Helping from home: Singaporean youth volunteers with migrant-rights and human-trafficking NGOs in Singapore

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Social science literature on development volunteering has mainly focused on the interstices between overseas travel experiences and organised placements, with a particular focus on youth. To date, this literature has not engaged with development volunteering that takes place within one’s ‘home country’ where subjects of helping are nonetheless racially and developmentally inscribed ‘Others’, such as refugee groups and exploited or trafficked migrants. This paper explores the motivations for and meanings of youth volunteering in development ‘at home’. The site for this examination is volunteers with NGOs oriented to migrant rights and human trafficking in Singapore. The paper makes a case for recognition of a more complicated geography of volunteering in development which is inclusive of development issues and subjects at home. Following this, the paper argues that this expression of development volunteering complicates existing characterisations, principally as volunteers express opposition to socially and state sanctioned discourses of service learning through development. Therefore, it is important to consider the political and social context of development volunteering to understand the motivations and meanings attached to development volunteering.

KEY WORDS: Singapore, migrant workers, development, youth volunteering, human trafficking

Introduction

Recent literature characterising development volunteers has focused disproportionately on youth and on the rapid expansion and concomitant professionalisation of volunteering (Baillie Smith and Laurie 2011; Simpson 2004; Muthuri et al. 2009; Perold et al. 2011; Palacios 2010; Raymond and Hall 2008; Jones 2011). The realisation of particular qualities and skills, the social capital outcomes of volunteering, and the fulfilment of projects related to the cultivation of the Self have provided particular foci (Sin 2009; Devereux 2008; Diprose 2012). As Jones (2011, 534) suggests:

Volunteer work has increasingly entered public and private sector discourses as a key plank of policies around corporate social responsibility, skills training, social enterprise, citizenship, environmental conservation, and international development.

This, Jones contends, has ‘fuelled a growth in international youth volunteering’, especially through gap year travel, and placements through NGOs and, increasingly, profit-oriented organisations. Jones (2008, 2011) has argued that this trend should not sit apart from discussions of work, but should speak to some of the key ways in which contemporary work is being reconfigured around the acquisition of particular skills, values and attributes, as well as the inculcation of what we might call a ‘global sensibility’. In line with Jones, other literature suggests that youth volunteering should be seen as tied to state, corporate and philanthropic agendas, as well as professional aspirations of volunteers themselves.

This paper contributes to recent geographical discussions of development volunteering through a focus on youth volunteers in Singapore. By focusing on development volunteers from and in Singapore, I hope to de-centre the spatial fixities of the current literature on development volunteering which are overly embedded in the geographies of ‘here’ (the developed world as helper, primarily the United Kingdom and the United States) and ‘there’ (the developing world as ‘the helped’). This geographical locatedness of development and poverty in discrete geographical entities of ‘first’ and ‘third’ world appears as a central premise undergirding virtually all
research in the field, including the critical research mentioned above. Despite these imagined geographies of development, the increasing mobility of majority world subjects has led to characterisations of ‘the third world in the first’, particularly in global cities (Sassen 2001). In these situations, both labour migrants (legal and irregular) and refugees form populations whose vulnerability to labour exploitation, social and economic marginalisation, and impoverishment is well documented by geographers (Waite et al. 2015a). More recently concerns with human trafficking have yielded recognition that many migrants’ experiences, both in Singapore and elsewhere, also involve significant elements of hyper-exploitation, poverty and homelessness in their situations (Anderson and Rogaly 2005; Rogaly 2008; Waite et al. 2015b; Yea 2016).

My aim in this paper is to explore the meanings attached to youth development volunteering when it occurs in the volunteer’s home country. While existing studies have examined student/youth volunteer motivations in some detail, most of this literature reinforces suggestions that youth volunteers are driven by the desire to cultivate the Self in ways that extend career trajectories (Baillie Smith and Laurie 2011) and/or fulfill personal desires for consuming the exotic third world Other (Sin 2009; Devereux 2008; Diprose 2012). Very little of this literature has examined the ways youth contests these dominant discourses and institutions of (development) volunteering. Holdsworth’s (2010, 421) study of student volunteers in the United Kingdom is an exception in its findings that: students are reflective about why they volunteer; their motives can change over time and that for many students volunteering is not necessarily part of a strategic goal to enhance CVs or even ‘do good’.

Further, Smith et al. (2010, 258) suggest that everyday practices and feelings in volunteering serve ‘to place the experiences of volunteers centrally in accounts of what matters in the doing of volunteering’, and go ‘beyond service provision or active citizenship’. This paper, then, builds on this incipient scholarship by exploring youth/student motivations for development volunteering in Singapore. Youth development volunteering in this context reveals some differences from common characterisations in the literature, relating especially to assumptions about neoliberalisation, institutionalisation and professionalisation, and cultivation of the Self for career goals. It is suggested that context matters when understanding the meanings and motivations youth attach to their volunteering experiences, and the choices they make about where and how they volunteer. Before discussing the findings of the study, I first discuss the rise of volunteering in anti-trafficking and migrant worker rights organisations, then provide a brief overview of the study, including participants, approach and methodology.

Labour migration, human trafficking and volunteering in Singapore

Singapore has long been a major importer of both professional (expatriate) and low-valued (migrant worker) labour in a pattern that Yeoh (2006) describes as ‘bifurcated labour’. The low-valued workers in this two-tiered model include men from South and Southeast Asia employed in the construction, shipyard, landscaping and cleaning sectors, and women from Southeast Asia (and belatedly Bangladesh) employed as domestic workers. In the 2010s, migrant workers and expatriates together constituted approximately one-fifth of Singapore’s total population, just shy of one million persons. As Singapore’s citizenry continues to age, the proportion of foreigners working and living in Singapore is only likely to increase further, creating among other things a palpable public resentment of foreigners among citizens in the city-state. The conditions under which migrant workers labour in Singapore are undoubtedly oppressive. The migrant-worker regime established by the Singapore state is heavily weighted against the possibility of exploited migrant workers achieving justice in cases of both workplace injury and labour claims. These exploitative conditions and lack of justice have been well documented by NGO reports and some academic studies (Yea 2012 3013; TWC2 2010; HOME 2015).

There are only a handful of NGOs in Singapore oriented to migrant-worker support and advocacy, and Singapore has an under-developed civil society (Lyons and Gomez 2005). The Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (HOME) is the largest of these NGOs and engages in direct service work with both male and female migrant workers, as well as research and advocacy. HOME has professionalised over the past few years, largely as a result of heightened funding opportunities associated with anti-trafficking work. To this extent, HOME has in large part re-invented itself as an anti-trafficking organisation and now has the largest number of paid staff (seven) and volunteers (more than 100) of any migrant worker NGO in Singapore. Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) is the other key migrant worker NGO which provides direct support to migrant workers, and also engages in research and advocacy. Although their paltry funding has restricted the number of paid staff they employ (currently two social workers and a director), their volunteer numbers match those of HOME. Both HOME and TWC2, as well as some other NGOs, also engage significant numbers of student interns from local universities in Singapore and abroad to work on specific projects for up to three months at a time. Many of the local interns then become regular volunteers for these NGOs.

Since 2010 there has been increasing awareness among the government, citizenry and NGOs that human trafficking is a significant problem in
Singapore. Initially the focus was primarily on the sex and nightlife entertainment industry, where migrant women and girls (and some men) are deployed. Women and girls in particular often face similar conditions to the low-valued workers described above, but also face the precarity engendered by a lack of legal working status since most women and girls enter Singapore on a tourist visa, which confers no working rights. Violence, debt bondage and high levels of control over migrant sex workers by their maintainers and pimps are characteristics of this sector, even when the workers may enter voluntarily to undertake sexual labour (see ECPAT International 2010; Yea 2012).

As a result, a nascent anti-trafficking movement has developed in Singapore. NGOs such as TWC2, HOME and AWARE were keenly involved in this incipient movement, largely seeing trafficking as a platform through which to address more adequately longstanding violations in migrant workers’ human and labour rights, or women’s rights. New organisations and groups have also formed as a result of the increasing interest in human trafficking in Singapore. Foremost among these is Emancipasia, which promoted itself as an organisation dedicated to raising awareness about human trafficking in Singapore. It does this primarily through monthly film screenings (see Yea 2013) and public events such as a walk against trafficking (called Steps in the Park) and a photo exhibition with narratives of trafficking victims from around the globe. Other less formal groups also emerged, including several student groups at junior college and university level.

The rise to prominence of human trafficking has been an issue of concern to Singapore over the past four years, particularly in light of heightened mainstream print, television and social media coverage. The public awareness-raising initiatives undertaken by Emancipasia and UN Women, in particular, have thus provided the impetus for greater public involvement in anti-trafficking organisations through volunteering. Further, pre-existing NGOs oriented to migrant-worker rights, such as HOME and TWC2, have in part reinvented themselves as anti-trafficking organisations. HOME, for example, opened its Human Trafficking Desk in 2010 and now labels itself as an anti-trafficking, rather than a migrant rights NGO. These migrant rights organisations have been able to take advantage of the increasing public momentum around human trafficking to build up their numbers of volunteers in existing (that is, migrant-worker support) work. Other volunteers for organisations such as HOME and TWC2 were less influenced by the emerging human-trafficking agendas of the NGOs and more interested in migrant-worker issues per se.

The Singapore state has been less keen to acknowledge both human-trafficking and migrant-worker exploitation, including how these two concerns may be inter-related. The Singapore government denied human trafficking was a problem in the city-state until 2010 when research reports documented the prevalence of trafficking in the sex and nightlife entertainment industry. The analysis of volunteer motivations and profiles in this paper destabilises singular readings of the interplay between volunteers and the precise ways they are embedded in work, economic and political contexts. Continued external projections of poverty that are central to international volunteering, both in Singapore and elsewhere in the ‘developed world’, have the key effect of deflecting critiques of social and economic injustice, poverty and human rights – especially in this case as they involve migrants and trafficked persons – at home. In the Singapore case, this is clearly seen by the government’s continued efforts to promote volunteering as something that is best undertaken abroad (but within the region), as well as in the government’s attempts to minimise opportunities for volunteers to interact with failed migrants and trafficked persons by providing direct services in-house (Goh and Gopinathan 2008). The relevance of this situation for discussion here is that, rather than promoting the experiences of development-oriented volunteering and service learning more broadly among marginalised migrants in Singapore, there appears to be a strategic investment in the promotion of volunteering abroad, and not at home (Tan and Chew 2004). This strategic impulse has the effect of muting and de-legitimising the significant degree of exploitation of thousands of migrants in Singapore, while promoting the belief that the alleviation of poverty and delivery of justice is something best done outside Singapore. This context has significant import in understanding my participants’ experiences and motivations in volunteering at home. Before turning to this examination, a brief discussion of methodology for the study is warranted.

Methodology and participants

The study involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with volunteers from seven migrant-worker (HOME, TWC2, Health Serve), anti-trafficking (Emancipasia), international development (World Vision Singapore) and women’s (UN Women Singapore, AWARE) NGOs in Singapore. The NGO landscape in Singapore is small, and these NGOs represent the main organisations involved in the inter-related fields of women’s and migrants’ rights and anti-trafficking. The interviews focused on volunteer motivations, experiences of volunteering, reasons for choosing one particular NGO over another, and understandings of migrant-worker and human-trafficking issues. These were part of a larger study that also includes adult/older volunteers. Twelve in-depth interviews have been completed with youth volunteers from the participating NGOs; six from the migrants’ rights NGOs, and three each respectively from the participating women’s and anti-trafficking NGOs. The volunteers for the women’s NGOs were...
selected based on their involvement in anti-trafficking and (female) migrant-worker issues respectively. Volunteers were selected either through responding to a call for participants put out by the NGOs on my behalf or through me or my research assistant approaching volunteers whom we knew based on our involvement with some of the NGOs.

In existing studies of development volunteers the experiences of youth (gap-year travellers, international service-learning students, faith-based volunteers and so on) who are ethnically distinct from the communities they visit have been a key focus. Youth volunteers were further divided into women (eight participants) and men (four participants). This apportioning approximately represented the gender breakdown of youth volunteers at the time. The migrant rights and anti-trafficking NGOs had approximately equal numbers of male and female volunteers, including university interns, while the women’s NGOs had exclusively female volunteers. Interviews ranged from approximately 45 minutes to 2 hours.

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with one paid representative from each of these seven NGOs. Usually this was the person in charge of coordinating volunteers or the person in charge of particular projects that attract high numbers of volunteers. These participants were questioned on the following topics: numbers of volunteers, the types of work of interest to volunteers, profiles of volunteers, and durations of their volunteering. These NGO representatives were also asked about the effectiveness of having volunteers for achieving the work of the organisation, and the benefits to the volunteers themselves (such as active learning). Pseudonyms are used to refer to all participants in both groups.

**Singaporean youth complicating geographies of development volunteering**

Development has been normatively mapped onto discrete and bounded spaces of third world and first. As critical commentators such as Crush (1995, 14) note:

> The language of development constantly visualises landscape, territory, area, location, distance, boundary and situation ... Development writing constantly delineates and divides territory by means of a relentless dualistic logic.

The imagery of development volunteering has subsequently been superimposed onto these spaces. Keese (2011), for example, has identified the use of tropes of third world locales to promote and direct understandings of development volunteering as occurring in exotic and impoverished locations overseas. Mostafanezhad (2013) similarly suggests that there is a geography of compassion in volunteer tourism which ‘maps onto the “Third World” and the children who live there’ (p. 318). Individuals, educational institutions, NGOs, the corporate sector and the tourism industry all actively reinforce these spatialities of development volunteering as something locatable in the ‘third world’ and undertaken abroad; itself evidenced by the sheer increase in volume of development volunteers going abroad and the number and diversity of organisations supporting their experiences.

Yet patterns of global mobility, particularly of low-valued transient labour migrants, complicate the spatial binaries of development and poverty and present new relational geographies of development volunteering as they are constituted ‘at home’. In particular, these more complex spatialities can extend our understandings of motivations and sites for development volunteering among youth, particularly by allowing us to consider development volunteering as something that does not necessarily involve tourism, gap-year experiences or going abroad. This was the case for participants in my study. Although they volunteer ‘at home’, my participants were not motivated to become involved in what they perceive as ‘local issues’, such as homelessness, poverty, and disability support involving citizen subjects as beneficiaries. On the contrary, they deliberately and consciously selected migrant issues as their focus for volunteering. This choice locates them more squarely within the frame of development volunteering because they perceive migrants as particularly marginalised subjects, economically, legally and socially.

Some youth volunteers in this study emphasised the degrees of poverty and vulnerability experienced by foreigners in Singapore as the most important determinant in choosing to volunteer for anti-trafficking or migrant rights NGOs. For example, one youth volunteer, Alex (Chinese-Singaporean male, recent university graduate, 23 years old), stated that:

> Singapore is a rich country; even poor people in Singapore are not so badly off, in my opinion anyway. I mean, they aren’t like the Banglas [Bangladeshis] and Tamil guys who are really poor when they come to Singapore and then get exploited. It’s totally worse for them. That’s why I chose to volunteer for TWC2.

Many of the volunteers expressed similar sentiments that effectively de-legitimised locals as important subjects for helping. This was also true in relation to migrant women and girls in the sex and nightlife entertainment industry. Yan Hong (Chinese-Singaporean undergraduate student, 18 years old), stated that she had seen movies about ‘sex trafficking’ and knew from the media and reports published by NGOs that this was also a problem in Singapore. She explained:

> I am the same age as many of the young women who are forced to come to Singapore for prostitution. They are from really desperate backgrounds and often they
don’t have a good family to support them, or opportunities to go to school or college like me. Sometimes they are tricked, and sometimes they come here willingly. But either way they are desperate and don’t have any other real options. There’s no way I can compare these situations to the problems that women face in Singapore. There’s just no comparison; these girls are really poor and really desperate. They deserve to be helped and that’s why I wanted to volunteer for an organisation like Emancipasia.

Apart from these constructions of third world Otherness in Singapore among youth volunteers, participants’ narratives also suggested that volunteering specifically on migrant issues in Singapore enabled them to realise important political aims, as we shall now see.

**Youth volunteering as counterspace and critique in Singapore**

Singaporean youth have been described by Tan (2007) as lacking creative opportunities for political and social engagement and participation, with highly proscribed and rigid modes of participation being the norm. According to Tan, the Singaporean state has valued the importance of youth in Singapore’s future development aspirations with, ‘The Singapore model focusing on education, youth aspirations and community development’. A similar nation-building discourse in international youth volunteering in Singapore has been identified by Krishna and Khondkar (2004). These same nation-building and community participation goals are not unique to the Singapore context (Holdsworth and Brewis 2014). However, unlike other liberal democracies where youth volunteering is promoted, in Singapore political and social conservatism militates against the possibilities for youth to participate in the community in ways that extend beyond sanctioned frames and modes of volunteering (Tan 2007; Wong 2016). Consequently, common to the reasoning of my participants were narratives that centred on opposing, rather than supporting, such sanctioned experiences of volunteering and understandings of where and to whom help should be extended.

The extent to which these motivations were deliberately and consciously against the state, political and familial conservatism, and socio-racial divides in Singapore varied from volunteer to volunteer, and certainly some youth volunteer participants became more politically aware as their volunteering experience continued. In either case, development volunteering at home constitutes both an important counterspace and critique for Singaporean youth. This is because it operates through largely informal modes, and because the awareness and learning that volunteers hope to achieve are largely beyond institutionally and politically sanctioned knowledge about migrant workers and human trafficking in Singapore.

The majority of youth volunteers became involved in migrant issues because they hoped to become more aware about migrant rights or human-trafficking issues in Singapore. This sense of wanting to know and understand is both an outcome of high levels of censorship and, possibly, misinformation about these issues in Singapore, and a result of a desire to understand better how third world development and human rights issues in one’s own country are expressed. Sharron (Chinese-Singaporean
university student, 21 years old), for example, related that she was able to contribute a lot to TWC2 because her honours thesis was on the topic of migrant workers’ sense of place in Singapore’s Little India, and that simultaneously, her own understanding of this topic through volunteering considerably benefitted her understanding:

My HT [honours thesis] entails that I do walking interviews with the workers. I get them to bring me around Little India, I ask about what places are meaningful to them; if they have any specific memories associated with particular sites; their first impressions of the area on their first trip to Singapore. Because I have all of this information with me, as well as various stories to tell from my experience volunteering at Cuff Road, it has been really nice to be able to share these narratives by conducting walking tours with the public education team. I’ve just started giving these tours, but I really enjoy doing it, and I guess it helps that I have these experiences with the men that few other volunteers do.

Sharron’s reflection speaks to the desire for mutual or co-learning that is often evident in the narratives of international development volunteers (Griffiths 2016), as well as the valuing of different sorts of knowledge and experiences from those often seen in narratives of international development volunteering (such as technical expertise or language skills). Sharron goes alone with the migrant workers, articulates her learning through passing it on to other volunteers and through her university work, and is able to contribute to some of the core work of the NGO she volunteers for.

Naz (Malay-Singaporean university student, 19 years old) also found volunteering at home an opportunity to learn about important development issues that directly impacted on Singapore. Naz had been on a senior school and undergraduate university volunteer experience in Cambodia and Thailand respectively, but was concerned about the ways the same issues she confronted overseas appeared ‘hidden’ in Singapore. She recounted:

I did volunteer work with an NGO in Thailand that looked at refugee issues and we provided some English lessons to refugee kids at the school they ran. Then last year at university I went on a volunteer tourism programme in Cambodia. We were doing the same thing as in Thailand; teaching kids English. But the kids were street kids and many of them were in danger of being trafficked or something like that. Anyway, I got back home and saw something about sex trafficking in Singapore on the news and I wondered why I hadn’t really heard about that before. I felt like I knew something about the issue after Cambodia and Thailand, but I knew nothing about it in my own country. I realised that the problem was totally hidden in Singapore and quite sensitive. Why was it so openly recognised in Thailand and Cambodia, but not Singapore? By volunteering with Emancipasia I felt like I was raising my own awareness and helping bring this issue out in Singapore.

Apart from Sharron, who was able to channel her learning about migrant-worker issues into her university studies, volunteering was antithetical to career and not significantly tied to assessment for the other participants. Even Sharron lamented that although her honours thesis was an important step in her career, the actual topic was ‘really sensitive and probably employers would not like that if they looked closely at what I did my thesis on’. Sharron’s motivations for volunteering emerge from a pre-existing interest in migrant-worker issues that prefigures and is remote from personal goals related to promotion of the Self through advancement of a neoliberal framing of career goals, or to the cultivation of attributes that may be desirable to employers, such as a global citizenship sensibility. What is particularly novel about the motivations of volunteer students such as Sharron is the way her biography in large part explained her motivations in volunteering in Singapore (as opposed to volunteering abroad).

Another student, Ben (Singaporean-Chinese, 24 years old) was particularly animated about the ways experiences growing up in a conservative family environment motivated him to volunteer. As he related:

I guess a short answer to that would be the way my own extended family treated their maids. Like my grandmother has managed to chase away three maids before and my family still isn’t banned by MOM [Singapore’s Ministry of Manpower] from hiring foreign domestic workers. I feel that’s a big, big loophole and if it can happen in my family I’m sure there are plenty more that are in similar situations. So that made me want to get in touch with what’s happening out there. Initially I had wanted to work with foreign domestic workers by the way. It was just that there wasn’t much going on with the foreign domestic worker team at TWC2 so I switched to dealing with the Banglas [Bangladeshis] and the Indians.

Volunteers such as Ben also discussed the ways they concealed their experiences from their families. Unlike the overseas volunteer tourists/students from Singapore, whose volunteering is viewed positively and even supported financially by family and the state (Tan and Chew 2004; Weninger and Kho 2011), Ben hid his volunteer work from his parents. As he lamented:

I didn’t tell my family about my volunteering experience for TWC2. On my grandmother’s side, my family has
this perception that there is nothing wrong with retaining a worker's salary or work permit (identification card). Other volunteers I know also had this experience that when their family finds out about their volunteer work, they think they will revolt against the government.

Unlike many development volunteers travelling overseas, whose narratives are riven with the themes of mutual learning and positive contributions that are supported by family and socially sanctioned, many student volunteers in Singapore conversely conceal rather than openly promote and laud their experiences. A Singaporean-Tamil law student, Sharmi (23 years old), reiterated Ben's sentiments:

I don't want to put this volunteering experience on my CV because the law firms in Singapore where I will be applying for jobs will look at it negatively. No-one is interested in pro-bono law in Singapore, and definitely no law firm is interested in migrant rights or human rights issues. Volunteering has no meaning in relation to my career, so I might as well leave it off my CV. Yeah, it might be better left off.

Sharmi was drawn to volunteering with TWC2 because of her past experience of volunteer work for 12 months at an NGO in Bangkok assisting urban-based Burmese refugees. The experience moved her deeply, so that returning to Singapore she felt that: 'I couldn't not do volunteer work at home [in Singapore] after Thailand. I already knew there were big problems with migrant workers in Singapore, especially the construction workers'. Beyond recognising the significance of background experiences, what I wish to emphasise from both students' reasons for volunteering is the important influence of their embeddedness in a personal (family) and national (Singapore) context where migrant-worker abuses and human trafficking are widespread and cannot be understood through some abstract and distant frames, often mediated by volunteer organisations (Keese 2011), but by their personal experiences, direct observations and proximity. The significance of biography and personal experiences in volunteer motivations is not exclusive to the student volunteers who participated in this study.

As Wearing (2001) noted over a decade ago, the largest cohort of international development volunteers is youth. Other researchers have subsequently developed this focus, reinforcing Wearing's early findings that the motivations of youth and choice of destination are specific to interests that advance the Self, particularly where social capital may be accrued and touristic impulses may be satisfied. But unlike international student volunteers discussed by Laurie and Baillie (2011) and Sin (2009), for example, the student volunteers in my study saw their volunteering experience as completely or largely outside of career goals and volunteering in migrant rights organisations was not motivated by the desire to assist their career aspirations. On the contrary, such volunteering was often frowned upon by family and within social networks, suggesting the sensitivity of migrant-worker and prostitution issues 'at home' in Singapore. The significance of proximity and embeddedness were significant influences on Singaporean students in my study. In particular, they became aware of these issues through university study or social events where friends and peers were participants. The 'pull' for these students then was the opportunity to engage directly with urgent contemporary development issues affecting Singapore. In a political context where civil society is strongly discouraged from critiquing government policy, and where such actions may have legal and personal repercussions, volunteering provides a means of engaging with contentious issues in a manner that is largely immune from strict government censure. This concealment can be understood in the context of nationalistic discourses centred around the need to control migrant workers in order that the labour regime on which the city-state's success largely hinges is not compromised (see also Yea 2015).

Conclusion
In this paper, I have outlined some of the emerging characteristics of youth volunteering in development as it occurs among Singaporean youth volunteering at home for Singaporean NGOs. Crucially, I have suggested a more complicated geographical reading of youth volunteering in development than current accounts generally describe. I have argued that geographical imaginaries of discrete and bounded spaces of 'poverty' and 'development' tend to undergird the normative international development volunteering experience. Academic discussions of development volunteering tend therefore to reiterate these spatialities in their analyses of such volunteering experiences. Re-imagining the sites of development volunteering to include those who volunteer in development work at home therefore enables us to extend our understandings of youth volunteer motivations and meanings. In particular, the ways such volunteering intersects with state, corporate and social agendas, as well as individual projects of volunteers, provide some marked departures from the characterisations put forward in much of the current literature. This observation builds on incipient studies which suggest youth volunteers often transcend rather than confirm motivations and choices about experiences as ascribed in existing literature (Holdsworth 2010; Smith et al. 2010).

First, my participants’ volunteering experiences sat largely outside an increasingly formalised youth volunteering sector. The volunteers in my study arranged their experiences directly with NGOs in situ, usually through word of mouth, local media stories or introductions from friends. The immediate relevance
of an issue was a key motivation to ‘get involved’, rather than the consumption of a stereotypical and exotic ‘third world’ abroad (Keese 2011). This also meant that volunteers tended neither to operate in a depoliticised ‘project’ environment (Griffiths 2016), nor to neutralise the discomforting realities of poverty (Crossley 2012) in their experiences in Singapore. The romantic and exotic appeal of an overseas travel experience mixed with volunteering (Sin 2009; Simpson 2004) was also absent for the youth in this study.

Following this, concerns centred around work, CV building and accruing social capital were far less evident than the literature suggests (Jones 2011; Baillie Smith and Laurie 2011). To this end, many of the Singaporean volunteers actively concealed their volunteering work from family members, which exposes the sensitivities these issues raise in the Singaporean context. Others frankly reported that volunteering for migrant and trafficking NGOs would not impact on their career paths and job opportunities positively, and may even negatively affect their prospects. Yet the potential of this type of development volunteering should not be dismissed. The awareness it raises among (some) Singaporean youth does speak to a (political) effect to which volunteering may be related. Raising consciousness about key development and human rights issues in Singapore is a means of positively contributing to a re-education through international volunteering (Sin 2009; Simpson 2004) was also absent for the youth in this study.

These findings should encourage geographers and others concerned with contemporary expressions of youth volunteering in development to consider the ways specific manifestations of volunteering engage with the contextual nuances of the destination for volunteering. These include political sensitivities and nationalistic impulses as they weave in novel ways specifi cally the analysis here suggests the importance of Singapore’s political context (soft authoritarianism and highly managed citizen participation), social milieu (conservatism and surveillance), and population dynamics (an extremely high proportion of low-valued foreign workers) as all impacting the dynamics of volunteer motivations and the meanings they attach to their experiences.

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