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Study Abroad in the Neoliberal Academy: Shifting Geographies

Terri Carney

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STUDY abroad is, in some ways, the magical heart of our wide and multilingual discipline. Students who have spent semesters poring over verb conjugations and textbook dialogues live in foreign countries where they can wander down side streets, hear utterances in the new language, and have brave and vulnerable conversations with strangers. Study abroad is an early form of experiential learning: a community experience that allows students to put into practice the academic and theoretical. Students engaged in linguistic and cultural immersion abroad have always embodied the art of connecting to the other, of cultivating a mutually constitutive definition of self and other. As one of my professors in Kansas said: the purpose of languages and literatures and all the arts is to *hacerse otro*.¹ This implies more than bridging or merely connecting: it implies a transformation of the self. It implies becoming another. Once we have that experience of loosening and then reshaping the features of our identity, we know on a deeper level that no one person is reducible to any one feature. This lesson makes impossible the dangerous and prevalent reflex of othering. If I can become another, can't everyone?

Despite the neoliberal imperative to attain freedom from alterity, the humanities, and language disciplines especially, continue to dive into alterity in defiance of the imperative to objectify.² Intercultural communication through linguistic immersion is a creative act of suturing, not a line-item transaction. Study abroad is not a tour bus but rather a stroll down the tiny side street of new worlds and chance encounters. It is the unknown and the unscripted, where we learn not by *PowerPoint* but by experience. Literature and language study are technologies of this intersubjective threshold, as they bring us to that shared, generative membrane between people, which is a breathing and changing entity, not a suit of armor or a border wall. Noam Chomsky reminds us that language is creative, not utilitarian. Language and literature scholars understand that epistemologies inscribe relationships with others, and they work to understand nonviolent ways of knowing and being (Brinker-Gabler).

But study abroad has changed, and linguistic and cultural immersion is no longer a central feature of the myriad study abroad experiences now available (MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages). Shorter programs proliferate. Monolingualism is okay. Even students who study abroad for a semester or longer are never really alone or disconnected from their home culture because of the omnipresence of social media and personal technology. While abroad with a group of students in Spain in the fall semester of 2009, I noted that the majority of them spent weekends exploring Europe by way of Ryanair, a cheap airline that allowed them to hop from country to country. Surely there is something to gain from extensive travel, but there was something lost by not living in the host country long enough to get bored, to

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make weekend friends, to join a club or a team at the university. In short, the neoliberal globetrotting citizen is not what we strive for in foreign language disciplines. We want deep study and immersion, a period of self-erasure and the subsequent rebuilding of the self in another language. That process is not substitutable.

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam outlines what he calls a pedagogy of vulnerability that applies to the version of study abroad we might consider rescuing: “While the ‘good’ teacher leads his students along the pathways of rationality, the ‘ignorant schoolmaster’ must actually allow them to get lost in order for them to experience confusion and then find their own way out or back or around” (14). The whole introduction to the book is a tribute to the undisciplined, an ode to the irrational and the unusable, a haiku about the marvelous illegibility of knowledge practices that inspire and transform, rather than inscribe and control. His conjuring of what I will call the magical heart of the humanities is reminiscent of bell hooks in *Teaching Critical Thinking*: “Those of us who stay, who continue to work to educate for the practice of freedom, see firsthand the ways that democratic education is being undermined as the interests of big business and corporate capitalism encourage students to see education solely as a means to achieve material success” (16). Our students today often carry with them the expectations of tourist ideology, which positions them as consumers of cultures. They are demanding, and they require a set of conditions for their study abroad experience: students who study abroad today are increasingly seeking culture-free zones, where their credits transfer seamlessly, the Wi-Fi is a stream of uninterrupted power and connection, and their English language is sufficient to see them through. They want host families who cook them chicken fingers and grilled cheese sandwiches and who provide a clean and private room. The campus version of this would be the luxury-style dorms being built, some featuring lazy rivers. Messy immersion is a thing of the past.³

Wanting to keep the magic alive is not a new thing. The best of postmodernism was an effort to preserve the spirit of the humanities project in the face of a profit-driven, outcomes-obsessed culture:

a broad, complex intellectual movement that sought to reconstitute a cultural framework in which the creative activity of individuals and groups would not be subordinated to economic production. For most of their postwar history, the academic humanities played a major role in this project. The humanities played this role because of their ties to movements and communities that had been largely excluded from the university, and were only now gradually finding the gates open to them. These fields provided huge advances in understanding sign systems, the effects of identity, collaborative invention culture as neither science nor religion, and in the truths that had been relegated to the margins. They articulated a vision for a future world—human development as the standard of market relations; art and labor as the standard for finance; race relations based on equality; international relations in the spirit of reciprocity. Those fields were constantly wracked with doubt. But they were part of a wide movement in society that was transforming the public university and its middle-class graduates from a conservative bulwark in a potentially volatile mixture of liberalism and radicalisms. (Newfield 46)

For decades now, we have been struggling for ways to respond to the brutalizing and insidious effects of late or neoliberal capitalism. Have we failed?

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In some ways we have. We are no longer producing humanistic citizens of a shared international space but rather atomized, skilled agents for the global marketplace: “The traditional goals of higher education—to inculcate fundamental Western humanist beliefs and nationalist values—are being challenged by a stress on skills, talent, and borderless neoliberal ethos” (Ong 148). The moral imperative to uphold the common good and shared humanity is eclipsed in a version of global capitalism. Just as nation-states have lost control over the most pernicious and destructive effects of global capitalism—whether by leaving citizens unprotected against the ravaging desires of the market or leaving the environment unprotected by any international coalition—so has the academic department lost control over the pursuit of truth central to its disciplines.

Many foreign language departments have lost control over the location, quality, and content of these programs. It is the task of the department chair to define the study-abroad experience so that it is meaningful and productive for a wide array of students, while still stressing the acquisition of other languages, the understanding and enjoyment of other cultures, and the difficult process of turning the foreign into the familiar and the familiar into the foreign. (“Best Practices”)

The national and departmental borders that, on the one hand, confined or limited us, and against which we have raged in the name of interdisciplinary or international cooperation, are also, on the other hand, the checkpoints we need to balance against the neoliberal-global atomization of identity that weakens our shared investment in human rights: environmental rights, educational rights, and so on.

Many have argued that foreign language study is ill-suited to the sleek online delivery of a distance course through a computer screen, citing the human, face-to-face physicality of our discipline. Even the core of second language acquisition, a pillar of the social science side of our discipline, is a first language acquisition scenario of a baby learning language through intimate contact with a parent or caregiver. In a similar fashion, study abroad is not reducible to a marketing effort of the corporate university—the elision of the messy and marvelous work of learning another language and culture is not a loss we will suffer quietly as language professors. We must unite and argue that this central experience is the heart of our discipline and an embodied practice that resists the neoliberal capitalist machine that standardizes and sterilizes everything in its path that does not produce an easy and efficient translation.

The corporatization of the academy is a well-documented phenomenon, with a spate of books contributing to the growing field of critical university studies (Bousquet; Evans; Giroux; Newfield; Readings; Slaughter and Leslie). While the academy has been a site of resistance from which to challenge the corrosive effects of unbridled capitalism on the values and commitments of a liberal arts education, we are now in the thick of the struggle, as conditions of austerity creep into every aspect of the university. Liberal arts professors desperately cling to our shared ideals of participatory democracy and the collective good, even as the spaces in which we work are restructured to accommodate and serve the logic of the market.

Global capitalism has created widespread human suffering, leaving many nations impoverished and the common welfare sacrificed for debt repayment. The market-driven movement of people and products around the world has forced us to

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reexamine conditions of being and belonging as citizens, refugees, exiles, or products ourselves. The study abroad enterprise in these conditions is no longer primarily understood as the transformative experience central to the disciplines of the language department: it is now a business that has migrated from an academic home to an administrative one, which oversees the budget and establishment of new programs. Faculty members dedicated to the teaching and learning of languages, literatures, and cultures of the non-English-speaking world are no longer essential to that business. Student demand for shorter trips to English-speaking places shapes institutional support for the most viable programs.

What is the goal of study abroad today? The Institute for the International Education of Students boasts on its Web page the mission of creating “global leaders” (“Who”). This is classic neoliberal discourse, where certificates and degrees in entrepreneurship and leadership are now common. In contrast, the Web pages of language departments are more likely to cite “liberally educated citizens of the world” as their mission. The fight to maintain the linguistic and cultural immersion version of study abroad is the battle for a humanities-centered liberal arts education, for a multilingual, culturally competent, international cadre of world citizens. Do we want to graduate neoliberal subjects with internships logged around the globe or critical thinkers who are change agents and cultural chameleons? Students can globetrot and become comfortable traveling, but students can also deeply immerse and return different from who they were. This technology of the self reveals the constructed character of identity, which is a building block for all learning in the liberal arts. To see possibility and choice where before there was nature and determinism is, after all, at the heart of the liberal arts and sciences educational mission. Becoming another has always been a central core of the liberal arts project, as it encapsulates the ideals of secular humanism: agency over determinism; common good over greed; knowledge that does, not will to power; and so on. As we learn from Fred Murdock, the protagonist in Jorge Luis Borges’s story “El etnógrafo,” deep immersion can change what we know and what we desire.

Language departments and other liberal arts departments are changing in these conditions (MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages). We are assessment-oriented, handmaiden to the utilitarian desires and outcomes of the professional schools. We are being standardized and streamlined for efficiency and profit. The special character of study abroad is similar to the magical core of the humanities and the liberal arts as an extension. The devaluing of the humanities in the corporate university is the story of what is happening to immersion study abroad writ large. The global university compares to the transnational corporation: “As such the emergence of self-proclaimed global universities resembles, at least superficially, the rise and diffusion of the transnational corporation” (Biles 150). Are we aiming to produce neoliberal *anthropos* or bilingual, bicultural, changed human beings who are cultural chameleons and no longer able to neatly contain themselves on one side of any border?

Study abroad in the global university model is antithetical to social justice in its design and implementation: it perpetuates class divides, facilitates cultural imperialism, falls short in the treatment of locals, and produces disconnected tourists. In “The Global University, Area Studies, and the World Citizen: Neoliberal

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Geography's Redistribution of the 'World,'" Tom Looser describes the conditions at study abroad satellite campuses:

Economically, the SEZ-like territories being constructed promise "freedom" from surrounding city and state contexts; a socioeconomic indifference to locale. The schools' curriculum, the use of English as the universal language, and the island-like status of the zones themselves—all this implies freedom from, and indifference to, culture. And because they are built in entirely new, undeveloped land areas (typically reclaimed land), in the tabula rasa philosophy that is so commonly cited, they are zones without their own history, and of indifferent relation to any specific history (other than their own, newly formed). (107)

The "freedom" Looser describes here is predicated on the dismantling of the national as an obstacle to a smooth and unfettered neoliberal transaction. These are zones without culture or history: two dimensions of thick human experience that adhere to the national and are erased in the global.

Students who go to these campuses, and corporate executives who go to live in these districts, are assured that the island-like nature of the district will for the most part allow freedom from the hindrances of local custom. We can already say, then, that these are culture-free zones. Free economic zones tend to produce culture-free zones. (102)

Such dangers of globalization are felt in a parallel way at the home university when study abroad is overseen by the academic administration, unmoored from its academic home in the language department. And this is happening across the board as we see a growth in the academic administration that supplants and erases the centrality of the faculty as the soul of the institution. Russell Berman reminds us that culture and humanism have always been entwined with money and materialism: "the inescapable dependency of universities on economy" (215). However, we still need to shore up the culture and the humanism in the face of capitalist domination. At campuses across the United States, the project of globalizing and internationalizing is largely the work of academic administrative offices. Bill Readings noted the rise of administration twenty years ago in *The University in Ruins*: "I would be inclined to argue that the University of Excellence is one in which a general principle of administration replaces the dialectic of teaching and research, so that teaching and research, as aspects of professional life, are subsumed under administration" (125).

Keeping track of the definition and circulation of key terms is essential work for language faculty members in these conditions. Benjamin Ginsberg notes, in *The Fall of the Faculty*, "But unfortunately, as we shall see below, for university administrators, diversity and civility are instruments of managerial power rather than philosophical principles" (102). Study abroad is contested terrain, and Sara Ahmed shows us that there is room for maneuver in her book *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Ahmed is an academic who teaches and researches in the area of race and cultural studies but who also lives in a particular institution where she, like all of us, must find ways to align institutional practices with disciplinary knowledge and standards. She considers herself a diversity practitioner who marshals forces around terms like *diversity* and *multiculturalism* as they are used by the institution. We can do the same with study abroad by pushing for the benefits of linguistic and cultural immersion versus global tourism. Like Ahmed, we can use the terms

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that are in fashion and migrate with them to get a good outcome. It is okay not to play a “pure” game. *Globalization, internationalization, diversity*—terms that have been uprooted from their natural disciplinary and academic homes and are now titles of new offices in administration. *Study abroad* is now a term for us to reclaim.

In language departments we must update our curricula and think about the way we breathe life into terms that are central to our work. We need to engage in a correction of past sins, which have been, in some corners, tragically nationalist and essentialist, often blind to borders and hybrids and the unruliness of intercultural borders and emerging grammars, which depend on a nationalism, but a flexible version. Language departments must examine their own imperialist undergirding and capitalist, patriarchal organization and value hierarchies. For example: How can we make immersion study abroad more accessible? Ahmed infused the economic and managerial strategies of the corporate university with philosophical and humanistic context. Like her, we can refuse to be disconnected by reclaiming our terms. Ahmed sees *global* as a new, positive term: “[T]he discourse of global citizenship is indeed useful: it associates diversity work with the skills of translating across cultures.” She notes the precarity of term surfing: “We can certainly note how diversity becomes an elite technology or a technology for elites. . . . Diversity can be a way of doing advantage, or becoming more advantaged, rather than challenging disadvantage” (78).

Like Ahmed, Lester McCabe also focuses on terms and the way they circulate and change in value and meaning in the university. His analysis of the important distinctions between the terms *internationalization* and *globalization* are useful:

As we examine various definitions of these two terms, on a broad level, the term *internationalization* seems to suggest cooperation and understanding between two countries and/or cultures, whereas often, the term *globalization* has negative connotations that conjure up fears of neocolonialism and cultural homogenization. Although the pros and cons of globalization are being debated by writers, analysts, and world leaders, it seems as though the field of study abroad has adopted *globalization* as the programmatic buzzword for the future; yet, in contrast, some international education programs continue to tout the necessity and benefits of *internationalization* as a preferable process by which to plan their programs. Regardless of one’s position on this subject, there appears to be a paradigm shift from internationalization to globalization, or minimally, the discourse spotlight has shifted toward highlighting globalization as a key concept. (139)

Herman E. Daly argues that we need to retain nation as a checkpoint and laments the shift from internationalization to globalization as the new world order:

Paradoxically, globalization even undercuts our ability to deal with irreducibly global problems such as climate change, because nations with porous borders are not able to carry out any effective national economic policies, including the ones that they agreed to in international environmental treaties. The IMF and the World Bank are abandoning internationalization and promoting globalization, contrary to the interests of their member nations, and to the intent of their charter.

McCabe also prefers the term *internationalization*, for *globalization*

implies standardization across cultures that occurs as technology, migration, and education become dispersed around the globe. This process suggests that ultimately

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the world will evolve into greater levels of sameness. . . . In contrast . . . internationalization is more oriented toward bilateral and/or multilateral processes involving knowledge of specific countries, which leads to the development of business, educational, social, and cultural relationships (140–41).

In *Neoliberalism as Exception*, Aihwa Ong argues that we can't produce neoliberal *anthropos*, that the American university needs to couple the drive to globalize with an expansion of "transnational humanities." We must practice what we preach in the service of global social justice: conditions of study abroad satellite campuses and treatment of host families must be ethical and made transparent by university partners, or we are betraying the ethical core of the study abroad mission: to create international understanding and solidarity. Is the study abroad enterprise creating the very conditions we seek to ameliorate with the transformation of students who engage in linguistically and culturally immersive study abroad? It is massively ironic to imagine the study abroad project creating culture-free bubbles around the world.

Applied linguistics tells us that faculty members need to play a key role in study abroad programs:

Overall, the research points to a need for language learners' broader engagement in local communicative practices, for mindfulness of their situation as peripheral participants, and for more nuanced awareness of language itself. This article offers a rationale, based on the current state of the art in research, for including the expertise of language educators in the choice and design of study abroad programs. Students will benefit from programs specifically designed to foster language learning through observation, participation, and reflection. (Kinginger 58)

Especially relevant today, in the light of Betsy DeVos's serving as education secretary, Ong seemed to predict in 2006 that

[w]e need to rethink the political logic of American education as an ongoing struggle for democracy in "a genuinely heterogeneous space" that is at once national and global. Our universities cannot be party to the production of global professional elites who are animated only by a calculative, economic spirit. The professional degrees for foreigners and Americans alike can be offered alongside lessons on democracy and human rights. Experts in particular would benefit from a view of a shared globalized future that requires conversations, connectivity, and reciprocity across fields, class, and nations. (156)

Here he offers a way to balance the national with the global that resists the unrelenting logic of the market by organizing in collectivity around the common good.

Are we fighting for the soul of study abroad? In our current context, where we have elected a president who would eliminate Spanish from the official White House Web site and declare a new era of American nationalism (build a wall, ban Muslims, detain refugees), now more than ever language professors must protect the sliver of study abroad that is about the transformative experience of linguistic and cultural immersion, of becoming another as a foundational knowledge about what it means to be human and in solidarity with humanity. Somewhat ironically, and always aware of the precariousness of the project, we must defend the national, cultural, and historical in the face of the glossy standardized global.

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Notes

1. Robert C. Spires featured this phrase in a presentation he gave at the Luis Goytisolo Foundation in the early 1990s.
2. “Most importantly, in its most basic and generic form, neoliberalism implies freedom from responsibility; especially, it implies freedom from responsibility to any kind of alterity, in favor of responsibility only to one’s self. Logically, carried out as a principle, the result would be a kind of pure self-identity, free of relation to others. This might already sound like a possible vision of both freedom and autonomy, but as a model for either community, or for individual identity, it is at very least strange; what would it mean to have a self that finds identity without relation to any other?” (Looser 99).
3. Some changes to study abroad are made with the intention to attract a more diverse pool of students, which dovetails with the goals of foreign language departments (Hart).

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