

# Post-reciprocity: In Defense of the “Post” Perspective

**Martha Johnson**

*University of Minnesota*

In the ongoing dialogue surrounding the project and facilitation of education abroad, several recent articles and presentations have positioned the conversation in the context of Western colonial history and the behaviors of the colonial traveler. Quite appropriately, such discussions have sought to raise consciousness in regard to the danger of modeling the facilitation of programs abroad on the colonial and expatriate tradition. These conversations, while thoughtful, tend to expose an underlying nostalgia for a bygone golden age of study and travel abroad.

From this viewpoint, perceived manifestations of the “postmodern” study abroad experience are often referred to with thinly veiled contempt as rootless and cursory “contact zones,”<sup>1</sup> conducted in bars and tourist traps, and designed to provide a sanitized and too comfortable cultural experience. While the concern is understandable, these vilified places and the local circumstances that create them are some of the least-accessed teaching opportunities study abroad programs have historically utilized. In fact, the proper application of post-structural, postcolonial, and postmodern theory is remarkably apropos and useful in assisting a student to engage with the complexity of the world they experience when they study abroad. Postmodern theory and methodologies can assist with bringing into consciousness the inherent biases in our responses to the world around us, and help us redefine the ways that we organize and deliver study abroad programs.

Postmodernism, while originally an architectural term, was primarily developed by theorists such as Jaques Derrida, Michael Foucault, Julia Kristeva, and others who sought to react to the tradition of liberal humanism. Highlighting the arbitrary nature of meaning in language became a means by which to expose the power dynamics inherent in the language, history, literature, and meta-narrative of any dominant culture. Postmodernism embraces contradiction and ambiguity instead of looking for absolutes, and emphasizes the pervasive influence of hegemonic forces on culture.

Postmodernism reacted specifically to the Modernist movement that dominated Western art and culture during the majority of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Modernism, while also a reaction to historical discourse, attempted to seek essence, truth, and beauty through experimentation and

form. Modernist travelers and writers, the very colonials under discussion, idealized the promise of the authentic experience and romanticized the possibility that the enlightened traveler might find the “real” and be rewarded for their efforts. Popular writers such as Earnest Hemingway, E.M. Forrester, and Graham Greene wrote stories with characters experiencing people and places in “authentic” ways and attempted to react to the segregated experiences of the elite travelers who preceded them.

The postmodern movement popularized in the 1960’s and 70’s is often accused of seeking only to destroy or deny strongly held beliefs and traditions of Modernism while offering no center or value in return. While some extreme examples may support such a view, a more moderate interpretation would view postmodern theory and in particular post-structural methodology as a highly effective set of tools. A deconstruction of a situation, cultural representation, or experience allows a more thorough examination of the separate parts and the opportunity to question the context in a different way. Deconstruction of Western art and literature has been the basis of the work of intellectuals such Edward Said, Albert Memi, Jamaica Kincaid, Homi Bhabha, and in turn has been crucial as a means by which to question the inherent bias of dominant cultures by questioning the stories circulated within these cultures. Most of the contemporary postcolonial, gender, and queer theory is based in post-structural methodology and thought.

So what are the potential uses of these theoretical starting points for education abroad programs? It is important to consider that by the time a student goes abroad to any destination, they have internalized numerous stories of privileged heroes and adventurers, from Robinson Crusoe to Indiana Jones, to firmly establish a concept of unquestioned privilege for the Westerner, and particularly the white male, traveler. No student goes abroad without having developed a worldview informed by their own racial, class, religious, and local perspective as well as the influence of a lifetime of culturally biased stories, movies, books, and conversations. Tropes such as the heroic traveler and the friendly indigenous sidekick or servant are firmly lodged in the subconscious. The student’s place in the home culture will also impact their perspective and vary greatly dependent on their own identity, but the influence of this established lens and identity is fully formed and their role as traveler established.

Michael Vande Berg holds that the conversations a student has pre-departure will likely reinforce the idea that this is “their” experience to have and that transformation is the commodity implicitly agreed to be provided. To follow what Vande Berg’s suggests, perhaps there is a need to disrupt this

meta-narrative and to establish a new, less loaded, vocabulary for discussing the goals and strategies for the student going abroad. By deconstructing several widely used terms in the education abroad lexicon and some of the implications of their use, we may change the pervasive vocabulary in order to influence the behaviors and attitudes of the student, faculty, and administrators.

It is perhaps worth briefly reviewing, or deconstructing, the tradition in which education abroad is rooted. It is important to recognize how specific narratives are still propagated and circulated within U.S. culture. In her book *Imperial Eyes*, Mary Louise Pratt relates still predominant and pervasive notions of reciprocity to awkward attempts of 18th century African explorers such as Mungo Park to assuage guilt for the obvious place of privilege they accepted or demanded in interaction with locals. The term “reciprocity” suggests a mutually beneficial relationship, as Pratt points out, based on a capitalistic concept of exchange that assumes both sides are equals and an implicit goal is “to achieve equilibrium through exchange” (Pratt 80).

It is worth reconsidering the historical emphasis placed on the institutional exchange as the basis for most traditional study abroad programs and the ramifications for contemporary discussions. This essential equality is often not the case, particularly with First World/Third World partnerships. But the equality assumed by Western institutional partners denies an appropriate recognition of the underlying power dynamics involved. Reciprocal exchanges are still often idealized as the “purest” of arrangements and experiences. While this attitude reveals a bias towards integration, it perhaps also belies a level of guilt. This is not to imply that programs do not or should not have the needs of the partners and communities with whom they interact first and foremost in mind. They should. There is also great value in inter-institutional projects for which collaborative exchange agreements are often the foundation. However the traditional notions of reciprocity that are based on exchange of students for the equal duration or obsessively reliant on balanced numbers or concerned with delivering parallel experiences are unintentionally based on an outdated imperialistic notion and problematic logic.

Institutional needs should be assessed separately and agreements should openly recognize and attempt to address the relevant motivations for both sides. The U.S. student understands social realities and attends college in an era of hugely varied cost, financial need, and assistance. As capacity issues become ever more challenging, models for exchange that offer non-traditional options will need to be explored. U.S. institutions should seek opportunities to maximize local institutional support for short-term, research, or summer

programs in return for supporting semester, graduate, professional, or other students who are often most able and interested in studying in the U.S.

The terms “authentic” and “real” are perhaps the most widely abused terms in study abroad. Marketing materials and program guides abound with promises to provide the student an opportunity to experience the “real.” But perhaps more concerning is the lack of engagement with the complexity of such an idea within the study abroad profession. The terms “authentic” and “real” are unintentionally often used as synonyms for “indigenous,” “rural,” and “traditional.” However to use these terms interchangeably is highly problematic. To suggest the life of an urban native is any more or less “real” than that of a rural citizen of the same culture is condescending and can indicate a disturbingly colonial nostalgia for a cultural experience laden with pre-development realities. Attitudes that encourage students to seek experiences that associate lack of resources and infrastructure with “authenticity” are as shocking as any of the more obviously constructed postmodern spaces. But the postmodern theoretical base provides the opportunity to enter into a discussion with the student about their own expectations and cultural assumptions that have resulted in this constant desire to seek the “authentic.”

The economic realities involved in study abroad programs mean the ‘student as consumer attitude’ is unavoidable. Instead of denying these realities or endlessly wishing the student would approach study abroad with noble altruism, more can be done to require them to engage with the privilege they inherently have as study abroad students. In her essay “A Small Place,” Jamaica Kincaid asserts, “a tourist is an ugly thing.” While the students may attempt to distance themselves from the character of that other postmodern creation, the tourist, educators might do better to engage the understood stereotype of the tourist as an educative tool. Many study abroad offices and programs effectively employ representations of the “ugly American” to great effect for just this reason. Instead of allowing the student to identify with a romantic notion of hospitality based in entitlement that often leads to disappointment, there is a need to expose and examine the reality of the economic basis of their experience and the power dynamic implied. Academic credit or educational value does not absolve the traveler from many of the realities of the relationship with the local community.

An honest and critical dialogue can be particularly useful in locations where tourism, and increasingly study abroad, has created related local industries. Like it or not, the emergence of “happy hour” in Florence was created by tourist demand, not local custom or supply. However a deconstruction of the relationship between the student and the community that recognizes this relationship

as another manifestation of the global economy can at least deny the student the ability to ignore the implications of their behavior. The ways the postmodern student engages is different, and many “contact zones” viewed as too American or inauthentic (McDonald’s, Starbuck’s) are, in fact, the very meeting places the local youth cultures with which we want the student to engage.

In an increasingly globally mobile society, today’s study abroad is also different. The student interacts with other students and populations in more complex ways. A student’s own cultural context, generation, and population are diverse; as are the cultures with which they interact. Homogeneity is not the reality in any urban center, and universities and local communities across the world have much more diverse populations than they did a generation ago. In his essay “The Location of Culture,” Homi Bhabha points out:

The demography of the new internationalism is the history of postcolonial migration, the narratives of cultural and political diaspora...the poetics of exile...The very concepts of homogenous national culture, the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, or ‘organic’ ethnic communities-*as the grounds of cultural comparativism* [Bhabha’s emphasis]-are in a profound process of redefinition (936).

The increased Americanization of higher education globally is manifested in the increase of English-language based coursework and reorganization around the semester schedule. Instead of imposing ideas about employing Draconian measures to find the local, perhaps we need to recognize that hybrid and non-indigenous populations increasingly *are* the local. Changes to local universities therefore provide an ideal basis for considering the issues of cultural and linguistic imperialism.

“Integration” is prolifically stated as a programmatic value or goal. But whether used as a noun or a verb, the word relates more to a relation of parts or objects than to any process of contact or learning. A student taking public transportation is arguably successfully integrating physically. While the term and its implied strategies are useful for fostering cross-cultural contact, integration as a stand-alone value or goal is meaningless. The assumption that integrated programs are any more or less inherently successful in providing cross-cultural learning is flawed. Local institutions are increasingly savvy at creating structures that segregate international student populations (including U.S. students) from local students. Survey courses redundant for local students (“History of Australia”) are created and populated by visiting students, reinforcing this segregation.

Successful integration as end-goal denies the rich experience that difference provides. A program's goal should not be to have a student "pass" as a local, but rather to find opportunities for comparison and learning both for the student and the local community. A visiting student may learn to mimic the local experience in terms of learning styles and social mores, but they will and should retain their own cultural identity. As institutions abroad continue to identify institutional diversity as rationale for hosting visiting students, the visiting student should perhaps be better prepared to contribute to this diversity rather than simply "fit in."

As practitioners in the field of education abroad prepare for unprecedented growth paired with unprecedented scrutiny, there is a need to refine and re-appropriate the language and meta-narratives related to what we produce. Such changes take time and patience. We have seen gradual shifts in the lexicon already, such as the more inclusive "education abroad" rather than "study abroad." "Exchange" is no longer the overarching term for all programs. As we continue to strive to find meaningful strategies to facilitate student learning, it is important that we not impose through our language and meta-narrative our own biases or nostalgia for a time when travel was different. Experiences with no reflection or support may have worked for many in the past, but it is possible the same situation left others isolated or unable to process their experiences successfully.

The student who has grown up understanding that 'reality TV' is not 'real' is adept at grasping the complexities of the postmodern world. Cable television, Facebook, and YouTube have exposed them to sports, humor, food, and culture from China, Russia, South Africa, and everywhere in-between. Their physical engagement in the act of travel indicates a desire for something more experiential. It is time to embrace the world they inhabit and maximize its unique educative opportunities from a "pro-post" perspective.

## Note

<sup>1</sup>Contact zone is a term used by Mary Louis Pratt in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturalization*

## References

- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994.  
Kincaid, Jamaica. *A Small Place*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988.  
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