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DOCUMENTING THE AMERICAN STUDENT ABROAD

DOCUMENTING
THE AMERICAN
STUDENT
ABROAD

The Media Cultures
of International Education

KELLY HANKIN



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To Simon Barker, travel guide extraordinaire

THE STUDY ABROAD GAZE

Attentive to these specificities, *Documenting the American Student Abroad* contributes to an exploration of the tourist gaze by focusing on its relationship to one kind of conceptual, virtual, and corporeal traveler: the American study abroad student. This is a category of traveler that comprises a small but symbolically significant number of Americans who travel across the globe annually. According to Ross Lewin, “More than half of all high school seniors express a strong desire to study abroad in college.”⁷⁰ According to the *Open Doors® Report on International Educational Exchange*, one in ten undergraduates in the United States will study abroad in some capacity. In the 2017–2018 academic year, 341,751 American students studied abroad for credit, with an additional 38,401 students traveling abroad for noncredit work, internships, or volunteer projects. The majority of these students identify as white, with only 30 percent identifying as minorities.⁷¹ These students study abroad through international education vendors, through home institutions in “island programs,” or via direct enrollment in universities across the globe. Abroad, they live in dorms, homestays, apartments, and university enclaves for international students. In addition to academics, American students go on group

tours, perform community service, and volunteer; they make friends with locals, isolate with fellow Americans, or mix with international students; they travel through Europe on weekends via trains, buses, and ridesharing; they party, have sex, and form relationships; they eat local cuisine or stick to recognizably global foods; and, unlike their pre-digital era predecessors, they stay in close contact with family and friends through social media and consume familiar popular culture through transnational media flows.

As with leisure tourists, the interconnection of travel and its representations shapes the lens through which these students and their advocates view their travels. But the study abroad gaze is additionally shaped by the discourses of study abroad and international education, which are circumscribed by a distinct set of beliefs. The first is that study abroad is a form of travel distinct from mere tourism. This distinction is not isolated to study abroad; the supposed differences between “the tourist” and “the traveler” have long been the subject of great scrutiny in the humanities, social sciences, and travel writing. In his much-cited introduction to *The Norton Book of Travel*, Paul Fussell derides the tourist as someone who “learn[s] exchange rates and where to go in Paris for the best hamburgers.” In contrast, he glorifies the traveler as someone who in “sens[ing] a world different from their own . . . realize[s] their provincialism and recognize[s] their ignorance.”⁷² As Ellen Strain points out, this is a specious distinction that exposes its own class elitism: the traveler is often posited as someone who “seeks and knows how to recognize authenticity,” whereas the tourist is regarded as someone who “gladly or unknowingly accepts Disneyland’s versions of the world’s wonders.”⁷³ This stereotype of the tourist is well entrenched in popular culture; representations of obnoxious and unworldly tourists are ubiquitous. Indeed, contempt for the figure of the tourist is so well ingrained that, as Sarika Chandra notes, “even tourists themselves do not like to identify themselves as belonging to this group.” Thus, the tourism industry is constantly trying to “resuscitate itself by appearing to be travel,” marketing itself through the ideas of “newness, adventure, [and] the exotic” that have long typified the more exclusive definitions of the traveler.⁷⁴

Even as scholars such as these point to the hollowness of the distinction between tourists and travelers, what Ellen Strain calls the “travel mythos” of anti-tourism remains central to the ethos of study abroad.⁷⁵ Whereas the connotations of leisure travel often revolve around some combination of personal and communal gratification (e.g., family vacations, bachelorette parties), consumption (e.g., of nature, of culture), and surface engagement with the host culture (e.g., cruise ship travel, group tours), travel for study abroad

is exalted by its stakeholders as nothing short of globally and personally transformative. Study abroad rhetoric is riddled with claims about the ability of immersive engagement in a foreign country to foster meaningful intercultural communication and understanding, a sense of global competence and citizenry, and transformative personal experiences. Study abroad is something greater, the rhetoric boldly proclaims, than a touristic endeavor.

As many critical perspectives on study abroad reveal, such claims are largely unsubstantiated. Numerous scholars point out that the data that supports such beliefs is woefully inadequate, the terminology on which these beliefs rest vaguely defined, the pathway for students to achieve these transformations, as well as their desire to do so, unclear, and the messaging about these values counterproductive.⁷⁶ Moreover, despite the value of many of the goals of study abroad, such as intercultural understanding and personal transformation, others, such as global competence and citizenship, remain ill defined at best and troubled by foreign policy agendas and the maintenance of global inequality at worst.⁷⁷ Colin Wright and David Jefferess remind us that, while global citizenship is an “empty gesture,” a meaningless category with no political or legal backing that would enable full “participation and inclusion, rights and responsibilities” in global arenas, global citizenship educational practices and discourses often suggest otherwise, encouraging students to claim these privileges as their moral obligation.⁷⁸ Indeed, Nigel Dower writes that the concept of global citizenship is “premised on the belief that agents have global responsibilities to help make a better world and that they are part of large-scale networks of concern.”⁷⁹ Unfortunately, as Talya Zemach-Bersin argues, this sense of responsibility to the world has often manifested through neocolonialist worldviews and practices. Her trenchant critique of global citizenship discourses in study abroad shows how this identity “is often imagined and described in explicitly nationalist terms,” which “draw from and perpetuate, rather than challenge or critique, fantasies of U.S. supremacy, entitlement, and global expansion.” This translates, she argues, into American students assuming it is their natural right and obligation to traverse, consume, and better the world.⁸⁰ Yet, despite these and many other critiques of what Walter Grünzweig and Nana Rinehart call the field’s “unquestioned dogmas,” these beliefs continue to remain some of its “most trusted assumptions.”⁸¹ In one variation or another, and with different connotations, unsubstantiated promises of global citizenship, global competence, personal transformation, and intercultural skills work their way into the mission statements and marketing strategies of most university study abroad programs, international education organizations, and study abroad vendors, as well as into the promotional material

about international education produced by the U.S. Departments of State and Education.

The point here in drawing attention to the pervasiveness of these goals in study abroad rhetoric is not to reject the potential value of study abroad as a fertile space for personal and intercultural transformation. Though I neither believe it is a *sine qua non* for a successful college education nor a magic bullet for world peace, like many who regularly advise students to study abroad, I believe that under the right conditions and at the right time study abroad has the potential to transform parochial perspectives into progressive and empathetic worldviews, as well as the capacity to help students learn how to, in the parlance of the day, “adult.” Nor is my critique of study abroad rhetoric intended to negate the possibility of educational practices that work toward dismantling uncritical notions of global identity. Rather, my focus on study abroad rhetoric is to point to the fact that the study abroad travel experience is already framed and predetermined for American students before they ever leave the country—indeed, even if they never leave the country at all. Given the established relationship between visual culture and travel detailed in the first part of this introduction, it should come as no surprise that media is central to this framing. Sarah C. Bishop and Zemach-Bersin each point to this in separate essays on study abroad advertising. Bishop argues that the online rhetoric used in study abroad websites and blogs plays a central role in framing students’ expectations of their time abroad, in directing how they understand themselves in relation to the host culture, and in shaping how they publicly reflect on their study abroad experiences. She argues that while students have real and valid study abroad experiences, their “experience is anticipated, situated, and mediated in a way that is too often ignored.”⁸² Likewise, Zemach-Bersin maintains that by the time students choose their study abroad destination, “they have both unconsciously and consciously been absorbing the images and rhetoric of international education and advertisements for years.”⁸³ Collectively, their research shows how the study abroad experience can be shaped by a jumble of ideologically competing visual and verbal rhetoric, where promises of global citizenship and authentic immersion sit alongside images of touristic fun, uncritical mobility, and a culturally homogenous and passive world available for American consumption. Both call on the field to develop a more critical visual language for advertising and to recognize, in the words of Bishop, that “the rhetoric surrounding the study abroad experience should not be conceived as existing outside of or around the traveling experience, but rather within it, as part of the experience itself.”⁸⁴ These scholars’ claims are, of course, another way of highlighting the intrinsic relationship of media to travel.

ITINERARY AND METHOD OF TRANSPORTATION

With a broader scope and set of questions, as well as a different conceptual foundation and methodological approach, *Documenting the American Student Abroad* considerably expands this conversation about the mediation of study abroad. Specifically, the book examines the ways in which key practices, values, and concerns of study abroad are officially and unofficially engaged in the numerous practices of useful media. These include the online promotion and presence of study abroad (chapter 1), the development of “intercultural” skills (chapter 2), the highly vaunted foreign “homestay” experience (chapter 3), diversity in study abroad (chapter 4), calls for “global citizenship” (chapter 5), and safety and risk abroad (chapter 6). Though these are by no means the only goals or values of the study abroad field, they are representative of some of its most topical, hence their inclusion in this book. By looking at how useful media in a variety of documentary modes speaks to and frames these goals and concerns, *Documenting the American Student Abroad* reveals how media plays a central role in shaping the field of study abroad itself. This is particularly important to parse because the media culture of study abroad often belies—intentionally in some places and inadvertently in others—the very rhetoric and goals it seeks to promote and support. In doing so, it demonstrates how the institutional goals for and messaging of useful media may become incoherent, diluted, and transformed when practiced by multiple stakeholders. While this diversity of messaging has the capability of opening up new visions for study abroad, as the media culture of study abroad reveals, there is no guarantee these visions and avenues will serve the institutions whose flag they wave.

The first two chapters of the book focus on the consequences of the industry’s use of specific documentary modes to market its products and values. In chapter 1, “The Personal Is Professional: First-Person Travelogues and the Study Abroad Video Contest,” I focus on the now ubiquitous “study abroad video contest” and online film festival. From for-profit organizations and university study abroad centers to national professional organizations, numerous study abroad stakeholders promote video contests in which student travelers can submit their study abroad-themed videos online, win awards, and showcase their work through officially sponsored websites. Through the free labor of affectively driven student volunteers, these contests offer organizations ready-made forms of useful media, presenting prospective student travelers with industry-approved visions of what it means to study abroad. This chapter takes an in-depth look at these industry-backed visions of study abroad.

Through an analysis of their contest rhetoric, submission rules, and winning videos, the chapter demonstrates how, as a result of the study abroad industry's lack of and inattention to media literacy, student filmmakers and the industry unwittingly collaborate in the production of a study abroad gaze that belies institutional rhetoric, inveterate beliefs, and aspirational goals. In particular, the chapter argues that the industry's endorsement of hoary first-person travelogue techniques invites students to advance notions of the world as culturally homogenous, easily traversable, and available for personal consumption, adventure, and fulfillment—the *opposite* of the kind of global worldview it hopes to cultivate. The award-worthy study abroad video thus undermines the merit and legitimacy of the very industry it hopes to serve. In doing so, the study abroad video contest demonstrates the dilemma of useful media that is deployed without an understanding of the representational terrain in which it traffics.

Chapter 2, “Intercultural Communication among ‘Intimate Strangers’: Reality Television and Documentary Study Abroad,” looks at how two educational documentaries about study abroad, *Crossing Borders* (2009) and *The Dialogue* (2013), draw on reality television rhetoric and beliefs to shape their vision of study abroad and intercultural excellence. In particular, *Crossing Borders* and *The Dialogue* model themselves on reality television's house-sharing, “intimate strangers” model, in which people from different backgrounds are placed together in close and pressure-inducing living quarters for a sustained period of time. As a result of their adoption of this common reality television framework, *Crossing Borders'* and *The Dialogue's* mediation of intercultural communication and conflict resolution is intertwined with the logic of reality television's mediation of these same practices, which are argumentative, highly emotional, and performative. This chapter examines the consequences of this entanglement, looking at what happens when reality television's models of intercultural communication migrate into more thoughtful intercultural arenas through the transnational flow of reality television formats, rhetoric, behavior, and expectations.

The middle section of the book includes two chapters on how students' mediated engagement with study abroad is often in conflict with official institutional discourses and practices. In chapter 3, “House Hunters International: Homestay Movies in the Digital Era,” I look at how three discourses—the study abroad rhetoric of the homestay experience, the conventional yet shifting vernacular of home movies, and representations of domestic space in home and real estate lifestyle television—intersect in what I call the study abroad “homestay movie.” Produced by both students and study abroad vendors,

homestay movies exist in great numbers on the internet and build on the amateur media tradition of documenting domestic rituals and experiences, but here with a focus on the host family home. This chapter demonstrates that, depending on which stakeholder is behind the camera—study abroad vendor or student traveler—homestay movies express dramatically different registers of home and family. Yet, despite their differences, both vendor and student homestay movies draw on similar appeals. In particular, even as foreign homestays are championed by study abroad stakeholders based on the belief that cultural immersion and its emphasis on separation from home culture and family will foster greater learning, visual representations of homestays paradoxically work to narrow the gap between homestay and home of origin. In spite of its camera trained on a foreign home, homestay movies are more about connecting students homeward than orienting students abroad.

Chapter 4, “Study Abroad’s Diversity Problem: Vlogs as Necessary Media,” addresses one of the field’s most pressing concerns—study abroad’s lack of diversity among student travelers. It is now well known that the typical study abroad student is white, middle class, female, and able-bodied. This has caused much hand-wringing in the field, spurring institutional initiatives to make study abroad more inclusive to minority, disabled, and poor students. Given that black and African American identified students are one of the least likely racial groups to study abroad—second only to American Indian or Alaskan Native students—efforts to increase this particular student population are central to these initiatives and conversations.⁸⁵ However, the slowness and inconsistency of institutional attention to student diversity mean that these efforts have not broadly infiltrated study abroad offices and informational sessions. Moreover, study abroad’s discursive framework around diversity, which defines minority students—particularly black students—in terms of their nonexistence and lack, has limited the ability of the field to change the profile of the typical study abroad student, who remains white both in number and in the cultural imaginary. In this chapter, then, I examine the specific ways in which students who identify as black and/or African American use vlogs to perform the identity of student travelers, thereby inserting themselves into a field that inadvertently negates their existence.

The final two chapters of the book focus on study abroad cautionary tales told through the docudramatic form. Unsurprisingly, these cautionary tales are produced neither by study abroad vendors nor by academic institutions, both of which have an economic interest in minimizing attention to risk, but by two dramatically different stakeholders in the institution of study abroad. Chapter 5, “Spy Kids: The Consequences of Global Citizenship in *Game of*

Pawns,” focuses on a twenty-eight-minute docudrama produced by the Counterintelligence Division of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National Counterintelligence and Security Center (ONCIX). *Game of Pawns* (Tom Feliu, 2014) tells the real-life story of Glenn Duffie Shriver, a young American man who, after studying and later living abroad in Shanghai, colluded with Chinese intelligence officers to spy against the United States. *Game of Pawns* dramatizes the story of Shriver’s recruitment by Chinese intelligence and ultimate capture by the FBI in 2010. Closely reading the film and its ancillary material, this chapter argues that this FBI cautionary tale reveals governmental anxiety around the relationship of student travelers to the concept of global citizenship. For study abroad advocates, global citizenship enables empathy, communication, and affinity across cultures. However, in the chary perspective of the FBI and its affiliates, global citizenship is an ideological fertilizer for divided loyalties and national betrayal. This chapter, then, reveals the tension in national discourses between the promotion of global educational exchange, on the one hand, and the globally minded philosophies, values, and practices that shape it, on the other. In doing so, *Game of Pawns* exposes the limits of the government’s support for educational practices that ask students to connect with other cultures outside of the framework of U.S. national interests.

The final chapter, “Study Abroad and the Female Traveler in the ‘Amanda Knoxudramas,’” offers an analysis of the risks of study abroad through the lens of gender. By all statistical measures, young women are the primary participants of study abroad, dramatically outnumbering men for the majority of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.⁸⁶ Therefore, the story of study abroad—including its representations—has often been about women and travel. In this chapter, I engage with this story via the highly publicized case of Amanda Knox, who was accused, convicted, and ultimately acquitted of the murder of British student Meredith Kercher while both were studying abroad in Italy. The chapter focuses on three docudramas about this tragedy, what I call the “Amanda Knoxudramas”: Lifetime’s movie-of-the-week *Amanda Knox: Murder on Trial in Italy* (Robert Dornheim, 2011), the television series *Guilt* (Freeform, 2016), and the feature film *The Face of an Angel* (Michael Winterbottom, 2014, UK). While this focus on mainstream media seemingly pivots the book’s general definition of study abroad media culture by including within its parameters analyses of commercial film and television, I do so because Knox is surely the most infamous study abroad student in America, if not the world.⁸⁷ As such, her story and her study abroad experience became of central concern not only to study abroad institutions but also to a wider

group of stakeholders, including anxious parents, outraged global media, and international parties involved in the case and its outcome. Thus, while the Knoxudramas under discussion in this chapter were produced as commercial entertainment, I suggest the context of and catalyst for their production were imagined national and global communities concerned about the risks of studying abroad, particularly for young women. Of specific concern in this chapter is what both the “headline” docudramatic form and female travelogue tropes bring to the fore regarding the experiences of young, sexually adventurous women studying abroad. A reading of the Knoxudramas through these lenses demonstrates that, even when stripped of the framework of murder and criminality, women abroad are regarded as both vulnerable to and agents of trouble. This is a long-standing cultural message for female travelers that, in the contexts of study abroad and the headline docudrama, becomes a cautionary tale not just to students and their parents but also to the institution of study abroad. This final chapter of *Documenting the American Student Abroad*, then, suggests that the useful media otherwise explored in this book does not exist in a vacuum, operating alongside and informed by the external forces that likewise work to shape it.

What should be clear from this chapter breakdown is the diversity of stakeholders involved in crafting representations of student global engagement. Given this diversity, it is no surprise that the meaning of global engagement varies dramatically across stakeholder media. As outlined above, each set of media reveals a distinct vision of who the globally engaged student is—from what they look like and what they look at to how they should (and should not) comport themselves in the global arena. Occasionally the distinct stories converge. But more often these visions are at cross-purposes, revealing a lack of consensus among stakeholders on the meaning of global engagement and its north star of citizenship-cum-competence. Instead, these ideals and practices are revealed to be constructed categories given ideological shape by numerous arbiters with different and sometimes competing agendas. Recognizing the contours of these various shapes and unpacking their agendas are the main goals of *Documenting the American Student Abroad*.