are several implications and possibilities raised by these conclusions. First of all,
it is important to be aware that some people are emerging from hegemonic or conventional programs with questions and a desire to deepen their critiques. In this sense, there is a pool of people potentially ready to engage in a critical education process, if such an opportunity were to exist. It may be worth exploring ways to connect with these volunteers and convene them somehow, in order to build on the learning that occurred during their placements. Second, there is a need for critical educators and social change advocates to articulate alternative visions more clearly and accessibly. Most of the participants in this study were unable to imagine what an alternative world could look like. If it seems impossible to apply one’s critical perspective in a meaningful way, it is incredibly easy to give up on this perspective as impractical or frustrating. Without an alternative to work towards, it can also be difficult to identify critical steps that can move us towards such an alternative as there is no way to evaluate or measure the actions that one is taking. Even without direct contact with volunteers in these programs, if there were clear and accessible conceptualizations of what transformed social relations could look like and how we can begin to move towards them, volunteers may be able to seek out these visions on their own and plan their actions accordingly. It is quite possible that these visions exist in academic writing or specific social justice circles; these ideas must become more accessible and widespread if they are to engage people who are seeking answers without knowing where to look.

I do not wish to discount the ongoing work of many academics and advocates, which may already be enacting the suggestions I have made here; nor do I wish to make these proposed activities sounds easier to implement than they would be in the face of engrained social relations and institutions. However, I firmly believe that critical research must be grounded in concrete practice, and so I offer these recommendations as a way to spark other ideas and reflect on
ongoing work. Learning must be a central part of the movement towards a more just world, and I hope that these recommendations can offer some ideas on how to build from existing learning processes in order to foster critical praxis in an increasing number of spaces.

**Exceptional Participants?**

As I mentioned in Chapter Three, I purposely selected a small sample size in order to focus on understanding participants’ experiences in depth. As a result, my findings cannot be generalized to other volunteers. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that my findings diverged from other literature on volunteer abroad programs that found volunteers’ pre-existing ideas were solidified rather than challenged (e.g. Simpson 2004, 2005) or that found more substantial limits to processes of critical questioning (e.g. Georgeou 2012; Heron 2007), and reflecting on what might have contributed to this divergence. In the following paragraphs, I suggest a few characteristics or factors that may have contributed to the somewhat divergent nature of the findings; this speculation would need to be confirmed by further research with a more representative and generalizable sample.

**Prior Experience.** As I described in Chapter Three, the vast majority of my participants had prior experience travelling or living in developing countries and prior knowledge of international development. As a result of their prior experience in developing countries, it may have been easier for them to move beyond initial culture shock at an early stage of their placement. They could then have spent a more significant portion of their placement considering and questioning their experiences, rather than simply attempting to learn the basics of life in another country. Similarly, their previous knowledge of international development may have given them more of a foundation from which to question and analyze their experiences. Their
prior experience differentiates this group of participants significantly from, for example, the high school graduates who often do gap-year programs or shorter group trips abroad. This difference may be one of the reasons my participants were more critical than the volunteers in some of the other studies I have mentioned.

**Recruitment.** Although I tried to circulate the recruitment notice as widely as possible, it is quite possible that the people who were interested in participating were those who had more to say or critique about their experience. Volunteers who did not find their placement particularly impactful or remarkable may have been less likely to choose to participate in this research. As a result, this recruitment process may have ended up selecting participants who had experienced more significant changes in perspective through their placements. One possible way of avoiding this risk in future research would be to work with a sending organization to access an entire cohort of returned volunteers. By speaking to everyone who went through the program in a given year, the researcher would be better able to ascertain whether most participants came out with some level of criticality or whether there was a wider range of reactions, as the existing literature implies is likely. From this perspective, it is entirely possible that speaking to a wider range of volunteers in the same programs as my participants would have generated results that are much closer to those in the literature.

**Hegemonic Conditions and Roles.** One possibility is that the blatantly hegemonic nature of the programs and the roles they offered to volunteers provoked dissatisfaction and thus critique. As I explained in Chapter Five, most of the critiques emerged from frustrating or challenging work experiences. Given that participants entered their placements expecting to gain work experience, when they encountered roles and positions that did not provide sufficient experience or the type of experience they wanted it is perhaps natural that they would start to
question and critique the placement. Of course, this does not mean that these critiques and questions would become ‘critical,’ but it does perhaps explain why participants initially began to question their experiences. Furthermore, several volunteers were placed in roles that were quite explicitly and obviously tied to Canadian corporate interests. Perhaps the blatant nature of this connection led them to ask questions they may not have had if they were placed on a project that was more subtly implicated in capitalist social relations. For example, ties to capitalist actors are much clearer when researching how to open an economic sector to outside investors than in a micro-credit project that is presented predominantly as a way to empower women. In this sense, the very hegemonic nature of the programs may have provoked questions that led participants down a path of critique. Their prior experience and knowledge may have then helped direct this critique towards criticality in the Marxist sense.

Based on these factors, there are several possible reasons that my participants may have been more critical than participants in other studies or the general population of volunteers. These possible explanations hint that volunteers may be better able to engage with critical learning during their placements if they already have some prior knowledge and experience to build on, and if they are confronted with particularly clear examples of the connection between capitalism and development. However, it is also quite possible that the findings have more to do with the particular volunteers who chose to participate in the study and therefore need to be verified by a more representative sample.

To Volunteer, or Not to Volunteer?

One important question remains: given that these volunteer programs appear to reproduce relations of racism and capitalism, is it ethical to promote these programs as a possible space for
critical learning? As the discussion in Chapter Four demonstrated, in their current form these programs reproduce hegemonic social relations and the ideological understanding of international development that facilitates the reproduction of these relations. As such, participating in these programs is participating in the reproduction of racist, capitalist social relations. However, if participation in these programs provokes critical questioning that can lead someone to engage in actions aimed at changing social relations, perhaps the long-term effect of the programs justifies the initial participation.

What is certain is that in their current form, these programs are not guaranteed to act as spaces for critical learning. Indeed, participants’ learning often seemed to occur in spite of – not because of – the program structure. In this sense, perpetuating these programs on the off-chance that the conditions align for some volunteers to engage with their placement in a critical manner does not seem ethical: there would likely be a far greater number of volunteers moving through these programs without engaging in such critical questioning, meaning that the balance would tip towards reproduction rather than transformation.

However, one of the central components of critical learning is prefiguration, or the experience of transformed social relations. It creates a much stronger environment for critical learning, as it enables learners to experience alternatives for themselves. In addition, the experience of creating transformed social relations can also inform further efforts to transform social relations in other spaces, outside the initial learning context. In this way, it would address some of participants’ uncertainties. Prefiguration was an element missing from all the volunteer programs discussed here, even those with stronger training programs or more opportunities for reflection throughout the program. Some of the recommendations I made above would help these
programs become more intentional learning spaces, but none of them require or enact transformed social relations.

If volunteer abroad has potential as a learning space, the most ethical way to engage in volunteering abroad would be to do so in a way that challenges existing social relations rather than reproducing them. In order to challenge racialized relations of expertise as well as the structural inequality that is currently built into these programs, they could incorporate opportunities for staff or youth at the placement organization to volunteer in Canada, and for Canadian volunteers and people at the placement organization to engage in learning activities together. In this way, they would destabilize assumptions about who holds expertise and knowledge. In order to challenge the ways in which international development is implicated in capitalist social relations, volunteer programs could consider placing volunteers with social movements or more political organizations rather than solely with NGOs. Furthermore, they could create placements that split the volunteer time between a movement or an organization targeting Canadian development policies and a similar organization elsewhere. In this way, the programs would offer an opportunity to contest capitalist social relations and understand the ways in which policies and actions in Canada are connected to those elsewhere. Canada World Youth used to offer this kind of reciprocal and split program, demonstrating that such a format is possible. These are just two suggestions; there are surely many creative ways to restructure volunteer abroad programs so that they can challenge hegemonic social relations rather than participating in them. These re-imagined programs would offer a more ethical way to engage in a critical learning process by prefiguring transformed social relations rather than reproducing existing ones.
Learning is central to social change. Therefore, when we begin to consider all the ways in which learning occurs in our lives, we expose many new pathways to creating change. The participants in this study demonstrate that we cannot, and should not, discount the learning that occurs in even the most hegemonic spaces. Their reflections and actions also emphasize the many ways in which individuals are attempting to change the way they interact with the world. Despite the limitations to self-directed learning revealed in participants’ experience, I conclude this research process with renewed optimism. As the participants have illustrated, even as individuals we can to strive towards deeper understandings of the world around us and more transformative actions within that world. If we can find ways to come together to join and solidify our individual actions and reflections, the impact will surely be even greater.
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