Study Abroad Reflection

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Reflections on Teaching Abroad: How Berlin Remembers Trauma and What it Means for American Sense-Making of the Past

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Following the 2016 U.S. presidential election, fliers appeared on our university's campus that uncannily resembled Nazi propaganda posters of the early 1940s. Custodians cleaning the campus facilities found the majority of the fliers and removed them before the general student population saw them. Still, a handful were photographed by students and quickly made their rounds via social media inciting a heated debate about free speech versus hate speech, racism, and white supremacy. Shortly thereafter, several student groups organized a Not My President rally near a campus work of art by the Mexican-American sculptor Luis Jiménez entitled "Border Crossing." Protesters chanted affirmations for minoritized students on campus, such as "you are welcome here," and "not my president," in an attempt to disassociate from mainstream political rhetoric and the newly elected President Trump's campaign slogans that centered on deportation and building a border wall. Not long after the protest started, a second group of students showed up, wearing Make America Great Again hats and waving Trump-Pence campaign signs in the air. Slowly, the second group of students circled the Not My President crowd, chanting their own slogans and creating a human border wall around the original protestors.

Moments like these on our campus emphasize our need to evaluate how our students learn to appropriately respond to such tensions and what role we play as faculty, staff, and administrators regarding campus activism. These questions will only continue to intensify as we approach the next national election and our campuses become once again grounds on which contested political issues become highly personal. The opportunity to engage in critical dialogue should not be limited to the classroom nor should those moments only arise during unanticipated events when emotions run high, such as during a rally or campus protest. Rather, tools for critical thinking and respectful dialogue should be incorporated into a broader range of academic experiences and opportunities offered to our students, including in places

and programs that take students out of the classroom and into communities beyond our campus and our national borders. Study abroad, while often represented as a fun and care-free time away from campus, in fact presents a perfect opportunity to engage students on topics around belonging, national identity, race, gender, class, and privilege. Study abroad experiences give students the opportunity to witness how historical narratives are formed, how political struggles manifest, and how ethical practices are often shaped within a context of time, space, and geography. Moreover, study abroad asks us to reflect on how we teach history and investigate cultural narratives when we explore those topics through a lens that is not our own. In particular, I am interested in exploring what happens when we engage students on challenging subject matters by introducing these conversations using a different culture, context, and historical lens as a point of entry. I posit that this allows students to enter into a dialogue that feels less high-stakes and more approachable because of the distance afforded. These tensions are teased out in greater detail in the following reflection informed largely by my own experiences taking student groups abroad as well through engagement with a subset of existing scholarship on memory, place, and time.

I teach a summer study abroad course taking students from a large Midwest land-grant institution to Berlin, Germany. At the core, my course asks students to analyze how modern-day Germany makes sense of past traumas such as the Holocaust, Nazi ideology, and divided Germany. We investigate how the city of Berlin commemorates its past through the built world—for instance, through memorials, museums, sites of cultural significance, and architectural symbols that communicate something about a past that might want to be forgotten. We discuss nationalism, populism, xenophobia, and what it looks like when leaders use a discourse of Othering to create policies and laws that violate human rights. By viewing these topics through the lens of Berlin and Germany, rather than the Midwest or the United States, students are more willing to discuss and ask hard questions. By the end of the program, comparisons between Germany's culture and past to America's past and present abound as students try to apply what they are seeing abroad to the realities familiar to them in their communities at home.

To encourage this type of dialogue and intercultural comparative analysis, I invoke the theories of Popov and Deák (2015), who argued that young people's understanding of the past shapes how they view their present and futures. Popov and Deák referred to places that tell the story of a shared past as "mnemonic communities" (p. 36). In those communities, the understanding of pasts that are "difficult" are largely shaped by the representations of those histories in the world around them (p. 36). Communities that do not shy away from telling these more complex and challenging stories signal a shared value in remembering and making decisions based on lessons learned. These mnemonic communities produce informed citizens who engage with their current conditions through a more knowledgeable and critical lens as a result. As Popov and Deák wrote, "Just as memory and history are mutually engaged with each other, so too the past and present cannot be uncoupled" (p. 49). In other words, to encourage our students to function as engaged and concerned citizens in the present, we must offer them the tools and skills to understand how our present

is built on a multitude of ideologies, political and historical events, and the remembrance thereof.

Berlin, a city emblematic of mnemonic communities, offers students the perfect setting for exploring complex histories and difficult conversations regarding a past that still haunts today's generations. My course begins with an exploration of the time period between 1935 through 1989—a half a century marked by turmoil, political upheave, and social unrest. More specifically, this also represents one of the darkest eras in German history under the National Socialist regime. Following a period during which Berlin and Germany were divided and governed using different ideologies and political systems, the country had to relearn how to function as one. After the collapse of the wall in 1989, Germans were faced with the monumental task of rebuilding roads, divided neighborhoods, fractured communities, and conflicting memories of a past that was largely shaped by experiences had one side of the wall or another (Copley, 2017). The class discussion on the unification of divided Germany, as commemorated by the East Side Gallery and the Memorial at Bernauerstrasse, easily leads into discussions on how Southern and Northern states following the Civil War sought to re-unify and make amends. Another site that similarly inspires reflection on American sense-making of the past is the large and imposing Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, found in the heart of the city near the iconic Brandenburg Gate. This massive memorial, taking up over 200,000 square feet of city center, is made of 2,711 concrete slabs of alternating heights ("Foundation Memorial," n.d.). Impossible to miss and evocative in its size and grandeur, this particular memorial inspires dialogue on what it looks like to attempt to make amends for past crimes. It also encourages students from an American context to think about what that narrative looks like on North American soil—when do states or governments use rhetoric such as "murdered" and where—if anywhere at all—do large-scale memorials to Indigenous Peoples' erasure reside within the United States?

Berlin as a whole is a city that can be read as a commentary on its past. As ubiquitous as the memorials erected are the buildings and constructions left intentionally damaged, charred, and otherwise destroyed during the war. Michael Meng (2017), in an article exploring how the architects Bohdan Lachert and Daniel Libeskind approached the task of commemorating past traumas in the built world today, wrote that we feel especially uncomfortable around buildings that show ruin because they serve as *memento mori*, reminding us of the fleeting and ephemeral nature of life itself. They not only remind us of tragic pasts but also reveal "the vulnerability of human creations no matter how monumental they might be" (p. 550). They point to a truth that is difficult for most to keep in sight: Humans, and all that we create, will eventually perish and disintegrate. And yet it is this very lesson that is most powerful when encountered in the world outside of the classroom; where students can gaze upon the remnants of a structure left partially destroyed and feel the impact of history, demise, and decay. Nowhere is this more poignant than at the sight of the Wilhelm Kaiser Memorial Church, which once stood as the tallest structure in Berlin and which today displays a gaping, shattered spire commonly referred to as the "hollow tooth" ("Rescuing Berlin," 2008). To encourage this element of critical reflection on the built world and humanity in general, I ask students, who is given a voice when commemorating history, who decides to create a

memorial, and whose perspectives are reflected in these tributes to the past? How do we understand the past through today's built world, and what does it mean to create material culture that serves as collective memory? Finally, who has access to these spaces and for whom are they created?

As a result of these discussions with students on study abroad, I argue that representations of study abroad in popular media and film, which often rely on the tired trope of affluent, predominantly white students enjoying romps through Europe while engaging minimally with the countries and people encountered along the way are dismissive of a more complex experience shared by students in real life and damaging to the field of international education as a whole. Similarly, Kathryn Johnson Gindlesparger (2018) argued in an article on the study abroad blog as a genre:

> study abroad is not necessarily all "awesome," all the time. […] As teachers and scholars then, we should ask ourselves what happens when a student's time abroad is more complicated than just "awesome"? What happens if and when a student's time abroad prompts real deep, justifiably uncomfortable and life-changing reflection, as it should? (pp. 7–8)

Gindlesparger argued that the majority of commercially sourced blogs, written by students but curated and published by study abroad agencies, present a sanitized personal travel narrative that does not fully reflect what happens when students engage in intercultural education. The study abroad blog genre does not make space for that discomfort that comes with learning about difficult truths and painful historical moments, which prompt students to interrogate their own positionality and cultural norms. She argued that this omission is necessary for the commercial study abroad industry to advance its own interests but does little to offer students a useful model for processing their own study abroad journey.

In my experience of taking students on an academic course abroad, I have witnessed how profoundly impactful it is to explore questions of belonging, memory, history, and trauma through a different lens. For the field to continue to make a difference in the lives of students, we must recognize and tell the stories of how international programs and study abroad experiences complicate the linear narrative of travel and privilege. As educators and administrators in higher education, we must moreover recognize the potential to engage in these discussions at the onset of a students' academic journey, before the protests and the rallies and the difficult encounters on campus that leave us wishing we had better prepared ourselves and our students for these cultural crossroads ahead.

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