

#WE STAND WITH MIZZOU

Policy and democratic action in study abroad

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ABSTRACT

While debates about internationalisation of higher education in the United States have traditionally been shaped by domestic political and economic interests (Hovey 2004; Reilly and Senders 2009), this article focuses on the peripheries of these domestically driven conversations, the terrains where study abroad takes place. We bring in voices of students whose publicly engaged work while abroad addresses critical sociopolitical issues from a transnational perspective. We use the concept of performative democracy (Matynia 2009) to frame these democratic interventions of students. Through speaking and acting in the public realm, they transcend individually and domestically oriented learning paths and engage with civic matters through a deterritorialised global imagination (Appadurai 1996; Gupta and Ferguson 1992). The students' work, we suggest, challenges the continued pervasiveness of the homeland perspective in internationalisation policies and asks for their more expansive geopolitical framing.

KEYWORDS

Central Europe, internationalisation, performative democracy, public realm, study abroad, transnationalism

On Polish Independence Day on November 11, 2015, we sat in a conference room of a downtown hotel in the Polish city of Wrocław with a cohort of students from Syracuse University, participants in a semester-long study abroad programme focused on politics of memory in East/Central Europe. From the second floor, we were looking down in disbelief at a crowd of thousands, participants of the March of the Patriots (*Marsz Patriotów*) organised annually by the extremist political movement called the National Rebirth of Poland. That year's march, weeks after national elections that put the conservative nationalists headed by Jarosław Kaczyński back into

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power, was organised under the heading, 'Against the Occupation by Brussels'. Participants carried banners with texts, such as: Stop the Islamization of Europe (*Stop Islamizacji Europy*), We Are Poles, So We Have Obligations to Poland (*Jesteśmy Polakami, Więc Mamy Obowiązki Polskie*), Death to the Enemies of the Fatherland (*Śmierć Wrogom Ojczyzny*), Sport, Health, Nationalism (*Sport, Zdrowie, Nacjonalizm*). The faces of the mostly young people, some of whom stopped to look up at us through the large glass panels that made up the hotel façade, seemed filled with hatred for an undefined Other. A few days later, the otherness morphed into an effigy of a Hassidic Jew bearing a flag of the European Union that was carried by a crowd and subsequently burned on the Market Square just one city block away.

Our students had spent the previous few months travelling and learning about the history and politics of East/Central Europe, visiting places of memory tied to the time of empires and their subsequent collapse, two World Wars, ethnic cleansings, the Holocaust and Soviet totalitarian rule. The day after watching the nationalist march, they published a post on our public web-based programme forum. In the black-and-white photograph, the students are shown sitting on the staircase holding signs with texts, such as: #WE STAND WITH MIZZOU, BLACK LIVES MATTER, INJUSTICE ANYWHERE IS A THREAT TO JUSTICE EVERYWHERE, #CONCERNED STUDENT 1950. Below was the following text:

We write to you from our dormitory in Wrocław, Poland. Today, November 11th, is Independence Day. While some might think this would be a call for celebration, we have effectively sequestered ourselves inside. Independence Day in Poland has recently become a holiday for torch-wielding 'patriots' touting slogans such as 'Poland only for Poles', 'Fuck Arabs', and 'Fuck refugees'. The annual 'March of the Patriots' has turned violent in larger cities such as Warsaw. While these events are recent phenomena, we can trace their historical roots to pogroms and genocide in the not-too-distant past. We watched somewhat helplessly as thousands of demonstrators marched through our street carrying flags of white power symbols, chanting 'Death to the enemies of the nation'.

So when we read about the recent events at the University of Missouri, including the terrorization of Black students through death threats, hate speech and physical acts of violence, we find that we must respond to calls of solidarity. There are only eight students in this program; we cannot stage a walkout or rally to much effect, and American anti-Blackness might fly over heads in Poland, a country so racially homogenous that only 0.1% of its population is people of color. What we can do is affirm our dedication as students and professors to critical education, abroad or at home. Among our group, there are no Black students, and this also



means something. While diversity alone will not remediate our institutions of education, accessibility is a key component of justice. Syracuse University, our home institution, also has a lot of work to do in the way of racial justice. We challenge our peers, professors, and administrators to change the culture of racism decried by so many students of color, and we support the struggles and demands of students protesting at Mizzou. (Message from Wrocław: Solidarity with Mizzou 2015)

In their public post, students on a study abroad programme in Europe were linking their immediate observations of rising nationalism and racism in Poland with anti-racism protests that had been rocking the University of Missouri campus since September that year (Seltzer 2018), tying geographically and historically distant events together in a critical public action.

In this article, we will draw on examples of such moments of deep reflection and critical public action of students taking part in international education programmes. We situate their voices within the existing research on study abroad and its place in the changing polycscape (Carney 2009) of higher education. Against the backdrop of important ongoing critiques of university policies and practices of internationalisation, the work of students illuminates the intellectually and civically transformative process of thinking, questioning and acting, in which they engage while studying abroad. Rather than passive recipients of internationalisation policies, this work positions them as important actors engaged in critical sensemaking and democratic action. Finding themselves under the conditions of temporary displacement from the tenets of the homeland perspective (Long 2013: 26), students experience the ways in which global processes impact people's lives in concrete locations away from home. In the process, they confront their own perspective as reflected back by the different ways in which people are experiencing the challenges of the world of global interconnectedness and its vulnerabilities (Eriksen 2014). In their intellectual output, we argue, students are 'performing democracy' through the 'process of learning', 'forming opinions' and 'reasoning' in the public sphere (Matynia 2009: 6), pushing for more intertwined and globally sensitive comprehension of the human situation.

Internationalisation policies and study abroad

Study abroad is a deeply rooted tradition of US liberal arts education whereby undergraduate students matriculated at colleges in the United States spend time internationally in tailor-designed and structured programmes of learning. Study abroad has traditionally been perceived as an

important element of undergraduate education, which allows students to gain international experience, intercultural competence and transnational awareness. Many US colleges and universities have built extensions of their campuses in foreign countries, or they run academic programmes through partnerships with established academic institutions abroad. ‘College campuses are’, according to a recent issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, ‘among the most globalized of American institutions, placing great value on the diversity of experience’. Not only do their students study abroad, but they also recruit international students to study on home campuses. ‘In a work world where crossing cultures and time zones is often the norm, graduates’ ability to communicate and collaborate with colleagues from different backgrounds isn’t just prized; it’s expected’ (Fischer 2021: 4).

In the post-pandemic era, US higher learning institutions articulate internationalisation as a key priority, according to a 2022 research report of the American Council on Education, which every five years maps progress of internationalisation on US campuses. Forty-three per cent of institutions studied for the report reference internationalisation explicitly in their mission statements (American Council on Education 2022: viii). Among the three most selected reasons for internationalisation are: ‘to prepare students for a global era (70 per cent); to diversify students, faculty and staff (64 per cent); and to attract prospective students (45 per cent)’ (American Council on Education 2022: viii). When asked about future prospects of internationalisation, following the period of the largely negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, colleges and universities communicated ‘a fairly optimistic view’ (American Council on Education 2022: 10–11). Moving forward, they anticipate that the three top priorities for internationalisation will be: (1) advancing internationalisation across campuses by recruiting international students (63 per cent); (2) study abroad programmes (51 per cent rise from the drop to 23 per cent during the pandemic); and (3) internationalisation of curriculum and/or co-curriculum (27 per cent) (American Council on Education 2022: 10–11).

This recent data shows the centrality of study abroad in internationalisation for US higher learning institutions. In confirming this importance of study abroad, the recent issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* points to important challenges faced by the sector. These include low levels of student diversity in study abroad with disproportionate over-representation of white female students; its mono-geographic destination focus on Western Europe; the impact of unfettered travel on global climate; and heightened risks of study abroad programming due to global conflicts and international health crises (Fischer 2021: 19–27). These challenges, further magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic, heightened awareness of the risk vs. benefits of the



study abroad model. The article concludes with a call for study abroad to place emphasis on academic programme content: ‘Going forward, the focus could shift from where students go to what they learn in an international-education experience’ (Fischer 2021: 19).

These conclusions are congruent with other existing research devoted to study abroad, which often takes a critical approach to the academic value of internationalisation of US education (Blair 2011; Hovey 2004; Long 2013; Woolf 2011; Zemach-Bersin 2009). Rebecca Hovey, for example, argues that global education policy has been essentially ineffective ‘in producing students with adequate knowledge about the world outside its borders’ due largely to the fact that it has been shaped by the United States’ security interests, which have dominated the rationale and the funding of the internationalisation for higher education (2004: 244–245). Theodore Long points out that despite the significant expansion of study abroad in recent years ‘as a substantial enterprise’, and the rhetoric of its transformative appeal, in reality and on close examination, it falls short in terms of its educational value (2013: 25). Michael Woolf takes on the abuse of the terminology of ‘global citizenship’ in the study abroad literature and marketing, arguing that it is misleading and reflects the commodification and commercialisation of the study abroad experience that takes agency away from the students, placing them in the position of a passive consumer of a pre-prepared experience (2011: 55). His work inscribes itself in the critical scholarship regarding the economically driven logic of international education policy. In the push to internationalise curricula through international education and study abroad initiatives, universities have settled too often on increasing numbers and reducing costs rather than building the qualities and ethical values important to higher education through content and intellectually and pedagogically sound programming (Lewin 2009; Tarrant et al. 2014). This ingrained approach has also resulted in universities in essence outsourcing international education to third-party providers ‘at the expense of academic integrity’ (Lewin 2009: xiv).

Scholars emphasise that sending students abroad to learn in foreign countries is simply not enough to foster cosmopolitan attitudes and skills (Hovland et al. 2009; Lewin 2009; Long 2013; Streitwieser and Light 2010; Tarrant et al. 2014; Woolf 2011; Zemach-Bersin 2009). While many existing programmes aspire to engage American students in the life of communities abroad, students remain (usually privileged) outsiders and ‘strangers in a strange land’. In a recent critical study of short-term faculty-led study abroad programmes, anthropologist Gareth Barkin describes students’ experiences abroad as ‘commercially inflected encounters’, which, he says ‘are made possible, and even normative, by the binary discourse of study abroad

in the United States, which privileges and celebrates “going” above all else, trampling any equitable consideration of pedagogical practice, goals and outcomes’ (2018: 16). Barkin and other authors (Landon et al. 2017) argue against the ‘contact hypothesis’ (La Brack and Bathurst 2012) whereby intercultural competencies are imagined to be gained automatically by leaving US airspace.

In positing their critiques, these scholars often point to the untapped potential of international education in general, and study abroad in particular, to nurture unique intellectual and civic capacities of students. Doug Reilly and Stefan Senders, for example, argue for a re-imagining of study abroad and ‘its place in international geopolitics’ (2009: 247). They point out that the world faces an existential crisis that threatens the future of life on the planet, and global education programmes should help address this global crisis directly in critical and deliberate ways, tackling the environmental crisis, economic injustices and disparities, and issues tied to ‘propaganda, identity management, border definition and control, racism and religious fundamentalism’ (Reilly and Senders 2009: 246–249). Long proposes a new framework of global studies as:

the foundation stone for reconstructing international education in a way that reaches beyond the limitations of study abroad to provide a compelling programme of study for a globalized world. By adopting it ... international educators will establish an intellectual and philosophical standpoint of their own that transcends the homeland perspective and can provide academic guidance for student experience overseas, but also at their home institutions. (Long 2013: 35).

Stephen Carney (2009) proposes ‘policyscapes’ as a framework for understanding educational policy under globalisation. He is inspired by Arjun Appadurai (1996) who argued that the world of globalisation is that of fluidity and increasing interconnectedness. Appadurai identified five dimensions of what he refers to as global cultural flows – ethnoscapescapes, technoscapescapes, mediascapescapes, financescapescapes and ideascapescapes. Carney’s term ‘policyscapescapes’ draws on one of these dimensions of globalisation – ideascapescapes. According to Appadurai, this term refers to the assemblages of images embodied in master terms tied to state politics and ideologies (e.g., democracy, sovereignty, liberalism, human rights), which become translated and take on new forms as they travel and become re-envisioned in different localities across the globe. In the context of educational policy, Carney proposes that we think of policyscapescapes as ‘essentially transnational in character ... globalized messages projected across educational spaces and translated in ways that resonate in particular contexts’ (Carney 2009). We see internationalisation



as one such educational ‘policyscape’, which originates in the home country and becomes ‘enacted’ or ‘figured’ by educational actors (students, teachers, local interlocutors) in international settings (Wright et al. 2020).

In this article, we consider different forms of student public engagement in the context of an established study abroad programme in East/Central Europe. We conceptualise their intellectual interventions as acts of performative democracy – a term developed by Elżbieta Matynia (2009) to capture the close link between speech and action in the shaping of the democratic public realm. Born from her observations on opposition movements in Communist Poland, Matynia uses ‘performative’ to connote a form of discursive action in the public realm when people silenced by authoritarianisms through mechanisms of fear use their voice and agency by speaking in the presence of others. This, she argues, generates a democratic public realm in which people speak as citizens, cracking totalitarian silence. In this regard, it is important to underscore that ‘performativity’ here is not used in the conventional understanding of the terms as referring to an instrumental action for show. Performativity, according to Matynia, is the opposite – it is about being present and speaking the truth to power in the public realm. Inspired by the political thinker and philosopher Hannah Arendt, Matynia’s performative democracy is predicated on a close link between speech and action (Matynia 2009: 7). Democracy is performed through individuals speaking in public – in fact, democracy is predicated on words and ideas transcending the private realm and emerging as public actions. ‘[The] conditions for performativity first occur when the long unused, action-oriented word transcends the private realm, when it comes out from hiding, squeezing itself out through the cracks into the open. And when it is first heard, it instigates the emergence of an undeniably *public* realm’ (Matynia 2009: 7). Performative democracy, she writes, ‘represents a kind of political engagement – critical for any democracy – in which the key identity of its actors is that of citizens, and in which the good of society at large, and not that of a narrow interest group, is at stake’ (Matynia 2009: 6). In what follows, we share examples of students’ public engagement through discursive interventions in the digital spaces, in which they apply transnational perspective to the understanding of issues critical to democratic futures. We hope to show how study abroad programmes can become spaces for democratic and critical reflection, far different than those envisioned by shapers of universities’ internationalisation policies (Shore and Wright 2011: 21).

Urban Labs

The Programme

We draw on the work that students published on Urban Labs Central Europe.¹ We created this publicly accessible internet platform for the semester-long Syracuse University study abroad programme, which we established and have led since 2014. Student publications on the website are integrated with the learning curricula and constitute a part of course assignments and assessment. The layout of the website was proposed by us as teachers in collaboration with a professional web designer, but its content is fully student-led. As a concept, the Urban Labs Central Europe builds on a participatory pedagogical approach whereby students translate their learning experience into written and visual work that becomes part of a polyvocal open access archive of student contributions. The flexibility of contributions made possible by the format of the Urban Labs Central Europe forum opens the way for individual and collaborative creative projects and reflects the fluid, transnational possibilities, which emerge from the entangled memories, silences and forgettings uncovered in the process of learning from the spaces and histories of Central Europe. The transnational curriculum is designed around participatory and ethnographic pedagogical encounters in different national and urban contexts, at the nexus of material culture in urban spaces, history and current affairs. Like in most study abroad programmes, especially those from the United States to Europe, the students come with different sets of expectations. Probably a majority is drawn to a multi-sited programme that takes place in Central Europe's historical cities carved in stone, with castles and ornate buildings designed in the times of European empires. Other students choose to participate in the programme because it is marketed as an academically rigorous experience embedded in participatory civic learning. Thus, it attracts majors in citizenship and public affairs, gender and LGBT studies or anthropology. Regardless of their differences, it is safe to say that in general, US-based students arrive in East/Central Europe with a rather ahistorical understanding of the world and are thus challenged to contextualise present-day social and political dilemmas in their global and historical dimensions.

In their contributions for Urban Labs Central Europe, students draw on observations from travels, interviews, site visits, observations and exchanges with academic experts, officials, practitioners and regular inhabitants of cities and towns mainly in Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Germany, Lithuania, Hungary and Austria. The website is a globally available digital forum of student voices – a composite of critical speech acts that constitute interventions in the public realm.



Children of the Diaspora

As I pieced my own experiences with the Turkish one, I felt a sense of relief in the lines that I drew between them. The thought that the same questions I've been asking myself my whole life are also being asked thousands of kilometers away made me feel attached to them. (Valbuena 2018)

Hanz Valbuena was an international Syracuse University student in the 2018 edition of the programme. Born in the Philippines, Hanz has lived most of his life with his migrant family in Dubai. Below are excerpts from his photo essay published on Urban Labs Central Europe's website, in which he draws on the experiential and intellectual encounters during the Vienna portion of the programme, a part of which involved an exploration of a predominantly Turkish migrant neighbourhood we visited:

[It's] hard when the land you've lived in your whole life, or maybe even born in, rejects you. This is the story I lived in as a Filipino in Dubai. From my experiences, we are seen as inferior and are forced down to the bottom of the society. Pushed in the corners of the city, I found a new Filipino-Dubai identity forming. An identity with stories of exclusion from both Dubai and the Philippines. We know them personally, institutionally, and quietly. That's why I was astounded to hear that same story from our tour guide in Vienna as we walked through a neighbourhood in the city predominantly inhabited by the Turkish community. To learn about this vacuum in identity within the Austro-Turkish community brought a chill that I was far too familiar with. It was fascinating how extremely similar our stories were – a story of a community of people in a country that rejects them. As we trekked through Vienna, I couldn't help myself thinking about how the Turkish community and I formed our identities in such a similar way. It made me feel a little closer to them – finding a piece of myself in a continent I've never been in.

In this opening paragraph, Hanz situates himself in a space that is linking four national contexts – his experiences of discrimination as a Filipino migrant growing up stateless in Dubai and what he learned about the situation of the Turkish migrants in Vienna. It was the studying of the situation of the Turkish community in Vienna while on a study abroad programme that gave him an opportunity to examine his own experience. He goes on to critically examine the concept of state citizenship and how it impacts transnational peoples:

In the UAE, expats are not given citizenship at all. Even if you've been there for generations, your family's passports are still from your home



country. Many young Filipinos have never been to the Philippines, barely speak Filipino, and can hardly identify with 'Filipinos in the motherland'. Yet they are not Arab. Neither can they speak English or Arabic fluently nor fully identify with UAE culture. We belong in this strange space in identity that is hard to define purely based on citizenship. ... Much like the Austro-Turkish, our sense of national identity is beyond our citizenship. The soil that we grew up in is as much a part of us as the passports that we hold. As I pieced my own experiences with the Turkish one, I felt a sense of relief in the lines that I drew between them. The thought that the same questions I've been asking myself my whole life are also being asked thousands of kilometers away made me feel attached to them. It was as if we were children of some confusion, some commotion, and here we are, brothers and sisters beyond oceans.

Hanz's reflection speaks to the limits of traditional citizenship categories for the growing number of transnational youth. In a world of mass migrations, their experience is not unique. As shown by anthropologists studying the experiences of transnational youth, their positioning can be a source of unique critical consciousness and civic and political awareness (Dyrness and Abu El-Haj 2020; Heidbrink 2020). Hanz also comments on the role of electronic media in producing multifaceted migrant identity and ties in a deterritorialised global ecumene:

Our tour guide talked briefly about how the Austro-Turkish maintain their national identities through the media. The media has this power to make huge distances feel frighteningly close, and to create a sense of identity between people who are countries apart. This power is so new. No longer do people feel so isolated in other countries when they can switch the TV on and watch the news from their hometown hundreds of kilometers away. This is the case with the Austro-Turkish. ... [And this] is what I've seen with Filipinos in Dubai. ... Both positive and negative, the power of the media ultimately helps build collective identities through common associations. Dispersed communities use it to still be a part of the national discourse that they are physically distanced from. And these conversations that they are a part of – whether it be on Facebook, Twitter, or the comments section of BuzzFeed – are building blocks for political and national identities. I find this incredibly important because this form of mass communication is brand new in history. Diasporas, isolation, and irregular identities are nothing new. But this unregulated creation of transnational identities across borders – that's new territory.

Hanz's reflections speak of the diasporic experience linked to the deep reorganisation of space under late modernity, which Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson refer to as the condition of deterritorialisation: 'In the pulverized



space of postmodernity, space ... has been *reterritorialized* in a way that does not conform to the experience of space that characterized the era of high modernity. It is this that forces us to reconceptualize fundamentally the politics of community, solidarity, identity, and cultural difference' (Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 9).

In his conclusion, Hanz speaks of the importance of the study abroad experience that stimulated his deep reflection on citizenship, identity and belonging:

I want to highlight how spiritually relieving it was to hear that I was not the only one who has never felt at home. Before I went on that tour, I found it hard to see real experiences in my readings. It was easy to find myself too immersed in academic ponderings about minorities, to be too deep into readings to consider that they concerned the lives of real people. This helped me ground myself, and how grateful I am that it did. This family-like connection that I feel towards children of the diaspora is significant. May it be the Austro-Turks, or the Asgardians from Thor, or my international friends back in Syracuse University who are also part of a great displacement – there is something that brings us all together. Maybe it's the sense of not having a true home, or maybe it's the sense of having many.

The exploration of the liminal spaces of the urban borderlands of contemporary Vienna created a setting for Hanz to confront his own experiences as a member of a minority migrant group in Dubai. The encounter with the marginalised Turkish migrant community in Vienna, contextualised historically through lectures and readings on the topic during the programme, inspired a personal reflection on the migrant experience and the displacement of transnational communities. Important is the affective dimension of the transnational connections Hanz is making beyond his individual self and his self-contained community. His critical reflection, which brings together geopolitically distant worlds and communities, is imbued with affective long-distance solidarity with a community of others with similarly difficult experiences of living in exile under nationally exclusive legislative regimes and practices.

Memorialisation through Romafuturism

Similar to Black Americans, Roma have experienced the history of slavery, restricted mobility, and segregation, and they face similar contemporary issues, such as unequal access to education and racial profiling. Tayla Myree was an African American student from Syracuse University who also

participated in the 2018 edition of the programme. In her essay for Urban Labs Central Europe, she describes a defining moment in study abroad, which gave direction to her research during and after the programme. She describes her visit to the recently established Romafuturism Library in Dittrichova Street in Prague. The small space doubled as a library and cultural centre. Prominent on sparsely populated bookshelves were Czech titles of seminal works by writers of the African American Civil Rights and Liberation Movement in the United States. Tayla did not need to understand Czech to recognise these works. Very quickly, through translated interchanges with the Romani activist hosting the group, the importance of the connections between these human rights movements on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean became apparent:

‘We need a Malcolm X’, said Ladislava Gaziova, a Romani activist and one of the founders of Prague’s Romafuturism Library. She went on to describe the many acts of discrimination that the Romani people have had to face such as unequal access to education, unemployment, housing discrimination, colourism, and many other issues. Due to the plight of the Roma, they have suffered significantly from the times of the Hapsburg Empire, the Holocaust, and now under the illiberal democracies of Central Europe. As a result of their marginalisation, many Romani live in poverty and are excluded from society. ... Due to this lack of memorialisation from European societies, it is important for Romani communities to create their own spaces of identity and political action, which is why Prague’s Romafuturism library is extremely important. The library is a space where Romani people can reimagine their futures and tell their own stories from the past through mediums such as literature, music, and art. The Romafuturism library is heavily influenced by Afrofuturism, a practice in which Black Americans re-envision their history within the African diaspora through science fiction, historical fiction and magical realism. According to Ladislava Gaziova, many Roma identify with the lived experience of Black Americans due to the discrimination that they [Black Americans] have faced within the United States. Similar to Black Americans, Roma have experienced the history of slavery, restricted mobility, segregation, and face similar contemporary issues such as unequal access to education and racial profiling. Gaziova believes that Roma must go through a civil rights movement of their own and need a fearless leader like Malcolm X so that they can have equal rights throughout Europe. She explained that the Romani community is not very politically active, and she hopes to encourage more to participate in political action.

...

The library contains works by both Romani and Black American authors such as *By the Way* by Tom Oddley and *Black Panther* by Emory Douglas. The library also holds different events and discussions, including a lecture



series on the Afro-American struggle for equality. ... The reclamation of Roma identity through Romafuturism along with inspiration from Black history and Black struggle is a part of a larger movement of marginalised minorities around the world reclaiming their identities in creative ways that is strong and unstoppable.

In her critical essay regarding the racial discrimination of the Roma minority in East/Central Europe, and the silencing of their history in official state narratives and the public sphere, Tayla draws on her first-hand experience from visiting the Romafuturism library in Prague during her time abroad. This vantage point allowed Tayla to perceive connections between the African American Civil Rights Movement and Roma activism. It is important to underscore the multidirectional nature of the intellectual currents that informed the encounter that took place in the library in Prague. This in-situ research illuminated how Romani activists were drawing inspiration from the Civil Rights Movement in their own struggles for recognition. As an activist, Tayla was able to discover for the first time parallels between the history of discrimination faced by her people in the United States with that of the Roma in East/Central Europe, an ethnic group of which she had little prior knowledge. The encounter allowed Tayla to place her own activism in a new, larger context. This circle of interactions – a feedback loop – reveals the potential of study abroad to forge solidarities – in this case between marginalised communities – across time and space. It is the kind of solidarity that Michael Rothberg refers to in his concept of implication in the era of the Anthropocene characterised by deep interdependency in the face of existential threat. He explores the kinds of solidarity that ‘forms “differentiated” or “long-distance” solidarity in order to capture the fact that they do not work via a logic of sameness, identification, or presumed proximity. Rather, the work of solidarity consists precisely in holding together that which is not expected or intended to cohere’ (Rothberg 2020: 16).

Poland's government preaches flawed history ... and so did I

Put simply, in an attempt to correct one flawed narrative, another, equally flawed one is often created. While the Polish government deliberately advances this flawed narrative for political gain, I unwittingly followed the same path. (Arneson 2021)

Connor Arneson, a history major from Grinnell College, studied abroad in Central Europe in 2021. At the start of the programme, students learned about ethnography as a way of learning about cultural and social realities



through direct observation and participation. They also read and discussed critical research which situated museums and other memory projects in Poland and Eastern Europe in larger political and historical contexts. Finally, they read and discussed articles on critical museum visiting experiences. In Gdansk, students visited the Museum of the Second World War. They were told to visit the exhibitions at their own pace, take ethnographic notes, deconstruct and reflect critically on the exhibit content in light of their experience, class readings and discussions. Connor's public essay entitled, 'Poland's government preaches flawed history ... and so did I', was inspired by the transformational experience in the museum. In this essay he centres changes the current conservative government introduced into the final section of the exhibit:

Upon entering the dimly lit chamber, my attention was immediately drawn to the animated film playing on my left. The visuals were sleek, and the score was engaging, but unlike other parts of the exhibition, this film reeked of government interference. In the short movie, titled 'The Unconquered', a gravelly-voiced narrator glorifies Poland's epic military struggle against the Nazis and Soviets, their abandonment by the West, and the country's heroic rebirth after decades of effort. According to this film, added by the Polish government in 2017, all Germans and Russians were evil, and, more problematically, every Pole was a resistance-fighting, Jew-saving, God-loving hero. By shamelessly indulging in nationalism, militarism and martyrdom, this film simultaneously advances the government's revisionist agenda and makes every mistake the rest of the museum tries to avoid. Further adding to the bitter taste this video leaves, it was shoehorned into the museum as a replacement for the much better original closing film, which was [undoubtedly] considered 'too international'. However, the aspect of the government's video that concerned me the most was how familiar it was. Not only had I seen the video before, I had made others exactly like it.

Connor joined the programme out of a deep interest in Polish history, with which he became fascinated at an early age. Some of this interest was driven by his Polish ancestry. In his high school history classes and textbooks, Poland's past could be found only in the margins. The effort to fill in the blanks on Poland's history led Connor, at the age of seventeen, to launch a YouTube channel in which he introduced viewers to different, often neglected chapters of world history. Connor's historical storytelling is illustrated with animated cartoon images and inflected with humour. His channel has gained a significant following. With eighty-two thousand subscribers, some of the videos have attracted more than half a million views. It was during his visit to the museum in Gdansk and his critical assessment



of the replacement of the final film in the context of the overall museum experience that Connor began questioning blind spots in his historical work:

[When] I stumbled across ‘The Unconquered’ on YouTube as a teenager, I consumed it uncritically and without question. How could I have possibly known that the video was politically motivated? The simple presence of this underrepresented history was enough to excite me. Partially building off this excitement, I started my own YouTube channel dedicated to bringing little-known history (such as Poland’s) into the mainstream. Three and a half years later, I feel conflicted. ... Oversimplified as it is, the agenda advanced in both ‘The Unconquered’ and my own videos is undoubtedly popular. I know this first-hand from the hundreds of Poles in my comment section thanking me for finally sharing their “true history” with the world. ... There are differences of course. In ‘The Unconquered’, bombastic music plays as patriotic iconography is paraded around the screen, while in my videos, copyright-free polka is heard as jokes are made about the infidelity of Poland’s allies. On the surface, the tones of my videos are [undoubtedly] lighter and the subject is treated much less seriously, but at their core, my videos push the same nationalistic narrative as the Polish government. For example, in my more than thirty minutes of content about Poland in WWII, the only time I mention non-ethnic Poles is when I point out that some of them welcomed the Soviets as liberators. Though my videos were not focused on the Holocaust (I couldn’t exactly make that funny), the only story I tell of that atrocity is that of Witold Pilecki, a Polish martyr who reported on Auschwitz before being executed by the Soviets. In my 13-minute video on the Warsaw Uprising, I quickly brush over the very-much-ongoing discussion of whether the uprising even needed to happen, preferring instead to focus on the heroic sacrifice of the hundreds of thousands of Poles who died fighting their oppressors. These are the exact same omissions and assumptions ‘The Unconquered’ makes. Am I being hard on myself? Absolutely. I was a teenager who had never had an official class on WWII beyond the high school level. I was not purposely manipulating the past to appeal to the largest voter base possible. Taken at face value, my videos are probably harmless, but under the surface, they are part of something much larger, because at the end of the day, I helped spread an oversimplified, unnuanced interpretation of history. And I did it 950,000 times.

Connor’s essay illustrates how the critical examination of history combined with ethnographic in-person encounters in the study abroad setting can guide students in a process of what Woolf has called ‘unlearning’ (2023). Woolf argues that while we normally think of education as a path from not knowing to knowing, in education abroad, the process is reversed. He writes: ‘We enter unfamiliar spaces with an idea of where we are going.

Technology offers substantial information to take on our journeys and some of it is true. And some of it is partly true. And some of it is false. Our examination questions demonstrate the importance of unlearning what we know. Going from knowledge to doubt' (Woolf 2023). In class sessions, which included lectures and readings by historians and social scientists from Poland and abroad, Connor and his fellow students were able to place the changes introduced to the museum's exhibition in the wider context of the effort by the Polish government to suppress national history and memory through its politically driven historical policy. These encounters prompted Connor to re-examine his own interpretations of 'The Unconquered', a film that had played a prominent role in shaping his own understanding of Polish history and sense of belonging in Poland since his teenage years. Through interpretive self-reflexivity in the context of writing for Urban Labs Central Europe, Connor exhibited how he was able to discern blind spots and omissions inherent to his early-stage historical work. In the process of moving from a state of 'knowledge to doubt' (Woolf 2023), Connor began to make room for and consider other players in Polish history – the minorities such as Ukrainians, Jews and even Germans, who had constituted a significant percentage of Poland's interwar population, individuals and groups who had previously been absent from Connor's field of vision.

Performing democracy in study abroad

[I] would like to emphasize that what I call performative democracy captures only one dimension of democracy and is not in itself 'qualified' to substitute for a well-functioning representative democracy with established mechanisms and procedures. Yet it brings out the richer texture of liberal democracy and makes it easier to see the prospects for democratic action in times of crisis. (Matynia 2009: 6)

Matynia's concept of performative democracy draws on the experience of former communist Poland, arguing that it was not through violent revolutions but the cumulative power of small daily actions of courage that the totalitarian regime was weakened and eventually overthrown. Democracy, she argues, is performed through individuals who break the silence of conformity by speaking in public. In fact, she says, democracy is predicated on words and ideas transcending the private realm and emerging as public actions. Importantly, she reminds us, such public participation through speech acts does not apply exclusively to non-democratic contexts, but also to those that we consider democratic. Performativity, she says, 'supplies



strategies to keep democracy vibrant and helps it to survive a season of democratic lent' (Matynia 2009: 9).

Ten years ago, our students who observed the nationalist violence of the Independence Day marches in the Polish city of Wroclaw, used the Urban Labs digital platform to make an discursive intervention in which they connected rising white nationalism in Poland with the violence of white supremacy in the United States: #WE STAND WITH MIZZOU, BLACK LIVES MATTER, INJUSTICE ANYWHERE IS A THREAT TO JUSTICE EVERYWHERE, #CONCERNED STUDENT 1950. Their voices, and those of their peers who have published their work on the platform, tackle critical sociopolitical issues from a transnational perspective imbued with personal critical reflection, offering a powerful insight into the possibilities of engagement in a transnational public sphere through study abroad. In their digital public posts, students critique rising nationalism, xenophobia and anti-immigrant politics in Poland, as well as racism on US campuses: they express long-distance solidarity with transnational communities across geopolitical spaces – including South Asia, the Middle East, Europe and the United States; they uncover patterns of discrimination in Europe enhancing their understanding of anti-Black racism in the United States; and they come to question previously held versions of history and identity and reimagine themselves and their relationships with others in the world (Reilly and Senders 2009: 251). Through their publications on digital platforms, we argue, these students transcend individually oriented learning paths and enter a transnational public realm. They perform democracy by speaking in public.

Debates about internationalisation of higher education (for which study abroad is a key element in the US context) take place far from the spaces in which students engage abroad. The conversations and university policies on internationalisation continue to be shaped by domestic political and economic interests (Hovey 2004; Reilly and Senders 2009). The students' work brought forth in this article transports us beyond the peripheries of these domestically driven conversations, to terrains where study abroad takes place. These examples challenge the continued pervasiveness of the homeland perspective in internationalisation policies and make obvious the need for their more expansive geopolitical framing that takes into account the deterritorialised, fluid and interconnected global situation.

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Notes

1. See www.urbanlabsce.eu.

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