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The dilemma of mobility: on the question of youth voluntourism in times of precarity

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, we ask whether there has been a revival of 'youthful aspirations' in the age of precarity, by examining youth groups' transnational civic participation in the form of 'volunteer tourism' (hereafter, VT). Mobility is central to VT practice, yet is often tainted to various degrees by an associated complex of commercial, extractive, neoliberal, and even racialized interests. Understanding the 'perils of mobility', we argue, helps us clear the way for a critical inquiry of VT, rather than closing it down. Without discounting the reality of neoliberal complicity, we want to look a little harder at the possibility of youth enacting change within the contradictions of voluntourism. This project is based on a case study of a Hong Kong-based VT organization called Voltra (established in 2009), especially thirty in-depth interviews with the 'voltrateers'. We reflect on their first-hand experiences, motivations, challenges, and aspirations to discover a 'strange synergy' that is expressed through complex affects that, on one hand, still hold on to the state to be responsible for social change, but on the other hand, develop their own aspirations to freedom generated by a sense of existential authenticity.

KEYWORDS Voluntourists; precariat; Voltra (Hong Kong); politics of sweating; existential authenticity

Introduction

> These people knew nothing about how to construct a building. Collectively they had spent thousands of dollars to fly here to do a job that Haitian bricklayers could have done far more quickly. Imagine how many classrooms might have been built if they had donated that money rather than spending it to fly down themselves. Perhaps those Haitian masons could have found weeks of employment with a decent wage. Instead, at least for several days, they were out of a job. Besides, constructing a school is relatively easy. Improving education, especially in a place like Haiti, is not. (Kushner 2016)

A reporter based in Haiti made the observation above when encountering a group of American volunteers in the mountains above Port-au-Prince. These volunteers had come to help build a school alongside a Methodist church,

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while young and muscular Haitian masons stood by watching (Kushner 2016). 'Perplexed and a bit amused at the sight of men and women who had come all the way from the United States to do a mundane construction job', the local Haitians stand next to the volunteers. In another way, they also stand next to a flourishing industry that specializes in organizing excursions for 'good causes' that stipulated requirements for sweat and labour. Together, the volunteers, the industry, and the local people form a triangle of agents central to the story of international volunteerism.

In this paper, we focus on a unique class of 'voluntourists' with the urge to rethink the ambiguities and contradictions of mobility marked by 'good intentions'. A good number of studies exist on voluntourists' motivations, experiences, and post-trip reflections (Wearing 2001, 2002, 2004, Brown 2005, Coghlan and Gooch 2011, McGehee 2012, Cheung *et al.* 2015, and many more). We are fascinated by these studies, yet find that many of them have not paid sufficient attention to the crucial question of mobility that underpins the transnational reality of various modes of voluntourism (hereafter VT). Where these studies tend to assume mobility as merely a given aspect of the venture, we want to think more carefully the nature, value, politics, and implications of identity and community formations brought about by VT and its variegated mobility narratives. In addition, our project connects mobility to another reality of the same contemporary moment: the diminishing economic opportunities and other related socioeconomic changes that have led to uncertainties especially for young people. Today, sociological characterizations of the 'precariat' abound (Bishop and Willis 2014, Standing 2014, Bessant *et al.* 2017). Much of the critique of the phenomenon of VT centres on two qualities of the tourist-volunteers: their amateur background (suggesting a lack of real professional knowledge and skills to help make concrete and lasting changes to the host communities) and their privilege (implying a problematic form of benevolence guided by the touristic gaze, which is too often entangled in an imperial impulse). Yet studies show that many voluntourists today are pre-professionals who have fallen through the cracks of an economic decline, including students who study in non-award courses overseas, and semi-employed or out-of-work youth who have not been able to secure full time employment at home (Simpson 2005, Mun 2013). It remains to be discovered what kind of social and cultural capital they are able to bring with them, even as amateurs, and what forms of 'translation' they are able to practise in their transnational encounters. Equally, we do not know enough about the possible forms of relatedness that take place in such encounters when a sense of privilege may be mixing with practices of adaptation, identification, and even solidarity. However complicated their motivations are when deciding to travel to engage in volunteer work, their predicament stems from and revolves around mobility, the forms of which have been insufficiently theorized in this context. In other words, the

common critique of VT that casts suspicion on volunteers' simple-mindedness of 'good intentions' seems to have neglected an analysis of the material complexity, if not struggles, wrought by the conditions of precarity, especially a critical analysis of the unique contours of voluntourist mobility generated by such conditions.

Stephen Wearing (2001, 2002, 2004), whose work on VT has been most influential in shaping much of the research in this field, has observed that international VT generally aligns itself with the paradigm of international development aid. Its popularity has surged due to growing social and environmental issues in developing countries as well as mass-scale disasters due to storms, tsunamis, and aftermaths of wars and conflicts. The focus tends to be on short-term visits (lasting about four weeks on average) to engage in humanitarian and environmental projects with the intention of serving communities in need. This has led VT organizers to start conservation projects, scientific research (wildlife, land and water), medical assistance, economic and social development (including agriculture, construction, and education), and cultural heritage restoration. Wearing and McGhee (2013) remind us that the rise of VT occurred with

> a serendipitous alignment over the past 10–15 years of a reduction in barriers to travel, an increase in the middle class in many developing countries, and the desire of that middle class to seek out more unusual travel experiences. (2013, p. 121)

In this project, we partner with Voltra, a Hong Kong-based VT organization established in 2009. Voltra – a name compressing volunteerism and travelling – represents a significant case for in-depth analysis. It is a unique VT organization of its kind in Hong Kong; there is no other comparable organization like it operating from the city. Up until 2016, Voltra has provided, coordinated, or linked up over 4000 international workcamps and voluntary service projects in over fifty-five countries each year. Since its inception, more than 4000 'voltrateers' from Hong Kong have participated in workcamps mainly in Japan, Mongolia, India, Nepal, Cambodia, Taiwan, and Thailand, and also in Europe, Latin America, and Africa. In this paper, we explore the first-hand experiences, motivations, aspirations, and challenges of VT among youth participants. By examining Voltra's history, ethos, and philosophy, we provide a context for understanding the voltrateers through an infrastructure of mobility that Voltra has established during disenchanting times of economic downturn and rising social inequality in Hong Kong.

In this inquiry into young people's volunteer encounters with cosmopolitan experiences in their search for change, we interviewed thirty voltrateers and asked them to speak frankly about their motivations, life considerations, workcamp experiences, expectations, and post-trip reflections.[1] Table 1 shows their profile. Our participants included 14 males and 16 females, aged 20–39,

Table 1. Profile of interviewed voltrateers.

	Name	Gender	Age	Education	Occupation (as of 2017)	Years to join Voltra workcamps	Locations
1	Alex	M	34	Bachelor's degree	Teacher	2009, 2010	Mongolia, Russia, Germany, Kenya, Hong Kong, Mexico
2	Carol	F	33	Bachelor's degree	Radiographer	2009, 2010, 2011, 2015, 2017	India, Australia, Hong Kong, Laos, Turkey, Cambodia
3	Karl	M	24	Bachelor's degree	Firefighter	2015, 2016	Taiwan, Cambodia, Hong Kong, Japan, Thailand
4	Janice	F	25	Bachelor's degree	Freelance Yoga teacher	2015, 2017	Nepal, Iceland
5	Victor	M	39	High Diploma	Account executive	2011, 2013	India, Hong Kong
6	Raymond	M	35	Bachelor's degree	Finance	2009, 2010	Jordan, Czech Republic
7	Selina	F	24	Bachelor's degree	Trainer (Personal Development)	2010, 2012, 2014, 2016	Taiwan, Italy, Kenya, India
8	Sammi	F	28	Master's degree	Physiotherapist	2012, 2015, 2016, 2017	Switzerland, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Germany, Japan, Nepal
9	Sean	M	27	Master's degree	Physiotherapist	2015, 2017	Cambodia, Morocco
10	James	M	29	Bachelor's degree	Event Marketing	2011, 2017	Iceland, India
11	Jasmine	F	25	Bachelor's degree	Marketing Officer	2013, 2016	France, Mongolia
12	Clara	F	32	Bachelor's degree	Officer	2010, 2013	Thailand, Indonesia
13	Anna	F	24	Bachelor's degree	Audit junior	2013, 2015, 2016	France, Macedonia, Hong Kong
14	Louise	F	28	Master's degree	Editor	2009, 2010, 2015, 2016	Hong Kong, Germany, India, Estonia
15	Wendy	F	21	Bachelor's degree	Student	2016	Kenya, Hong Kong
16	Lisa	F	26	Bachelor's degree	Educator	2016, 2017	Hong Kong, Laos
17	Fred	M	30	Bachelor's degree	NGO Officer	2015	Kenya, France
18	Sam	M	28	Bachelor's degree	Civil Servant	2016, 2017	Hong Kong, Nepal, Estonia
19	Catharine	F	26	Bachelor's degree	Clerk	2017	Portugal, Macau
20	Elisabeth	F	20	Bachelor's degree	Student	2017	Vietnam
21	Margaret	F	20	Bachelor's degree	Student	2017	Vietnam
22	Jackson	M	20	Bachelor's degree	Student	2017	India
23	Den	M	27	Secondary school	Event helper	2016, 2017	Hong Kong, Turkey
24	Danny	M	20	Undergraduate	Student	2017	France, Lithuania
25	Anthony	M	22	Bachelor's degree	Student	2017	France Lithuania
26	Max	M	21	Bachelor's	Student	2017	Iceland, India
27	Henry	M	26	Master's degree	Student	2017	Tanzania
28	Audrey	F	22	Bachelor's degree	Student	2017	Latvia
29	Judy	F	25	Associate degree	Unemployment	2017	Nepal
30	Laura	F	29	Bachelor's degree	Officer	2011, 2017	China, Poland

whose participation in Voltra's workcamps and other activities spanned from 2009 to 2017. Ninety percent of participants possess bachelor's degrees. They went everywhere around the globe for VT work, including Europe, Africa, Australia, and Asia; about ten of them had also joined workcamps in Hong Kong, helping out in local communities. While many existing studies suggest that many international VT participants are college students on vacation or in their gap year, the cohort we spoke to actually consists of many working professionals (e.g. teachers, marketing officers, NGO officers, civil servants, firefighters, etc.). Only nine of our informants listed their occupation as 'student'. Another notable aspect of their VT experience is that many of them joined Voltra's workcamps multiple times; some up to six times. Repeated engagement, as we will show, is one of the hallmarks of voltrateering, perhaps dispelling a certain scepticism about voluntourists' alleged casual or non-committal attitude toward doing VT work.

The perils of mobility

Long before voluntourism gained popular currency over the past two decades, the idea of combining travel with voluntary service formed part of the itineraries of pilgrims, colonial missionaries, and aid workers. The ruling imperatives that correspond to these various travelling figures have been the ideologies of sacrifice, manifest destiny, and developmentalism respectively, none of which has escaped criticism, even when all of these began with a professed devotion to, and practices of, compassion (Simpson 2004, Vrasti 2013, Occhipinti 2016). By the mid-twentieth century, the practice of combining travel with voluntary service got a new name, as it were: working for world peace. International voluntary service, which has its origins in the British-based Volunteer Service Overseas (VSO) (established in 1958) and the U.S. Peace Corps (set up in 1961), can be said to inaugurate a new era of public pedagogy whose imperative was to extract youthful energy and idealism to serve for world peace. By the 1980s, the rise of corporate social responsibility, the new attractiveness of ecotourism, and the flourishing of school-based service-learning programmes and study abroad initiatives further explained the maturation of professional international volunteer programmes that service a 'standard requirement for higher education and career development' (Simpson 2005, p. 448). By adopting 'the language of humanitarian development in order to trade on the idea that they send people to "help" others in dire need of assistance' (2005, p. 3), McGloin and Georgeou (2015) point out how voluntourism reinforces the dominant narrative that 'the poor of developing countries require the help of affluent westerners to induce development'. In this way, government agencies joined NGOs, charities, university-based programmes, religious organizations, and private companies to provide a variety of voluntourist opportunities that lasted

anywhere from two weeks to two years. Soon, travel agencies and other for-profit organizations began to fit overseas charity work into the all-inclusive travel packages and offer them for purchase. Guttentag (2009) goes so far as to suggest that volunteer tourism has become the fastest growing sector of the travel industry. In addition, in the market of supplying volunteers' aspirations to 'make a difference', voluntourism 'privileges individual autonomy and responsibility over that of the collective' (McGloin and Georgeou 2015, p. 6). Traditional not-for-profit organizations, such as Habitat for Humanity and United Way, are gradually being crowded out by Travelocity, Cheaptickets, and the like.

In short, we can say that the mobility imperative that underwrites all those forms of voluntourism has been tainted in different degrees by the complex of commercial, extractive, and we even venture to say, neoliberal and racialized interests. This is what we mean by the perils of mobility. It is a genealogical view that suggests that this complex of problematic interests is both directly linked to voluntourist mobility, and constitutive of it. It is on this basis that we suggest that *foundational to the modern global imaginations, aspirations, and practices of voluntourist mobility are histories of different and uneven forms of geographic conquest and commercial gain*. The emphasis on voluntourists' 'voluntary agency' in seeking global mobility cannot disregard charitable motivations and actions as something unavoidably complicitous with the capitalist and cultural apprehension of the far-flung Other. This observation points neither to invasion nor to conquest as seen in the bygone eras, but to a certain adaptability to an underlying modern global economic logic. Kati Dlaske's (2016) research examining the 'Workaway' scheme offered through tourism entrepreneurs in northern Finland can illustrate this point.

Dlaske discovers that the 'Workaway' scheme is symptomatic of contemporary socio-economic developments, which make the 'workawayers' (the volunteer workers) subjects of contemporary globalization in both senses of the expression. According to Dlaske, the Workaway initiative is 'a mode of travelling which promises both at least a partial way out of the capitalist logic of monetary exchange and a chance to help others while enjoying a unique and memorable holiday' (2016, p. 418). However, her research on the workawayers in a tourist resort in northern Lapland, home to the indigenous minority language community of the Sámi, shows:

> how the (prospective) workawayer is, on the one hand, interpellated by a kind of non-capitalist cosmopolitan humanism with an emphasis on travel as a means of achieving intercultural understanding and contributing to a worthwhile cause. On the other hand, s/he gradually becomes not only attuned to but effectively trained in a variety of the practices and rationalities governing the contemporary neoliberalized world of work and, increasingly, the society as a whole … [For instance,] workawayers will be willing to embrace risk, while showing prudence … and considering adequate measures for risk-management. Through everyday

> work they will learn to regard the customer as king and to flexibly adapt their actions and being to the customer's needs. As regards skills, workawayers become virtual all-rounders of the tourism industry, while as regards attitudes, they approximate to the entrepreneurial self, showing besides flexibility, risk-sensitivity and customer-orientation, personal responsibility, goal-orientedness and readiness for action. They become accustomed to living in a "democratized panopticon". (2016, pp. 435–436)

In addition, the workawayers' access and the relationship to local languages and cultures are often regulated by the rationality of business, in which 'languages figure as the means and cultures as the object of economic transactions' (2016, p. 436). Learning the local language, then, becomes not a key, but rather added value, to the so-called 'cosmopolitan subjectivity'. Dlaske concludes that 'the Workaway scheme contributes not only to the "economization of the social", but also to the socialization, or culturalization, of the economic' (2016, p. 437). The workawayers' flexible and adaptive attitude toward work, therefore, ties in neatly with the needs of the neoliberal order of work.

Ultimately, schemes such as Workaway cater more to globalized capitalism than its counterforces. Vrasti (2010) puts it this way, 'In spreading various affective and entrepreneurial competencies, volunteer tourism helps young adults from the Global North assume a type of political subjectivity, which in its fidelity to neoliberal injunctions, embodies the new normative ideal' (2010, p. 3). It is unclear what Vrasti means by 'political subjectivity', when it seems that the line of argument in much critical research on voluntourism tends to point to the problem of the *de-politicization* of global inequality. For instance, Mary Mostafanezhad's (2013) ethnographic research on voluntourists working in Chiang Mai, Thailand, points out how the voluntourists 'aestheticize the host community members' poverty as authentic and cultural, [therefore legitimizing] volunteer tourism as a celebrated cultural practice that perpetuates the aestheticization rather than the politicization of poverty in the encounter' (2013, p. 150). Yet interestingly, Mostafanezhad argues that rather than being a problem about voluntourism only, the whole question of the relationship connecting mobility, travel, volunteerism, and social justice in fact reflects a core anxiety affecting international development. It is an anxiety characterized both by a loss of trust in government in delivering relief to the poor and displaced, and a renewal of the volunteer spirit to use common people's sweat and energy to bring about relief. Mostafanezhad writes:

> If the last decade of intensified moral markets including fair, locally and ethically traded goods and services have taught us anything, it is that these strategies often fall short of realizing the broader social justice agendas that they seek to realize … Yet, what can perhaps be more easily argued is that they have set the stage for an *informed public* [emphasis added] that, armed with their

> fair trade chocolates and teas, organically produced yoga mats and international volunteering experiences, may be willing to engage with more serious questions about broader structural change. (2013, p. 165)

It seems, then, that there are explorations of potentials that remain dormant in the 'informed public'. It follows that what we need to ponder is whether the neoliberal normativity of volunteerism-qua-mobility is completely corrupting its aspirational spirit. It seems to us that to attribute wholesale corruption to the ever-increasing interest among youth in devoting themselves to volunteering – what Chun-Yi Sum (2017) calls the volunteers' 'quest for hardship and tears in relation to emerging desires for authenticity' (2017, p. 409) – and thus to render them as mobile 'cultural dupes', would be misguided. Understanding the 'perils of voluntourist mobility', we want to argue, in fact helps us clear the way for a critical inquiry into VT, rather than closing it down. Without discounting the reality of neoliberal complicity, we want to look a little harder at the possibility of youth enacting change within the contradictions of voluntourism. Through the case study of Voltra below, we seek to do more than simply identify the binary oppositions or hegemonic representations of the voluntourism phenomenon, but rather think through the possibility of reshaping, even disrupting, its social, economic, and aesthetic structures.

Voltra and its mobility paradigm

Founded in 2009, Voltra mobilizes its connection to a well-established worldwide network of international voluntary service organizations to promote voluntary services to 'enhance global citizenship and friendship as well as to strengthen solidarity of the local communities' (Voltra's Vision Statement). Each year, it runs over 4000 international workcamps and voluntary service projects in about 100 countries.[2] Yet, in its attention to global connectedness, Voltra's mission seems to centre a great deal on cultivating a desire for mobility specifically among Hong Kong youth. Throughout the years, this local engagement has been a hallmark of this organization's simultaneous commitment to global relief work. An emphasis on activating Hong Kong youth's outward-looking disposition can clearly be seen in Voltra's capstone statement:

> Climate change, ethnic wars, religious conflicts, energy crisis, wealth disparity … Our world is facing various crucial issues that transcend borders. These issues influence everyone on the planet, but unfortunately none of us can resolve them on our own. Especially in Hong Kong, we seem to shut ourselves off from global issues beyond economic discussions. Some feel unconcerned and do not bother to get involved, while some think individual power is so limited that their efforts are in vain. Consequently, we become indifferent and apathetic towards our surroundings and gradually respond to our problems with either sarcasm or despair. Sometimes, we just wish to leave those big issues to

> other, more powerful entities, and isolate ourselves from such a chaotic world. Isolating ourselves is the crux of the problem. (Available from: https://www.voltra.org/en/about-voltra/)

Danny, 20, voltrateer in 2017, a university student keen on helping others, seems to concur:

> From a teenager's perspective, volunteer travelling is a good way to leave your comfort zone and challenge yourself. I do think teenagers nowadays do not work hard enough, workcamps would definitely bring a positive impact on the young generation. If teenagers can have a challenging, even harsh, experience, it would be a benefit to the whole society at large!

Indeed, calling for 'a change of mentality from "me" to "we" from global citizens who are willing to stir changes from the bottom and work their way up step by step', Voltra formulates the question of personal growth around the youth's recognition of the need to 'go global'. In this way, the transformation of the (self-isolating) local youth into subjects of global citizens (from 'me' to 'we') stems from a robust interpellation of them as mobile subjects.

By becoming mobile, these youth aspire to become responsible global citizens. In the first few years of Voltra, the core values of their practice were stated as: volunteerism, equality, mutual respect, sustainable development, and responsible travel. Clearly, the engendering of these values depends on, or is accentuated by, mobility. By 2015, Voltra had accumulated enough experience to allow it to fine tune its core values; as a result, they became: exploration, empathy, empowerment of change, and glocal awareness. Once again, the linchpin of their operation is the development of a spirit of adventure and discovery at the juncture between local and global awareness. The visual cues in their publications include the iconography of the globe, globetrotters in backpacks with a magnifying glass in hand, voltrateers pushing the globe into motion, and so on (see Figures 1–3).

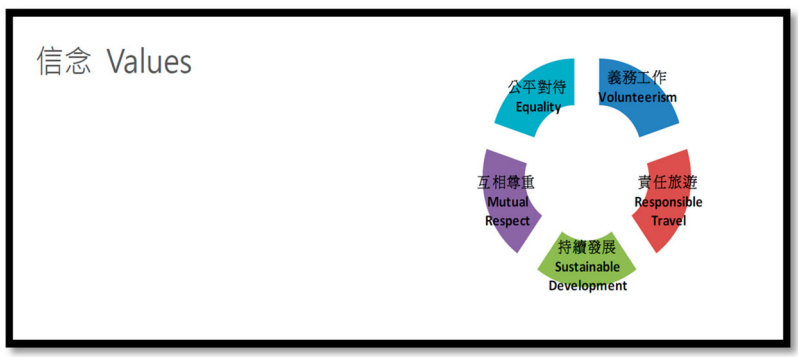

Figure 1. Source: Voltra's annual report, 2009–2013 (p. 2).

Figure 2. Source: Voltra's annual report, 2015–2016 (p. 2).

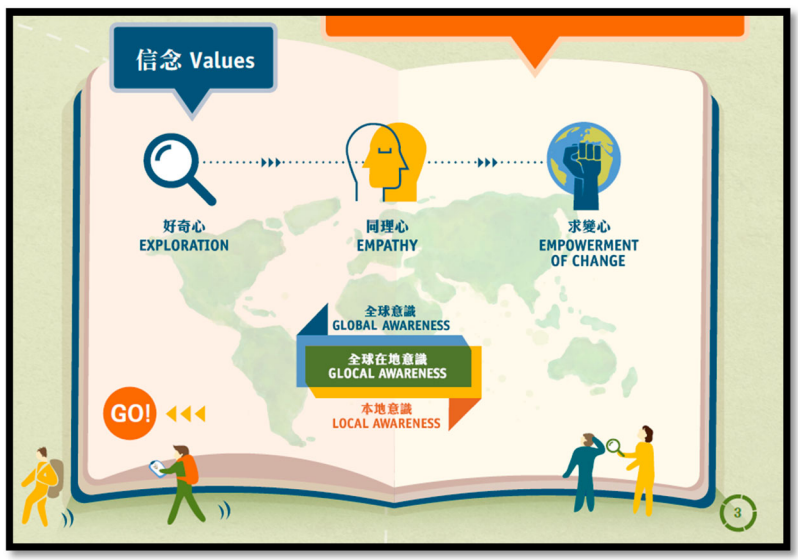

Figure 3. Source: Voltra's annual report, 2016–2017 (p. 3).

Along with lateral mobility, what voltrateers look for is something far more than upward mobility, such as the search for professional experience. Alex, 34, voltrateer in 2009, a secondary teacher, explained to us that he had an inner desire to take responsibility to help the poor and make the world better.

> Since we are living in a modern city and learning a lot, we know that we are able to help people yet we never do. I think we intentionally ignore this responsibility. It is not a life time endeavour; it only takes some of your time to do so. If we don't try to do that, who else [will]?

This aspiration, which takes on an ambitious global responsibility, expresses itself through a high degree of self-awareness. This echoes Louis Ho's (this collection) claim about the Working Holiday Programme becoming a 'cultural task' worldwide on the to-do-list among the young people. Ho goes on to point out that with advanced communication technologies and more convenient travel options, that is to say, when mobility is no longer a problem, working holiday programmes cannot truly satisfy the desire of young people anymore for in most cases it only allows them to go to relatively developed countries to work mainly in the primary industries (it is also irrelevant as a professional career experience back in their home countries). These young people are looking for something else in addition to developing professional experience. Culturally speaking then, for voltrateers like Alex, looking for mobility and looking for *diversified* purposes of travel become coterminous.

Yet still, for almost every voltrateer we spoke to, the yearning for and curiosity about 'foreign experiences' are the origin and impetus for going abroad; the wish for volunteering is something they discover while on the road. For instance, Janice, 25, voltrateer in 2015 and 2017, explains:

> I really like travelling. I started travelling alone two years ago as a backpacker visiting Russia, Finland, the three countries in the Baltic Sea, and finally Hungary. I mainly stayed at a hostel where I could meet so many travellers. I did not have a concrete plan for traveling; my main interest was to meet new friends, especially those who have been traveling for years and normally provided voluntary services or worked at a hostel – for me that is a new attitude to life. I also heard a lot of European people who went to Africa or Southeast Asia to do such voluntary works as teaching. I was impressed by this way of traveling for the fact that it can help people in the process. I found it very meaningful. As a result, I found my travels incomplete; I wanted to change it.

In fact, meeting fellow travellers who commit themselves to doing volunteering work becomes an important turning point as their commitment confirms the voltrateers' own worldview.

The worldview of 'being different', and even 'being rebellious' to mainstream values is something that many of our interviewees shared with us. Sammi, 28, voltrateer in 2012, 2015, 2016, 2017, is a Voltra enthusiast; she joined their workcamps repeatedly. Later, she even joined Voltra as a staff member of the organization after returning from workcamps in Switzerland and Vietnam. She emphasized to us:

> I just did not want to do the regular stuff (慣性的事情) in Hong Kong. I worked as a private tutor for students, but this was not what I wanted to do. If I had to

> spend time on finding a job, I would rather join Voltra and took it as [a chance for] cheap travel, and [to] do some voluntary work.

Anna, 24, voltrateer in 2013, who is from Malaysia and was studying accounting at a Hong Kong university, shared the same feeling:

> Before I departed to the workcamp, my friends asked me why I did not just do an internship. But I told them this was the reason why I did not want to follow the mainstream (跟隨世俗的方式); I did not want to do the things my friends tried to persuade me to. I am a bit rebellious (反叛).

Anna ended up joining a workcamp instead of the more common pursuit among university students of an internship during the summer holiday. Her decision, which was questioned by her peers, in fact reinforces the underlying idealistic mission of Voltra. Anna spoke firmly:

> I think the young people who joined Voltra wanted to make a change, to change the standard attitude in Hong Kong (固有的生活態度), social values and perspectives, and to see how far they could go. Honestly, there are more people who want to pursue their true self (追求真正的自己) instead of being [?] what society wants them to be (社會想你怎樣你便是怎樣).

We are reminded that a majority of our participants graduated from university with a specific career path that they had been pursuing: as teacher, physiotherapist, radiotherapist, interior designer, accountant, etc. But it seemed from our interviews that a 'decent' career or a 'stable life' were no longer what they desired. Bird Tang, Voltra's Executive Director, confirmed with us the character of the participants. He even suggested that Voltra existed to support those who had somehow forsaken the ordinary middle-of-the-road mentality:

> In my opinion, they all despise mainstream values (不屑主流的價值) … probably not despise but they are angry or not satisfied with those values, e.g. study hard, work and earn money, buy an apartment, get married and have a family, all that boring old stuff! Almost every participant did not want to walk this way, but they did not know how to change; hence Voltra becomes a kind of voice to represent them (代言人) because we understand them, we know what they are suffering. We are the same as them, we are different from the mainstream (異類). So now there is a platform for all of us to do something. Actually this kind of platform already existed in the world for a long time: they are the international volunteers.

He continued to explain how Voltra helps them to make change. 'When you are overseas, you see how others live, and through the exchange created when living abroad, you will find many possibilities'. Bird found that some keywords kept popping up, for example, 'leaving the comfort zone'(出走comfort zone), 'more possibilities' (更多可能性), and 'transcending oneself' (突破自己). He concluded, 'all these point in one direction – to make change – in which

voltrateers hope to detach from a certain prescribed way of life, with a preference for cross-cultural experiences, to make a better world that works for everyone'.

Common as it may be for young people, the desire to strike a different life path may still mitigate the commercial and depoliticizing tendencies of voluntourism. One of our informants, Wendy, 21, voltrateer in 2016, waxed philosophical when she told us how disappointed she was about humanity when she first joined the workcamp in Kenya. She lamented:

> We are living in a modern and free society, there are so many choices for us, yet all these choices are not real. The time or money that we earned from working hard were all spent on happiness, but this happiness is, sadly, something created by the businessmen, who make you earn more and spend more. We are all controlled by those businessmen. When you are aware of this problem, you will gradually realise that happiness in traveling is a trap. Why do I want to be a volunteer, even though Voltra emphasizes traveling and volunteering? In fact, Voltra redefines the meaning of traveling, to mean that through travelling you can understand and know others' cultures and then hopefully reflect on your own life, instead of the regular travel spending money on food and material things. You travel to explore yourself, or when you know more about others, your horizon is widened … I don't like people only looking at the phone, there were not too many material things in Kenya, so the kids there spent time enjoying playing with each other, they were living happily "in the moment" (享受當下). I like the fact that they made use of every resource to play, and secondly they were connected with the earth (與土地有連結). They played with what they had, unlike us, spending so much money on fake happiness, this is my belief.

Wendy's reflection suggests a critique of consumer's modernity and commodity culture in the developed world, even though her realization may have been 'conditioned' by Voltra in the first place. Like Wendy who felt strongly attached to the community in Kenya where she claimed to find her utopia, Alex, 34, voltrateer in 2009, had his own epiphany in his encounter:

> Before I arrived at the workcamp, the local volunteers took me to the slum area, the condition was so bad but the kids there were so happy, they would not ask me for money. I am sure this is the only one slum area where the kids wouldn't ask for money, which is totally different from the areas in Asia. They were poor but living with respect (窮得來卻有尊嚴). They were very happy when they saw us coming, we took pictures together. This feeling was beyond words, it exceeded my understanding of the poor. I was so ashamed that I had expected they would ask me for money, I prejudged them (帶著有色眼鏡去看待). As a result, I reflected on the trust and bonding between humans based on our personal experience instead of the stereotypical stories we hear.

The sentiments expressed by Wendy and Alex can be fairly consistently observed among many other informants we spoke to. Karl, 24, voltrateer in 2015 and 2016, reflects on his experience in the workcamp in Cambodia:

> When your life is material-oriented, it is more difficult to have real happiness, and to be satisfied. There was nothing in the village, the children could just play with a feather easily and happily. We are living in such a prosperous city, but everyone just focuses on their cell phone instead of spending with the children. Why do Hong Kong people live so hard and spend so much time on a fully crammed metro or bus to work? Do they enjoy working? Why does it have to be so hard in Hong Kong, for what purpose? In Cambodia, people are happy easily as long as they have enough food, but in Hong Kong I don't know what the purpose of life is anymore.

When examined from the empirical realities expressed by the voltrateers, we find that their desire for authenticity has emerged out of a general discontent about life-as-usual or life-as-expected, and their many normative values. Their voices of discontent point to a certain moral vacuum in the hypercommercial modern life of Hong Kong. Those whom we spoke to seem to have already made strides in their quest for a more 'authentic' existence before they joined Voltra. Under these circumstances, wariness about an 'immoral other' (e.g. the political state or the adult world in general) was inherent in the youthful understanding of authenticity.

Based on his study of volunteer tourists and volunteer tourism organizations in the province of Chiang Mai in northern Thailand, Nick Kontogeorgopoulos (2017) goes so far as to claim that:

> Despite the importance of various other motivations—including the acquisition of career skills, the desire to help others, and the need for novelty and adventure—and regardless of such factors as age, duration of participation, level of previous travel experience, and nationality, the most significant and frequently-cited reasons given by volunteers for choosing to participate in community service while visiting Thailand all relate to various dimensions of existential authenticity. (2017, p. 9)

He highlights the critical role played by the search for existential authenticity in shaping the motivations of volunteer tourists, guiding individual beliefs regarding the benefits associated with overseas volunteer activity, and even framing the whole discourse surrounding volunteerism. By existential authenticity, Kontogeorgopoulos means to delineate several types of interrelated authenticity: object-related authenticity, intra-personal authenticity, and inter-personal authenticity:

> Object-related authenticity relates to the genuineness, accuracy, or truthfulness of material objects that can include life processes (e.g. cooking and washing), activities (e.g. recreational games, religious rituals, cultural performances), artefacts, and so on … [I]ntra-personal authenticity … consists of bodily feelings and "self-making," and inter-personal authenticity … relates to experiences that enhance family bonds or contribute to touristic communitas. (2017, p. 2)

We follow the clues provided by Kontogeorgopoulos to dig deeper into our data to evaluate his claims in our study of Voltra's volunteers. Specifically, we

follow three unique narratives of voltrateers. We take their mobility narratives as expressions of their search for authenticity, expressions that evoke, even question, how young volunteer travellers are supposed to regenerate their energy/labour in material ways, and how this energy in turn feeds into their sense of belonging and even idealism. Each case can be described as an experiment in remaking an authentic space for the politics of youthful reproduction through material labour, in an effort to deal with their wariness about an 'immoral other' that we mentioned above. This wariness is often translated into their urge to find a way out of the political atmosphere of pessimism.

Let's sweat

Before we move to the mobility narratives, we first clarify some terminologies. In the spirit of being keen to make the world a better place through international volunteer service, the strength and vitality required to sustain one's volunteer-travelling journey is something we call *youthful energy*. No matter how short or long, temporary or extensive their workcamp experiences are, the physical and mental work required of the voltrateers is something we simply call the *materiality of sweat*. Sweating is a corporeal form of energy; it signals exertion of strenuous effort. This perspiring material labour in volunteering work is considered a proactive means for 'releasing' social/civic engagement – 'to get rid of something from the body by exuding sweat' (Lexico 2019 [online]. Available from: https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/sweat). What is the 'something' they sweat for? We see that the conversion of energy is activated by one's intentional work, perhaps due to the mixed feelings of frustration, uncertainty, and satisfaction. So we suggest that sweating becomes an indication of one's action and reflection to produce, resist, or negotiate one's identity and hope in the wayward journey of being a volunteer traveller. So, instead of asking how young people devote their energy to the volunteering work, we are more interested in exploring various manifestations of the *politics of sweating*, by asking how youthful energy is articulated with the voltrateers' quest for existential authenticity in the problematic space of voluntourism. We pay particular attention to the way identity questions, hopes, and actions become, for the voltrateers, manifestations of 'authenticity'.

Kary: chasing after genuineness[3]

> Because of Voltra's workcamp, you see, hear, smell things in person and are therefore influenced by them in an unconscious way.

Kary was enrolled in a bilingual programme in university when, in 2009, she first joined Voltra's first local workcamp to volunteer in a primary school in Hong Kong. She once 'longed to connect with the world in person with

conversations rather than watching the news' and in doing so, to 'improve [her] spoken English ability'. During the time of living and working with ten other foreign volunteers at the site, Kary felt amazed:

> The most precious moment was the time when we communicated to each other. Everyone chatted under the moonlight on the campus. It was such a utopian scene where we didn't need to worry about work, school, or things at home; we just shared our thoughts about the future and tried to understand different cultures with the foreign volunteers.

A year later, she joined a second workcamp on a project for cultural conservation of castles in Germany, but felt dissatisfied with the lack of cultural exchange when the volunteers were too often separated by their various travel plans. After her European trip in 2010, Kary went back to university but continued to volunteer for Voltra as a camp leader in the workcamps held in Hong Kong.

Kary has worked in Voltra since she graduated in 2012 in order to sustain her cosmopolitan aspirations: by organizing local workcamps, collaborating with other host organizations, promoting the workcamps, and acting as Voltra's representative in International Volunteer Service (IVS) meetings in Europe. Meanwhile, Voltra set up group-project-based workcamps in Asia, which aim to develop a sustainable community of past voltrateers keen to continue to make impact on local communities in order to also strengthen their own sense of solidarity as voltrateers. In other words, Kary became a front-line actor within a network that serves as an enabling structure of belonging through sweating labour from 'seeing, hearing, and smelling things in person'. Always, the sweating labour that is spent this way in the network is richly relational, never individual.

Kary took charge of planning and coordinating project sites in Bangalore, India and in Siem Reap, Cambodia. In the former case, not only did she need to read up on Indian culture and society, she was asked to set up project sites at the moment when her Voltra team became keen to tackle the problem of Indian 'rape culture' widely reported in the media:

> I chose to set up a workcamp in India because people in Hong Kong had very negative and confusing impressions toward the country, like its "stinky smell," rape problem, etc. However, India is more than those. There are many positive things such as its ancient civilization and inspiration to life, despite its complicated religions and poverty.

As for Cambodia, Kary visited the country in 2015 four times to help set up workcamps for Hong Kong volunteers. She narrates a memorable encounter the first site she visited:

> Once we came upon a poorer village in Cambodia, where we encountered a school principal. This man just resigned from his job. He then taught English in the morning, and sold juice on Pub Street to earn his living. Because he

> grew up in the temple and received mercy from the monks, he hoped he could do some charity work to help others. We were all moved: for a man with little money who hoped to give every child a chance to learn English … I then helped to decorate his juice stand, wrote his story on the car, and named it "Shake for Change." Then we promoted his story on a Facebook Fan Page with the same name. We all donated money to help the construction of the school fence.

What Kary and her seven voltrateer buddies on her team cared most about was how to help make the work of the 'juice principal' sustainable. When they returned to Hong Kong, they resolved to meet again to plan for a project to bridge Hong Kong and Cambodia. These returnees quickly founded a project called 'Books to Cambodia' (B2C) to collect English books for Cambodian students to develop a library. In the process, they also built some bookshelves in Voltra's office for collecting books from the public. Thrilled, they surpassed their target of 600 English story books, receiving more than 1000 of them. They then financed themselves to physically carry the 1000 books back to the Khmer Smile School in Spean Chreav village where their previous workcamp was located. To date, the B2C project is still ongoing, and the original voltrateers and new ones continued to travel back and forth between Hong Kong and Cambodia.

Kary sweated, because of her encounter with the genuineness of the people she met while working in the camps: the stuff learned from 'seeing, hearing, and smelling things in person'. Much popular understanding of object-related authenticity focuses on such activities festivals, rituals, or performances, or objects such as food, art, or clothing (McIntosh and Zahra 2007). However, Kary devoted her sweating labour to help others because of the vivid characteristics of the people and settings she encountered, which in turn provided her with the focal points of her tourist gaze searching for symbols of authenticity (see Pearce and Moscardo 1986, Urry and Larsen 2011).

Chris: sharing for co-living

> During the workcamp we all lived together, what it led to was sharing resources.

In the summer of 2014, Chris, a university student, spent two months doing educational work in rural Shanxi, China. Supporting China's industrialization and economic growth, a huge flow of migrant workers move from the rural to urban areas. As a result, about 61 million children are left behind in the rural area in 2010, sparking social issues such as poverty, education and welfare crises [?], rural underdevelopment [?], and so on (Chui and Jordan 2016, Xu 2017). In the youth centre sponsored by World Vision (Hong Kong), Chris helped to organize art activities, like music and painting, for the abandoned children in the village.

Compared to the other well-established sites run by the international NGOs, Chris found that Voltra offered a higher degree of autonomy to initiate projects through the calling for 'expecting the unexpected'. Wanting to become a repeated voltrateer, Chris followed Bird Tang to visit a project site in Taixi, a place in Taiwan that few tourists visit. They participated in a project for environmental conservation of the waterfront. 'Our common target was the core of our experience together. We knew we needed to build something and we lived together to work hard every day to make it happen'. Chris was particularly enamoured of the sense of togetherness in the co-living arrangement of the workcamp. 'Without the experience of living together every day', Chris emphasized, 'the workcamp could not have generated as much strength and vitality'. On the frontline, volunteers come as a team and the resources offered are often very limited, so volunteers get used to the spirit of sharing. Mundane tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and washing dishes created what Chris called a 'sense of security' that 'makes you feel that you are not alone and there are people who help, care for, and support each other'. He became keen to provide a similar experience to other voltrateers when he later designed and coordinated workcamps in Japan, Thailand, and Cambodia.

Chris recalled that at the beginning, he was inspired by a British volunteer who hung her handmade sweaters and scarves in a public park for those in need: the idea of sharing resources. Chris then used what he had learned from the workcamps to transport such an idea of sharing into Hong Kong's context and received much support. He finally lined up a few of his friends and some returned voltrateers to form a project team with twenty volunteers. They effectively organized two projects of sharing clothing in the winter: 'Hanging Santa' was staged to serve the homeless people in Sham Shui Po during Christmas of 2016, and then 'Handing out red packets', which targeted the poor residents in Tin Shui Wai during Chinese New Year of 2017. Targeting those communities who have felt left behind especially during the holidays, the narrative of sharing – 'a festival full of a touching quality (人情味)' – became the volunteers' way to reject the consumption culture that characterizes those holiday times. Chris was meek about his effort. 'I do not know whether I started to care about the needy after joining Voltra's workcamps or whether it was because I cared about them that I joined the camps'. Yet he was clear about the value of sharing:

> Every volunteer in my team knows what they should do, understands the whole thing, and [we] face the challenge together. Because the relationship is different, not like an employer-employee relationship, the activities are seen as the things we face together. Not one is particularly responsible for any specific thing.

Horizontality became an important mode of operation, when the underlying ethos of the volunteer work is that of sharing or co-living. And the more sharing takes place, the stronger the support Chris received from more and more people who wanted to share. Receiving such great support, Chris and a few other former voltrateers went further and founded an organization called 'Shareology' that promotes the culture of sharing, and which staged a variety of public events, such as a regularly held 'Idle Market', 'Sharing of Clothing', and even quickly setting up a local recycling service centre in Cheung Chau island in 2018.

In Chris's narrative, the delightful experience of co-living can be said to be a collective form of youthful energy that can only be generated by the outpouring of their material labour of doing recycling. It provokes a reflexive and pragmatic question: 'how can strangers live together?'. This material endeavour is corporeal and cultural, since it draws a group of young actors together to form an experimental space of hope on the basis of sharing/co-living. Like Kary and her quest for object-related authenticity, Chris's devotion originates from his personal encounter with what he sees as genuine, truthful people and settings. Yet, Chris's emphasis on the sharing of resources strongly suggests another kind of authenticity: interpersonal existential authenticity. This refers to 'personal or intersubjective feelings activated by the liminal process of tourist activities' (Wang 1999). Strong feelings of camaraderie result from interactions among volunteers, and between volunteers and hosts, which promote interpersonal existential authenticity. By developing a lasting bond with their fellow volunteers and with the local communities, volunteers like Chris manage to find their own authentic way to answer the question: how can strangers live together?

Sara: establishing 'real power'

> Information is hardware; people's attitude is the software (硬件是資訊?軟件是人的態度). Once the hardware is changed, software can achieve its goal.

In 2012, Sara, who was a second-year student in college, applied for her first Voltra programme to join a Physical Handicapped and Able-Bodied (PHAB) workcamp in Switzerland. Sara chose Voltra for two reasons: the low travel cost and the meaning she sought through volunteering. What pushed her 'outward' was the cruelty she saw in the medical system during her internship in a public hospital in Hong Kong. Studying to become a physical therapist, Sara witnessed the fragility of human life and was particularly disappointed by the traumatic situation when patients were forced to leave the hospital before they had fully recovered. The workcamp Sara joined was entitled 'Access for All', and was located in a little wooden hostel run by an NGO supporting the deaf community in Switzerland. She was grouped in a team with

three Asians and seven Europeans, one deaf woman from Japan, a blind woman from Slovakia, and a near-blind local woman joining with other able-bodied people.

The volunteer work was not much related to Sara's training; the team did some common daily tasks such as cleaning rivers, fixing the garden road, and sweeping in the hostel. But one day, when they were planning a walk to the lake, Riko (who was deaf) was furious about something and refused to go out with them. Riko even wanted to leave the workcamp. Furiously, she took out the Info-sheet, pointing at the rule that they should care for and help each other, and accusing that the fellow campers all failed to do so. Because of her disability, the other teammates had difficulty communicating with her. The conflict was not resolved until Sandy (who was blind), intervened. They talked things over, and Riko eventually calmed down. This incident made Sara feel bewildered and 'utterly useless'. Despite her background in physical therapy, Sara felt that she was unable to help at all. Ultimately, the disabled teammates managed to console each other by way of technology that enabled them to communicate. 'I thought my experience of treating the handicapped could help me understand them better, but the fact is that they all have their own ways to manage their lives, their needs, and where things are sensitive', Sara shared. In other words, no amount of 'professional training' could help the volunteers to foresee the actual conflicts that may arise when people work and live together in the workcamp. Sara continued: 'One only has "true experience" when being together. Conflicts are bound to occur in the workcamp (工作營一定會有衝突發生), but that's when you learn how to work through them'. The real tension she and the others experienced renders their co-living a creatively engaging existence, especially around the capacity of the disabled and the question of what social integration can be. This shifted Sara's approach to health therapy. Instead of healing patients in the hospital, Sara began to develop a greater concern about how the disabled can live well outside of medical facilities. She recalls:

> I am glad that I chose to work in an NGO, because it is a sort of long-term service for patients. This choice has a lot to do with the experience I've gotten from the Voltra workcamp, because I've lived with them and known that the disabled people have their own lives besides the part in the hospital. When we talk about quality of life, what I understand is their life, not purely treating their illness. I personally am stubborn. There was a job offer from a hospital, but I didn't accept, because I didn't want to work in a hospital. The medical system in Hong Kong is too institutionalized. Everything is standardized. Patients with different symptoms will only receive a standard treatment, similar forms of treatment are given to everyone regardless of their life needs.

With the flexibility of her NGO job, Sara was able to continue to join a number of overseas workcamps organized by Voltra. During one of the workcamp experiences she had in Vietnam, Sara said she encounter a problematic

NGO, which she called a 'black-hearted' organization (meaning inauthentic and exploitative). The organization was set up for assist disabled children. But upon arrival, Sara and the other volunteers found that the number of volunteers outweighed the number of children served. Angry at the NGO's attempt to earn a higher hosting fee and at the realization that the organization was not really interested in improving the children's lives, Sara concluded that 'their thinking is that those children are meant to stay here forever!' With the other volunteers' consent, Sara reported this issue to Voltra to ask it to stop these children from being unfairly exploited by the Vietnam-based organization. This organization was subsequently removed from NVDA's membership network. Sara's action may have weakened Voltra and NVDA's access to the Vietnamese partners, yet it suggests how voltrateers can play a part in weeding out undesirable partners in the network.

Sara later became a member of Voltra's board and participated in a number of workcamps over a five year period. After her days with Voltra, Sara continued to think of ways in which the able-bodied and the disabled can be more integrated in their everyday life. In 2014, she launched a community-based project called 'Wheel Power Challenge (WPC)'. Sara explained: 'wheel power for the disabled is "real power"'. Supported by Voltra, Sara and her wheelchair-user partners planned a hiking trip by wheelchair, but wherever they went, they encountered difficulties with wheelchairs trying to move up or downhill. What may be commonly accessible to the able-bodied is often an obstacle for people in wheelchairs, indicating how invisible wheelchair users' hardship is in public space. Seeing this, Sara and her partners decided to focus on two elements in their project: the training and the mapping sections. In the former, the volunteers were asked to use wheelchairs to move around in the city, so that they could gain experience of the real situation wheelchair users face. In the latter, they accumulated barrier-free information, including the locations and routes of barrier-free facilities, and uploaded it onto open source mobile apps (e.g. Wheelmap). According to Sara, although they could not change the obstacles, they could change the way wheelchair users move, and she believes this is the core of the project:

> Information is hardware; people's attitude is the software (硬件是資訊, 軟件是人的態度). Once the hardware is changed, software can achieve its goal. In this group there are different people with different aims but we all want to do this … My patients would not likely recover after leaving the hospital, and I think this is not their problem. It is the way social space is designed, along with certain limited ways of thinking of many people in our society, that made the disabled less willing to go outside.

Sara's project demonstrates how human intervention can counter social exclusion WPC has now been registered as an NGO that aims to increase public awareness of equal rights for the disabled, and to tackle numerous

facets of social exclusion such as inadequate transport and inaccessibility of public buildings. Through it, Sara applied for funding to develop a local mobile app to upload the collected barrier-free information. Through developing local workcamps, she continues to develop new understanding of the needs of the disabled. Her accumulated experience through voluntary projects is a far cry from the professional training she received in her university years. Hers is a case of the co-production of energy and embodied knowledge, defying any abstract schemes of integration and assimilation she learned from the medical and social welfare systems in Hong Kong. The project of wheelpower has revealed the capacity of the volunteers to develop what Sara calls collective 'dis-disabled' knowledge.

What the mobility narratives of Kary, Chris, and Sara have in common, it seems, is their quest for existential authenticity, whether through their reflections on object-related genuineness, interpersonal co-living, or intrapersonal truthfulness. In many ways, all three types of authenticity-quest can be found in each case. Ultimately, these examples reveal a profound set of bodily feelings, self-making, and most importantly, sustainability developed through voluntourism. The work carried out by Kara, Chris, and Sara was continued long after their Voltra workcamps. We would go so far as to argue that their bodily feelings (associated with the material labour of sweating) and self-making (articulated as identity belongings) feed critical energy into their strong will to continue their various volunteer ventures after they came home. This sustainability was not something expected by Voltra, as Bird Tang admitted; yet through the work of Kary, Chris, Sara and a few other ex-voltrateers like them, the momentum, value and energy are all emerging as part of the framing narrative of the organization.

Even though many previous studies of volunteer tourism have engaged with relevant existential themes such as intimacy, camaraderie, personal challenge, community capital building, bridging social distance, and self-development (Broad 2003, Broad and Jenkins 2008, Conran 2011, Coren and Gray 2012), the focus on the materiality and politics of sweating (and tears, suffering, conflicts, disillusionment, etc.) appears to be an incidental component of these studies; they are mentioned in passing only. What these three mobility narratives show us is the common sense of existential authenticity that arises from what we have called sweating, heavily shaping their motivations, identities, actions, perceived benefits, and hopes.

Conclusion: the 'strange synergy' of voluntourism

> After Katrina, the New Orleans native vowed to hike the entire 2,174 miles of the Appalachian Trail and plant a tree for every mile hiked. She met and exceeded that goal. Saturday, she led the planting of the 4,900th tree in New Orleans. It was among the oleanders, live oaks, sweet bay magnolias, southern magnolias,

> cypress and fringe trees, also known as granny greybeards, planted during the two-day project. "I've been wanting to volunteer in New Orleans since Katrina, and this was the first real opportunity I had and I didn't want to pass it up," said Art Koonce of Atlanta … For Koonce, who planted several trees on Saturday, the day was "worth every drop of sweat." (Gurchiek 2009)

This essay hovers between a critique of voluntourism's problematic reproduction of the precariat caught in the problematic of mobility, and the provocation to think about the potential of voluntourism's stubborn politics of sweating for a different kind of reproduction, that of the precariat's quest for existential authenticity. The research presses us to ask: to what extent do the voltrateers – and other similar wandering groups on a mission to change the present moment of wide economic and social deterioration – stand in as figures of the 'precariat'?

Today, indeed, many sociologists, economists, and cultural analysts have called young people the 'precariat' who are caught in socioeconomic processes that see them pushed and pulled in and out of employment, causing considerable anxieties (Standing 2014, Bessant *et al.* 2017). Guy Standing writes:

> One defining characteristic of the precariat is distinctive relations of production: so-called "flexible" labour contracts; temporary jobs; labour as casuals, part-timers, or intermittently for labour brokers or employment agencies. But conditions of unstable labour are part of the definition, not the full picture. More crucially, those in the precariat have no secure occupational identity; no occupational narrative they can give to their lives. (2014, p. 10)

He concludes: 'The defining conditions of the precariat produce a general consciousness of relative deprivation and a combination of anxiety, anomie, alienation and anger' (2014, p. 10). The notion of the 'precariat' gives us the clue with which to think through the personal, emotional, ideological, and structural shifts in Hong Kong youth's quest for existential authenticity. Broadly conceived, volunteering can be viewed as a cultural response made by the precariat, an answer arising from a sentiment of altruistic giving, but, as shown in the cases of Kary, Chris, and Sara, a sentiment formed through their felt reality, or witnessing, of inequality and resulting in 'anxiety, anomie, alienation, and anger' (see Smith *et al.* 2010, Griffiths 2014). Arguably, then, the practice of the voltrateers' quest for authenticity should not be understood simply as either a vision for an alternative future or a desire to create a better world. Like the yearning for utopianism and idealism, the quest for authenticity expresses impulses and aspirations that may have been blocked by society, so that it often carries with it complicated affective and ideological tensions.

We echo the reference made to Lauren Berlant's (2011) work in the introduction of this special issue that the precariat is a 'feeling class' (2011, p. 195)

who witness inequality but 'feel attached to the soft hierarchies of inequality to provide a sense of *their place in the world*' (2011, p. 194). It is through this complex affective state that the precariat, despite being in an unsettling situation, embraces precarity itself as its own condition of being and belonging (2011, p. 194). The interesting observation we made in our study is that instead of turning radical, the precariat practices its relative privilege of moderately creative living and working amid a relatively stable genre of events, such as the events of charity, co-living, and of course repeated mobility. In this cultural shift, sacrifice is often a recurring stabilizing trope in voltrateers' reflections. The tension between social justice and flexible capitalism seems resolved as long as a private choice to sacrifice and a bit of traveller's privilege are combined, allowing the regeneration of the material sweating labour and affective attachment to the good-ambassador fantasy to prevail.

In our study, we see how affectively, there have been shifts among young people toward valuing the *lateral* mobility of freedom and creative ambitions, *after* letting go of the narrative of the more normative *upward* mobility of the bygone era. We call this *strange synergy*. It is expressed through complex affects that hold on both to the frustrations toward the government's lack of responsibility for real social change, and to aspirations to freedom generated from desire for existential authenticity. This synergy is 'strange' because of the way it seeks to converge social change demanded of the state (many voltrateers still hope for the government to 'do a better job', despite their disappointment in them) with an aspiration to freedom at the individual level (against the state). In doing so, it puts strange fellows – i.e. responsiveness and responsibility of the powerful on the one hand, and values of genuineness, truthfulness, etc. on the other – in the same bed.

Why does the politics of sweating matter for social justice? It is because the capacity to aspire through sweating labour is a *cultural* capacity for the aspirants to *navigate* their maps of norms (laterally, rather than the usual upward-mobility kind) as developed from their material encounter with the poor, the alienated, the outcast, etc. (see Appadurai 2004, Amit and Barber 2015). Sara, for instance, developed her map of norms not out of her previous professional training, but out of her aspiration to contest that very training. She even contested Voltra's network of partners, some of which she considered as 'black-hearted' NGOs. Chris, on the other hand, charted his map of norms from his aspiration to 'live with strangers'. To him, horizontal forms of sociability are effective means with which to contest the hierarchical structure characteristic of the host/guest relation, first world / third world distinction, conditions of the mobile versus that of the immobile, etc.

What Voltra's workcamp experience reveals is that development work, poverty reduction, education, environmental protection, and so on, have a great deal to do with the future. Thus, strengthening the capacity to aspire laterally – that is, in solidarity with those whom they wish to serve – can

enable the voltrateers to better imagine ways to contest existing structural inequalities. How? Here, we only gesture briefly to Arjun Appadurai's (2004) useful work on poverty reduction based on the very notion of the 'capacity to aspire'. Appadurai makes a series of 'nuts and bolts' recommendations to those who want to bring interventions into poverty reduction programmes. We extrapolate from his approach some 'nuts and bolts' of our own with respect to the capacity to lateral aspire found in voluntourism. When entering into a foreign space where social inequality is a major concern, the volunteers become acutely sensitive to the cultural rituals that perpetuate a certain dominant social consensus (e.g. worries of class privilege, racial superiority, patriarchy, etc. expressed by some voltrateers). Changing the consensus therefore amounts to changing the terms of self-recognition for both the volunteers and the local community. Also, capacity building will be focused on specific local needs, and not through cookie-cutter programmes pre-packaged by the volunteering organizations. Voltra's workcamps demand on-the-ground negotiations of the work to be carried out in a specific locale, therefore making the local community's understanding of the links between aspirations and achievement eminently more possible.[4] Any volunteer initiative must 'develop a set of tools for identifying the cultural map of aspirations that surround the specific intervention that is contemplated' (Appadurai 2004, p. 83). Needless to say, this capacity to aspire encourages internal efforts to cultivate an authentic voice from the local community.

Moreover, the capacity to aspire entails the capacity to feel. Emotion/Affect is a site for the voltrateers to negotiate and proclaim their strange synergy. The precarious body of the voltrateers feels hyperactive, fluid, simultaneous, restless, but also unsettling, vulnerable, often exhausted. It feels itself being multiply dependent on a vision of lateral freedom and mobility. The steady experience of flexibility affords little protection but must accommodate a constant sense of sacrifice and availability. Mobility itself – or more accurately, movements at airports, bus depots, hostels, and other temporary and contingent abodes – is burdened by an overabundance of communication, interactivity, fragile employability, and emotional labour. As a whole, Berlant would call this sense of worldliness a 'thick present' (2011, p. 198). To her, this 'thick present' has little or no capacity to aspire (Berlant remains staunchly pessimistic about the transiting figure). Yet, we wonder if the situation for the voltrateers is one in which the form of social contract looks more like an emotional 'distribution of the sensible'. Here, we extract from Jacques Ranciere's (2006) suggestive concept in which he uses to speak to the order of various sense perceptions that govern the way we participate in the common social world. We feel the world of the voltrateers is characterized by sense perceptions arising from their affective response to social inequality. The value of seeing it in this way is that it allows us to insert an 'aesthetic' politics into the youthful

practice of volunteering, i.e. the politics of different sensuality of doing, creating, making, sweating, and changing. While this political aspiration may be moving its sensuality within a given narrative genre of youthful energy, charity, and sacrifice, it generates divergent feelings, strange synergies, and interruptive adaptations *within and against* the feelings of encountering a dead end.[5] This is no rhetorical gesturing. It goes to the heart of the *affective tension in volunteerism*: of how one feels one should still continue to move into volunteering spaces, how we do so in order to find our footing in the precarious world, and eventually how we learn to track our aspirations up and down the continuum of a gridlocked world.

Notes

1. Primary data for this project was collected through semi-structured in-depth interview with Voltrateers. The research team collectively conducted 30 interviews from 2016 to 2017 in Hong Kong. Among the informants were two founding members of Voltra, four voltrateers who became Voltra's staff, and six voltrateers who pursued extended projects after their workcamp experience. All interviewees were identified through snowball sampling. Beside, we also drew information from secondary sources including Voltra's yearbooks and social media, news coverage, as well as through our first-hand observation at the Glocal-Hero training camp in 2016, and an International Conference of Global Volunteering in 2018 and the NDVA's 13th General Assembly in 2018, both held in Hong Kong. The in-depth interviews offered us a wealth of insights, assisted by unusually vocal and self-reflective informants. What would have enhanced our observations would be to gain an even deeper experience through an immersive participation in a Voltra workcamp.
2. Aside from coordinating workcamps overseas, Voltra also organizes local workcamps for both Hong Kong residents and foreign visitors for durations of 1–2 weeks.
3. We use real names in these three mobility narratives, with consent from the informants.
4. Here, we supply an additional example. After the 2017 earthquake in Nepal, Janice (25, volunteered in 2015 and 2017) joined a workcamp for temple reconstruction in the capital city Kathmandu. She and other volunteers were assigned to clean up the trash in the city. But they quickly realised that the locals and the tourists alike littered everywhere. Adaptation came when they realized that the action to clean up the city on lofty ecological grounds would not do. Soon, they turned away from the host organization's focus on 'care for the environment' to 'care for your home.' Homing, then, became a key message through which Janice and her team initiated new activities (e.g. they drew new posters, lectured, modelled, and even redesigned rubbish bin that can avoid local wild animals). Janice reflected: 'the locals felt that we did a good job and knew that we wanted to help them improve, so they all told the agency that they hope to have such activities in the future.' We believe that this adaptation with, and not for, the service targets, exemplifies a lateral aspiration for change.
5. Berlant refers to such feelings of the dead end as the 'impasse.' She writes:

> I offer impasse both as a formal term for encountering the duration of the present, and a specific term for tracking the circulation of precariousness through diverse locales and bodies. The concept of the present as impasse opens up different ways that the interruption of norms of the reproduction of life can be adapted to, felt out, and lived. The impasse is a space of time lived without a narrative genre … One takes a *pass* to avoid something or to get somewhere: it's a formal figure of transit. But the *impasse* is a *cul-de-sac* … In a cul-de-sac one keeps moving, but one moves paradoxically, in the *same space*. An impasse is a holding station that doesn't hold securely but opens out into anxiety, that dog-paddling around a space whose contours remain obscure … The activity can produce impacts and events, but one does not know where they are leading. (199; emphasis hers)

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