Swarthmore College
Department of Sociology and Anthropology

Collecting Cultures and (Re)Imagining Class:
Experiences of First Generation College Students Studying Abroad

Aaron Webster True
Senior Thesis
May 2017
Advised by: Dr. Joy Charlton
# Table of Contents

Abstract 2  
Acknowledgements 3  
Chapter 1 4  
Chapter 2: Vignettes of an International Education 24  
Chapter 3: Social class and education history abroad 47  
Chapter 4: American identity through study abroad 62  
Conclusion 78  
Appendix A 84  
Appendix B 85  
References 87
Abstract

Study abroad is an increasingly important aspect of the American college experience and many colleges and universities are interested in increasing its access along social class and racial lines. This study analyzed study abroad with the following research questions: How does study abroad fit into a context of class transition (or class solidification) of students at elite colleges? What kinds of cultural capital are gained when studying abroad, and how is this different across social class and racial lines? How does study abroad affect national identity and what are its implications for class-transitioning college students? Participant observation: thick description of a year's study abroad in two programs in two separate countries as a first-generation college student. Semi-structured interviews: twelve interviews with both first-generation and non-first-generation students at a small, liberal arts college who studied in programs with different structures. Navigating class: Students navigate study abroad with the same strategies they use in other upper class and predominantly White spaces. Intercultural capital: Students gain intercultural literacies and other cultural capital associated with tourism differently based on education history. National capital: Students' experiences abroad nuance their national identities. This forms a kind of national capital in which students are socialized into the particular national identities of the upper/middle class. First-generation students navigate social class abroad and develop the intercultural capital associated with exposure to other nationalities and the national capital associated with self-awareness of American identity that prepare them to transition to the upper/middle classes. More importantly, where the literature of study abroad focuses on quantitative data, this project offers qualitative and ethnographic data describing not just ‘what’ happens while studying abroad, but ‘how.’

Keywords: international education, cultural capital, class mobility, national identity
Acknowledgements

I want to thank the Dept. of Sociology and Anthropology and my advisor, Dr. Joy Charlton for assisting this thesis. I also want to thank Swarthmore College, the Kohlberg Foundation and the Philip Evans Scholarship for funding my experiences abroad and for inspiring this research. This project could not have been completed without the advice and guidance of Patricia Martin and Rosa Bernard in the Office for Off Campus Study. My time abroad would not have been successful or possible without the support of Professors Maria Luisa Guardiola and Desiree Diaz Diaz in the Spanish section of the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures. Finally, I want to thank my family who continues to encourage me to pursue my passions, even if it means living across the world from them.
Chapter 1

Introduction

“You don’t really know what it’s like to be poor. You only like pretending you’re working class,” she said to me as we sipped wine and ate cheese in southern Spain. An unexpected comment that I paid little mind to in the moment, it continues to challenge me as I think about my educational experiences. In many ways she was right. I was born to working class parents, neither of whom had been to college, and yet I attended private, college prep schools my entire life. All of my friends and I were expected not only to go to college, but to go to private colleges or at least top-tier public colleges. I had international experiences before college, but only in the context of my high school classes, preparing me for college-level foreign language learning. In high school I thought I understood middle class lifestyles and expectations.

And yet, as I entered Swarthmore College, a private, liberal arts college with a sticker price of more than $60,000 a year, I realized that I was not prepared for the amounts of wealth many of my classmates came from. Uncomfortable in groups of upper-class students, I found myself making friends of similar low-income backgrounds who were also first generation college students. Still, I consistently found that this solidly upper-middle class education--private high school to private college--with its international exchanges, cut me off even from those who shared similar backgrounds with me. More than the way I spoke, the car I drove, or the area I was from, it was when I revealed the international experiences I had that I felt the most isolated from the people I grew up with.

I decided to spend two semesters and a summer outside of the United States, existing in near constant confrontation with the question of social class while abroad. Financially, this opportunity
was only available to me because of Swarthmore College. Before Freshman year I was chosen as a Philip Evans Scholar and given $15,500 to fund extracurricular experiences over my four years of college. I used almost all of that money to fund those experiences abroad, which ranged from organized group tours, to classroom education, to work experiences. As I traveled more, I realized that often low-income college students’ first experience with international travel is through institution-sponsored study abroad. In the context of transitioning social class that is the experience of most first-generation college students, international experiences are important and carry material benefits. Thus, I returned to Swarthmore with two questions in mind as I began this thesis: 1) How do first-gen students study abroad? And 2) what do they get out of study abroad that might be different from their non-first-gen peers? While there are many ways to measure class, this study will focus on students’ access to cultural capital both before and during their experiences abroad as a proxy for their transition from lower or middle income classes to higher income classes. Specifically, I will use travel, and its varied methods and distinctions, to demonstrate that, through study abroad, students gain the cultural capital necessary to position them in the upper/middle class, regardless of their income.

The problem in its context: a review of the literature

Two hundred sixty-four thousand, eight hundred sixty-six US students studied abroad in the 2013/2014 academic year. That is up 5.2% over the previous year according to the Open Doors Institute of International Education (IIE). This marks a high point in US study abroad participation, which has more than tripled over the past two decades. Students study abroad for good reasons, it offers academic, professional and personal benefits to students. Students gain cross cultural competence, flexibility and maturity. They learn to navigate foreign cities in and offers unbeatable opportunities for foreign language learning. Research from universities and third party institutions
suggest that students who study abroad have higher grades and are more likely to graduate from college than those who do not study abroad (O’Rear 2012). Moreover, surveys of employers suggest that study abroad plays an essential role in preparing students for an intercultural workforce, improving chances of employability, earnings potential and financial stability (Maliki and Patts 2013). And yet, these supposed benefits are undermined by the fact that the majority of people who study abroad are those individuals -- white, upper-middle class -- who already have better prospects in academic and professional spheres.

As of the 2013/2014 academic year, the almost 265,000 students who studied abroad represented only 1.6% of the entire undergraduate higher education population. In terms of students who actually received degrees, they represented 14.8% of the population who received bachelor’s degrees and less than one percent, or 5,176 students who received non-bachelor’s degrees, i.e. two-year associates degrees, or technical degrees (Open Doors, IIE). According to the College Board, 42% of all students are enrolled at 2-year community colleges, and students whose parents have a college degree are more than 20% more likely to enroll in a four-year undergraduate institution. 54% of students enrolled in public, four-year programs and 61% of students enrolled in private, four-year programs have parents with a Bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to 33% of students enrolled in two-year programs. While there does not exist substantive data measuring the number of first generation college students who study abroad, we can extrapolate that because of first gen students’ density in 2 year colleges and study abroad’s primary draw from private, four year colleges, the majority of first gen students do not have access to study abroad opportunities. Moreover, we know that one’s education level is the main factor of determining income over the course of one’s life. According to the Census, the difference between students who earned a professional degree, such as a master’s or doctorate, and who dropped out of high school was about $72,000 dollars over a forty year period (Julian et al. 2011). From these numbers we can assume that those students who end up
studying abroad are likely to have come from families with some college education, and from a social class.

The barriers to study abroad are even starker when looking at the racial and ethnic makeup of study abroad students. 74% of study abroad students in 2013/14 were White, 8% were Hispanic or Latino(a), 7% were Asian or Pacific Islander and 5% were Black or African-American. The 2011 Condition of Education study found that in 2008, 63 percent of college students were White, while 14 percent were African American and 12 percent were Hispanic (Aud, Hussar, and Kena 2011). Clearly, White students, especially White students who are not First-gen, are overrepresented in study abroad.

There are several reasons scholars have provided for why study abroad participation skews White and wealthy. First is the cost of studying abroad (Salisbury, Paulsen and Pascarella 2010). At many colleges, students are expected to fund abroad experiences, which are often more expensive than tuition. In response to the prohibitive costs, some colleges offer financial aid to students while they are abroad in accordance with their financial aid while on campus. Other researchers have argued that in addition to the structural barriers to study abroad, there are sociocultural reasons that certain students do not study abroad. That is, cultural capital and previous exposure to international experiences are good predictors of whether or not a student will study abroad (Simon and Ainsworth 2012). Students who came from racial and class backgrounds that exposed them to others who had college degrees or who had exposure to international travel are more likely to study abroad. Based on this data we can assume that first-gen students of color being the least likely to study abroad. Overall, study abroad continues to be dominated by wealthy, white women.

The European Union has developed a study abroad program, Erasmus, which offers students the ability to study in any other European country for a year. However, similar to US study abroad, participants largely skew white and wealthy. Research on European models of study abroad
indicate that those who study abroad do not strengthen cross-national identity because those who study abroad are already more likely to feel European (Kuhn 2012). Thus, if a goal of study abroad is to foster cross-cultural competency, it misses this goal by targeting those who already have cross-border experiences and Pan-European identities and already had that competency before Erasmus. In an American context, research suggests the same— that participation in study abroad does not, in fact, foster a sense of shared international community and, in fact, may heighten nationalism and national identity (Jones 2014). Those American students who study abroad, who have likely already had international experiences, do not experience much change to national identity or understanding of nation. Therefore, international travel and study abroad offer a form of classed national identity, using national identity, as it is understood after international exposure, to articulate social class. The question remains: what happens to first-gen students, who may have never had international experiences before, understanding of national identity during study abroad and how is it located within a context of supposed class-transition through higher education?

One way to approach this question is through the sociology of international tourism. Many studies suggest that international tourism is essential in the development of the modern “leisure class” (Urry 1995; Desforges 1998; Brooks 2000). Specifically, Ian Munt (1994) argues that youth tourism is preoccupied with collecting international places, peoples and experiences for class distinction. They return home, often, to communities of those who have also traveled abroad and thus create a habitus of tourism that include those with proper tourism experiences (i.e. “authentic,” individual, and educational), and exclude those without them or with different kinds of tourism experiences.

This study will put discourses of national identity and tourism in conversation with studies of social class and tourism to argue that study abroad affords students national identities that are
inscribed with cultural capital. Therefore, study abroad as a social process combines cultural capital with national identity to prepare students for the upper-middle class.

To examine this process, I utilize interview data from students who studied abroad while pursuing a bachelor's degree at Swarthmore College, a private, four-year liberal arts college in suburban Philadelphia. The college purports to have a commitment to access, and provides 100% loan free, need-based financial aid. Almost 52% of the student body receives some amount of financial aid, with an average award of $46,931 or 72% of the total cost of tuition and room and board (Swarthmore College Fact Sheet). Twelve percent of students are Hispanic or Latino, 6% are Black or African American, 17% are Asian or Pacific Islander and 42% are White. Twenty-one percent of students admitted to the class of 2020 were first generation college students. Additionally, Swarthmore's study abroad office allows students to study abroad to any approved program while paying Swarthmore tuition and receiving financial aid. Many students, myself included, also receive a stipend to cover meals and other daily expenses while abroad. By almost all measures, Swarthmore is an elite college that is successfully integrating underrepresented college students.

And yet, many students report difficulties transitioning to this elite setting, from trouble navigating the college’s bureaucracy to isolation from family and friends, to intimidation and feelings of inadequacy. These experiences are exacerbated by Swarthmore’s elite, private status: first generation college students at State schools do not report similar difficulties adjusting to college life (Aries and Seider 2005). For example, these tensions came to a head in the Spring of 2013, when many students protested hostile environments created by other students and lack of sufficient institutional support for marginalized students (Discontent 2015). Despite real institutional goals and achievements to increase access and diversity on campus, social and cultural barriers persist. The same can be said for study abroad. These campaigns and achievements for institutional change favoring marginalized students do not address other sociocultural barriers such as access to cultural
capital, habitus and national identities, which prevent those students from studying abroad or having similarly rewarding experiences while abroad.

In many ways study abroad for first generation students parallels the college experience as a whole. For example, the conversations I had with my parents before studying abroad sounded similar to those I had before moving away to college. Assurances that programs are structured, safe, and well run as well as the methods of communication were of top concern both for my parents and me as we reviewed programs. And yet, I still made the final decision. This was an experience that they knew little about -- after all, they had never been able to give me advice on college life. While students who were second or third generation college students had parents who could offer advice based on personal experiences either studying abroad or at college in general, my college experience was a constant exercise in growth and independence, with little parental guidance. Meanwhile, I learned to navigate spaces and relationships with people who had parents who went to college, who were solidly upper class, and who had myriad international experiences before college. I learned to selectively blend or stand out in this environment, depending on my surroundings and the opportunities I felt I could get by doing either. Study abroad was no different and, in fact, highlighted stark class differences in a way that did not happen on campus. The decisions and abilities to travel, eat out, club and skip class were all informed by social class or its pretension. If four years at an elite, liberal arts college is a study in upper-middle class mobility for first generation students, then study abroad is its pinnacle, manifesting all of the anxieties, thrills, tensions and joys of transitioning social class in a single semester (or summer). It is important to understand first generation study abroad if we want to understand the ways that class identities (and racial and national identities) change throughout college.

It is important here to note the definitions this study will be using when analyzing socioeconomic class. While each of my participants reported family income data before their
interviews, all of which can be found in the participant biographies on page 50, the material wealth of students is not as important to me as their cultural wealth. That is, for the purposes of this study, cultural capital is explored as it is articulated often is a stand-in for material wealth. First generation college students do not need to have the material wealth of their peers to know how to communicate upper-class status. Critically, study abroad gives students the cultural capital to appear upper/middle class — as defined as those who are able to participate in a tourism that is more ‘integrated,’ or authentic — regardless of whether or not they have the material capital to do so. Additionally, study abroad gives students the often tenuous national identities that are culturally common to the upper/middle class. That is, their experiences with other nationalities complicates their own understanding of national identity and socializes them into the cultural expectations of a leisure/tourist class.

**Theoretical frameworks**

The analytical framing of this study is based on three key theoretical frameworks: theories of cultural capital and social class, theories of tourism and travel, and theories of national identity and nationalisms. These theories are linked in their discussions of privilege and the development of privileged identities, in this case classed national identities. International tourism, as distinguished from other forms of international travel such as immigration, demarcates social class through the development of cosmopolitan or pluralistic national identities (Walton 2010, Souders 2009). That is, national identities are complicated and expanded because of encounters with “Others” abroad and the consumption of places and peoples to indicate material and cultural wealth (Urry 1995, Munt 1994, Thurot 1983). Study abroad fits within this context by combining the cultural capital of tourism with that of higher education. Higher education, and especially higher education at elite colleges, is a process of socialization into upper-middle class lifestyles (Aries and Seider 2005). Thus,
study abroad works to socialize students also into those national identities, now cosmopolitan through cross-cultural exposure, that describe many upper class individuals.

Cultural capital

Cultural capital can be defined as the cultural assets that promote social mobility beyond solely financial means. Examples typically include education, intellect, style of dress and speech patterns. Pierre Bourdieu proposes that it is those with the most cultural capital in a society that get to determine what constitutes taste. He also articulates this determination of tastes, and the material implications of not having appropriate taste, as a form of structural violence. Taste is thus an important example of cultural hegemony, of how class fractions are determined, not only by the possession of social capital and of economic capital, but by the possession of cultural capital. This social mechanism maintains the social reproduction and the cultural reproduction of the ruling class (Bourdieu 2008). Moreover, cultural capital is embodied, objectified and institutionalized to make it more difficult for certain bodies from establishing cultural capital and converting it to financial or social capital. Academic markers serve as an institutionalization of cultural capital, a certificate of appropriate taste (Bourdieu 2008). Thus, first generation college students at elite colleges are often doing double the work of non-first generation students -- having to learn and assume cultural codes as to "pass" as upper-class like many of their peers, while simultaneously doing the academic work expected of everyone. Modern additions to the articulation of cultural capital have included the way that travel and tourism have become significant distinguishers of empowered cultural tastes. For example, in a section of his book, *Bobos in Paradise* (2000), titled "useful vacations" David Brooks argues that tourism, especially non-mass tourism, is an "investment in our own human capital." Moreover, he sees education, as opposed to pure financial status, is the primary method of distinguishing social class in modern society. Therefore, travel is about more than seeing famous
sights: “we want to pierce into other cultures. We want to try on other lives” (205). In modern, upper-class experiences, tourism is a corollary to and serves in function of education as distinguishing class difference and cultural tastes: cultural capital. Therefore, it would seem, study abroad is an amalgam of classed experiences, combining at once tourism, education and academic -- institutional -- validation.

Tourisms

Tourism, especially youth tourism, highlights the ways that social class is articulated through leisure travel. Study abroad relies on tourism in order to provide students with meaningful experiences abroad. Tourism has always been an activity for the leisured class that is undertaken with the goal to experience a change -- in scenery, self, or situation (Smith 1989). Moreover, as modern developed economies have moved away from industry in favor of services, tourism is an example of this commodification of experiences. That is, as commodity has become integrated with culture, tourism demonstrates that the value of things is not necessarily based on the labor required to produce them but rather the quality and quantity of the experience they produce. (Mac Cannell 1999, Urry 1995). This commodification of experience in tourism often becomes the commodification of peoples and cultures. Much research has been done showing the ways that tourists commodify places, usually based along historical colonial power relationships. This commodification often involves cultural stereotypes and essentialization, to which local populations respond by “reflecting” the gaze back to benefit financially (Urry 2011). This dynamic can be understood through the lens of Orientalism (Said 1994), indicating that Western societies have static views of the exotic Other, allowing them to be easily consumed and “understood.” Such tourism feeds off of social, political and economic inequalities and follows an inexorable capitalist logic:
“once tourism has made the other accessible, other others must emerge to take its place” (Huggan 2001, 178).

Critically, this consumption and collection of otherness abroad is deployed at home in articulations of class differentiation. In this way, new forms and new locations for tourism are constantly necessary in order to distinguish mass tourists -- and thus middle-classes -- from other tourists -- supposedly upper classes (Munt 1994). For example, an analysis of tourism advertising reveals several classes of touristic experience: “the traditional model, the clerical/executive model, the youth model, and the “intellectual class” model” (Thurot and Thurot 1983, 173). Thus, while all tourism is based in the distinctions of social classes, within tourism there are different forms that more successfully articulate class status than others. Within these models the lowliest tourism is mass tourism, seemingly derided by all other tourists. For the purposes of this study, we can imagine mass tourism as any form of tourism that involves a “package deal,” is all inclusive but also advertised and priced for Western middle classes. Analyses of youth tourism and academic tourism are especially relevant. Both of these tourisms are defined by differentiating themselves from mass tourism. For example, in general young tourists, concerned with “authentic” experiences, collect travels in the third world and use these collections to establish themselves in upper-middle class lifestyles (Desforges 1998). They return home and “showcase” their collections of places and peoples to demonstrate wealth. This showcasing may occur purposefully, but it also can take the form of a less intentional action that has the consequence of conferring the cultural expectations of the upper/middle class. Additionally, John Urry (2011) traces the history of tourism to the beginnings of academic tourism in the Grand Tour of the 17th and 18th centuries, whereby young men of landowning classes would tour Europe, especially Italy and Greece, after graduating from University but before going into the workforce. This served as a rite of passage into monied, male adulthood and codified upper class British, French and German identities as Pan-European. From
the beginning, study abroad has merged socialization into socioeconomic class and national identity development.

National identity

Benedict Anderson, whose seminal study of nationality titled *Imagined Communities* (1983), transformed the understanding of national identity, argues that nation is an “imagined political community” (1983:3). “National identity” is a social construct that creates in-groups and outgroups and thus national identity is inherently based on the idea of the essential sameness of national groups, either that of one’s own nation or that of other countries. This also means that a collective forgetting of inequality and exploitation is required to imagine the horizontal camaraderie that national in-groups imply (Anderson 1983). Still, there are several ways that national identities based on essential sameness are resisted even by members of the imagined community. For example, immigrants and children of immigrants, and other racial and ethnic minorities in America, tend to assert those marginalized identities before that of Americanness (Huntington 2004). More importantly, those ethnic and racial minorities have organized to demand recognition from the state and changed nationalist discourse both in Europe and the United States from one of ethnic singularism to one of ethnic pluralism (Guibernau 2007, Railton 2011, Rhea 1997). Craig Calhoun in his work, *Nationalism*, analyzes contemporary nationalist discourse as navigating this tension between ethnic essentialism and pluralism using the United States as an example. He argues that while nations cannot be explained by any ‘objective’ origin in a single ethnicity, there is still some reference to a pre-existing people: “America is only a partial exception, with ideas of the ‘melting pot’ complemented by production of a WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) ethnic identity as -- at least for a long time -- culturally dominant in the image of the nation” (1997:57). For almost all participants of color in this study, the tenuous ethnic implications of American national identity served as a point of contention in their ability to identify themselves as an American.
Many of America’s professional and academic elites have decreasing ties with American identity, preferring to instead think of themselves as “citizens of the world” together with the globalizing elites of other nations (Huntington 2004:267). Moreover, international travel has a profound impact on the ways individuals conceive of their understandings of national identity. This seems to come both from the exploration of identity allowed in the brief liminal space of temporary vacations, and the encounter with people with different national identities (Kelman 1965). Cultural capital thus intersects with national identity in the development of “cosmopolitan” identities among elites. “Cosmopolitans represent a new class free from national attachments and eager to transcend the limits of their national and local communities. They enjoy traveling a world that, for them, has become truly a single place” (Guibernau 2007:168). In addition to the national identity development through international exposure, travel is an important indicator of cultural capital, allowing middle and upper middle class individuals to demonstrate their wealth and maintain cultural differentiation.

**Study Abroad**

Research on study abroad indicates that it provides students with increased autonomy, expansion or differentiation of self, increased tolerance and flexibility, increased self-assurance and confidence and increased objectivity (Nash 1976). It strengthens students’ knowledge of other countries, has impressive outcomes on student language learning and is occurring in a period of increasing importance of international education (Carlson, Burn and Yachimowicz 1990). Moreover, studies indicate that studying abroad is correlated with students’ academic performance. Students who study abroad are more likely to graduate on time, have higher grades, and be more independent (O’Rear 2010). And yet, even the most positive studies of Study Abroad admit that it often limited to students of professional level parents, who have already been abroad and are already high academic achievers (Carlson, Burn and Yachimowicz 1990). These positive statistics are undercut by
the participation in study abroad. Non-first generation students, of already wealthy backgrounds, are more likely to study abroad and be strong academic performers.

Several studies also attempt to distance study abroad from traditional tourism. In a particularly revealing passage, an author argues for the importance of study abroad as it is different from traditional tourism:

As the United States stands here poised on the brink of sending one million of its students to study abroad each year, it can either send them as curious seekers, fundamentally opened by the understanding that there are significantly different realities faced by and productively responded to by people across lines of gender, ethnicity, ideology, and national identity, or it can send them as bigoted tourists thinly cloaked by a legitimizing veneer of academic affiliation (Walonen 2015).

Reflecting the ways that youth tourism and upper-middle class tourism define themselves in contrast to mass tourism, this passage unwittingly places study abroad as yet another distinction of tourism, indicating class distinction while advocating for "true learning."

The following section breaks the literature of study abroad into two key areas: national identity development and social class and access. In many ways this literature corroborates and complicates the purported benefits of study abroad, but ultimately argues that study abroad is a classed act, and the national identity that is developed during its process serves to prepare students for upper-middle class lifestyles and tastes.

**National identity development**

Studies of national identity in study abroad are centered around three main arguments: 1) study abroad matures students' national identities, 2) study abroad matures students' national identities only when students have prior exposure to international travel, 3) study abroad matures students' national identities if it is distinct from traditional tourism.
Previous studies suggest that study abroad causes student to think of other national groups in terms associated with individuals instead of stereotypes such as food, historical events, and geographic characteristics (Drews, Meyer, and Peregrine 1996). They laud it as “one of the most powerful tools available for internationalizing the curriculum in American colleges and universities” (Kauffman 1992, 1), an opportunity to compare various forms of government, systems of education and values and lifestyles, resulting in a change in conceptions of the home country (Kauffman 1992). Some authors suggest that students adopt a transnational identity, abandoning nationalism and ethnocentrism (King and Ruiz-Galices 2003).

Others argue that relationships with national identity are more complicated, combining both of these views. For example, study abroad allows students to demystify their own culture, recognizing that cultural norms are not natural (Wagner 1995). Other studies suggest that while governments and institutions have varied reasons for sending students abroad, ranging from imperialism to goals of internationalism, student experiences result in the adoption of “cosmopolitan” national identities. That is, they do not reject their national identities but rather their experiences with other nations allow them to develop a more complicated and mature view of nationalism, rejecting particularistic understandings of nation (Souders 2009; Walton 2010; Jones 2014). Several studies analyze the differential impacts of study abroad programs, indicating that programs that are more immersed in host cultures and less isolated or reliant on traditional tourism are more effective in allowing students to develop complex national identities (Hendrickson 2016; Nyaupane, Teye and Paris 2008).

And yet, the most convincing studies indicate that students who study abroad are predisposed to ideas of enlightened nationalism because of previous experience abroad (Sigalas 2010; Kuhn 2012; Savicki and Cooley 2011). That is, while these students did engage in a negotiation
of self through an experience with an Other, these experiences had already taken place in the form of International travel, cultural exchange, and representations and discourse of said Other (Jewett 2010). This study works to bring together these studies of study abroad and national identity and those of study abroad and access to argue that the national identities developed during (or before) study abroad have classed implications. That is, the supposed “mature” and “complex” understanding of study abroad are similar to those shared by upper-class professionals and academics. Therefore, study abroad, fits into a context of upper-class socialization especially for first gen students.

**Cultural capital**

Studies of study abroad and cultural capital are based around two central camps: 1) first gen students and students of color do not study abroad because of lack of cultural capital, 2) study abroad is a part of a process of accumulating or ensuring cultural capital. This section closes with an analysis of study abroad’s impact on career prospects, emphasizes that this cultural capital accumulation (or lack thereof) has material impacts.

Several studies suggest that students’ habitus, access to cultural capital, and family reaction to study abroad makes it undesirable and inaccessible to many first gen students and students of color (Salisbury, Paulsen and Pascarella 2010). Moreover, previous experience abroad and competency navigating institutional bureaucracy to gain information from officials, usually qualities of white, high-income students, severely limited the participation of POC and low income students in study abroad (Simon and Ainsworth 2012). One study suggests that while students’ perception of institutional support has little impact on whether or not they study abroad, their exposure to diversity and their attendance of a private institution are predictors of their participation in study abroad programs (Adriano 2010). Finally, once abroad students of color often face difficult and at times hostile host countries that are unaccustomed to POC. This is exacerbated by little support
from the institution or their mostly white peers (Talburt and Stewart 1999). Study abroad in many ways is limited to those who already have accumulated the cultural capital to know how to study abroad, and had the networks and habitus that valued international education. Thus, these students are also more likely to have already developed themselves, or have families with the “enlightened nationalism” model of national identity.

In a 2002 ethnography of study abroad programs in high school, Traci Fordham (2002) discovers that study abroad processes reinscribe race and class privilege, and is a form of cultural capital “that exists to reproduce a global business class” (1). However, she also argues that students in these programs have agency as they resist or transgress particular boundaries of the program and negotiate cultural adaptation and person change on their own terms. Perhaps it is this study which is the most promising for our analysis of study abroad programs at elite colleges. While the eventual outcome is socialization into upper classes, along the way students have varied responses and resistances.

Finally, this accumulation of cultural capital while abroad has material consequences for students and is beneficial when searching for a job post-graduation. Two studies suggest that study abroad is important as students decide what jobs to pursue and the responses of hiring managers and workplace leadership (Kronholz and Osborn 2016; Trooboff, Berg and Rayman 2008). These two studies remind us that cultural capital is followed by material capital. Access to study abroad, just like access to college, has material consequences for first generation college students and students of color.

**Methods**

This study takes a primarily qualitative approach, using auto ethnography, and semi-structured interviews. I traveled to and studied and worked in three separate countries over the
course of two years at Swarthmore college. Using field notes and personal reflections as a first
generation college student in those environments, I merge my auto ethnographic data with the data
of my interviewees. Chapter two features five personal vignettes of my time abroad and serve to
complement the other qualitative data in the study.

I am starting from a definition of social class that includes the amount of cultural, social, and
financial capital that people have. However, the scope of this study focuses only on the ways that
cultural capital operates in first generation study abroad, with the other pieces being explored in the
statistics presented above. Finally, I will be focusing on the differences between first generation and
non-first gen college students studying abroad. First generation status is the operationalization of
social class for the purposes of this study, where the focus is on the ways that first gen students
gather the cultural capital necessary for class mobility through study abroad.

Interview participants

A sample of eleven students who studied abroad were selected for interviews. They were
selected based on a grid, ensuring that participants had a range of experiences abroad and
socioeconomic backgrounds. In order to compare first-gen and non-first-gen experiences abroad,
participants were selected to ensure an adequate balance. All students interviewed were American
citizens. Pre-interview surveys (Appendix B) verify this range of participants, asking questions about
the level of integration of study abroad programs and socioeconomic class. All first-gen participants
reported a combined family income of less than $100,000 while all non-first-gen students reported a
combined family income of over $150,000. All participants are Swarthmore college students, a small,
elite liberal arts college in Pennsylvania.
Interview data collection

Semi-structured interviewing is the primary method of data collection for this study. Eighteen open-ended questions were prepared before the interviews (Appendix A). Questions attempted to identify participants’ relationship with national identity and social class, and how it may have shifted while abroad. Participants were encouraged to speak freely and discuss their experiences in a conversational manner. Thus, not all questions were asked to all participants. The interviewer engaged each participant in individually scheduled interviews, each of which was audiotaped and scheduled to be an hour long. Participants were solicited through email and interviews were scheduled and conducted within a two month period.

Data analysis

Notes of key themes taken during interviews and they were audiotaped using recording software. Recordings were listened to multiple times, which allowed new themes to be identified and made analysis more robust. While listening a set of fifteen codes were developed to analyze social class and national identity. Interviews were then selectively transcribed according to those codes and key quotations were pulled.

Limitations

All interview participants as well as the interviewer are students at Swarthmore college, limiting applications to larger or public colleges or universities. Additionally, the author is a first
generation college student himself, limiting objectivity in analysis. Larger, more diverse samples are needed to adequately represent the ways that national identity develops differently according to social class.
Chapter 2: Vignettes of an International Education

Introduction

I grew up in a predominantly immigrant neighborhood in a working class suburb of Washington, DC. I’ve lived in this house my entire life -- 3 bedrooms, 2 bathrooms -- comfortable but not extravagant. My mother works as a secretary at a labor union and my father is a bus mechanic. They have solidly middle class jobs and no college degrees. Fortunately, my mother was promoted several times as I grew up and this allowed my parents to send me to private schools and prepared me for college -- and the upper-class aspirations it represents -- in ways that would not have been accessible otherwise. We traveled less and less growing up as tuition bills for me and my brother grew from middle school, to high school and to college. My first international experience was with a Spanish class in my college-prep high school. They pooled resources with the French department and we went on a week-long trip to Paris and Barcelona. My parents graciously covered the costs, from the passport to the flights, viewing international experiences (and my desire to take part in them) as important opportunities that I should take advantage of even if we were not able to have them together. And so, my interest in international education began early. So too, then, did its intrinsic link to upward class mobility and distance between me and my family: I quickly learned that I could not take them to college with me (or bring college back to them), just as I couldn’t take them to Paris or Barcelona.

I applied to Swarthmore for Early Decision and was offered the Philip Evans Scholarship -- $14,000 for extracurricular experiences -- upon arrival. I took this money as an invitation to travel as much as possible. In fact, I used $11,000 of it to travel in Ecuador, Spain and Cuba for an academic year and a summer. I based these international experiences, only possible with money from the
college, in my academic pursuits. By the end of my freshman year I was set on a double major in Spanish and Sociology and Anthropology -- two departments that are emphatic about international scopes for academic learning, and that strongly encourage study abroad. The summer after freshman year I used $6,000 and spent 9 weeks in South America, interning in Quito, Ecuador for 8 weeks and traveling in Peru -- to Machu Picchu -- for the final week. Concerned with bringing my parents along on my experiences, I planned this final week in Peru as a family vacation, where Swarthmore would pay for my part so they could afford to join me. I gained valuable professional experience and greatly improved my Spanish during this time, but I left very concerned about my position as a tourist; was it a worthwhile trip if I spent so much time (and money) as a tourist?

I spent the next year studying tourism -- its history and its present implications, especially in the Global South and Latin America. I discovered that tourism, especially youth tourism, is a signifier of social class, through which middle class individuals “collect” international places, cultures and people and deploy them to distinguish themselves as 1) wealthy enough to travel and 2) educated enough to “truly” appreciate the experience (Munt 1994, Urry 2011). It was with these considerations in mind that I decided to study abroad for my entire Junior year, using $5,000 from Swarthmore college to further supplement my experiences, usually through tourism across Europe and within the two countries I was studying in: Spain and Cuba. Obviously, Spanish language was a primary concern as I was choosing countries -- but I was also torn between an experience in Europe, with all the possibilities for easy international travel it offered and Cuba, with the critical opportunity for self-reflection that it offered. As a White, US student in a country actively resisting US hegemony, I would surely be confronted with my complicity in systems of global domination: American imperialism and white supremacy. So, I refused to compromise and went to both places.

My year was a whirlwind of travel. While in Europe for 4 months I saw Madrid, Granada, Seville, Toledo, Segovia, Córdoba, Ronda, Malaga, Nerja and Palma de Mallorca, Spain. I traveled to
Amsterdam, Istanbul, Prague, London, Edinburgh, Florence, Rome, Venice, Paris, Gibraltar, Tangier and Chefchaouen, Morocco. Again, wanting to bring my parents along on my experiences of class transition, my mother joined me in Paris -- with Swarthmore and rewards points that I had saved up paying for the hotel and many experiences. Cuba was less busy, but I still managed to travel to Havana, Santiago de Cuba, Viñales and María la Gorda in 4 months. Almost every weekend I was boarding a plane, traveling to another city, trying to squeeze the most out of my travel abroad.

It was not until I got back to Swarthmore that I began to think about my study abroad in the context of being a first generation college student. If part of my experience as a first generation student at an elite, liberal arts college is class transition, picking up the cultural capital necessary to thrive in upper middle class lifestyles, then clearly international experience and tourism fits into that. This chapter will be divided into 5 vignettes, in-depth descriptions of experiences I had while studying abroad that forced me to think about my position as an American, as a first generation student, as a queer person, as a White person, and overall prepared me well for the expectations of the upper-middle class: cultural tastes, particular knowledges and travel experience. Throughout it all there was resistance and complacence in equal measures, and the episodes of critique (of positions, governments, oppressions) are as important as the episodes of compliance (enjoyment of privileges and positions). These are deeply personal and deeply political. They are presented in their entirety and then followed with analysis and framing.
Quito, Ecuador
July 2014

A conversation with my boss as I prepare to leave the country after an 8 week internship.

"Pero tú sí tienes suficiente español. Claro, a veces no estoy seguro que me entiendas perfectamente, pero nunca hemos tenido un pasante más trabajador."

"But your Spanish is good enough! Sure, sometimes I'm not sure that you really understand me, but we've never had a more hardworking intern."

I was crowded into the back of an 1980s American car. In the car with me were my co-workers, three women who devoted their lives to studying child abuse and to working to protect children. There was a lawyer, a psychiatrist and a social worker -- all employed by the government in a board to oversee the resolutions of child abuse cases. Every decision they made was binding, they had state-endowed power to send people to court, to declare and enforce restraining orders, and to separate parents from their children. Today, however, was one of the few days I was not thinking of the gravity of my position in this agency. We were on our way to a massive open-air market in downtown Quito. It was the last day of my internship and they all wanted to buy me a present to remember them by. "No te pierdes!/Keep in touch!" they reminded me as my internship was coming to its inevitable close.

The entire internship had been a blur. I wanted an internship focused on social services -- at that point I was considering a career as a social worker. I wanted to practice Spanish, and I knew that I had a fairly advanced command of the language. Based on just a resume and cover letter in Spanish, the on-site program director decided that my Spanish would be good enough to work at the Junta para la protección de la niñez/The Board for the Protection of Children, a governmental agency comprised of three women who handled half of all child abuse cases in Quito, the capital city with 1.6 million residents. When I arrived, Juana, the Social Worker at the agency, asked me how
comfortable I was in Spanish. There was no way that the overwhelm and anxiety I was feeling was not also on my face. I remained silent for just a little too long, apparently, and my program director jumped in with high praise of my Spanish. And so, without hearing me speak a word other than “buens día,” my new boss sat me at the receptionist desk and told me that I would be directing clients who came in -- guiding them through the process of issuing a report, deciding which reports were priorities that needed to be seen immediately (sexual and physical abuse were always directed immediately to Juana), and databasing all contacts with clients.

“¿Crees en Dios? /Do you believe in God?” María, the psychiatrist, asks me. I asked her how she processes the weight of this job. I was feeling helpless seeing the number of cases that were simply overlooked because these three employees could not get to the hundreds of cases that had piled up. “A veces/Sometimes,” I said, with a smile. She laughed and told me that she prays, that she tries to find peace and empathy for the abusers, who, she reminded me, need help that they will not receive.

Almost halfway through the internship, three more employees were finally hired. The position I was in for a month was filled by a lawyer, born in Ecuador who spoke Spanish fluently and with emotion. I was an emergency fill-in. They had gone 6 months missing half of their staff, and the government had taken too long to replace them. Juana decided to look outwards, knowing the number of Americans who come to Ecuador for internships and Spanish language learning. For the final half of the internship I was filing papers in a dusty back room -- these too had gone largely unorganized for 6 months. And as if to make sure I did not feel that this was a less stressful position she said, “Ten cuidado. Normalmente no permitimos que pasantes hagan eso porque es demasiado importante, pero tu eres muy trabajador/Be careful. Usually we don’t let interns do this job because it’s too important, but you’re very hardworking.” Apparently, I was one of the better interns that they had had.
In the back of that car on my last day I asked if I should tell my program director to send another intern. I said I was concerned that my Spanish wasn’t good enough, and that I would recommend that the next person they send have better Spanish than I. Juana replied, “Pero tú sí tienes suficiente español. Claro, a veces no estoy seguro que me entiendas perfectamente, pero nunca hemos tenido un pasante más trabajador. Di a Marta que necesitamos otro Aaron.” But your Spanish is good enough! Sure, sometimes I’m not sure that you really understand me, but we’ve never had a more hardworking intern. Tell Marta we need another Aaron.” They were thrilled with my performance as an intern that summer. I was less so. They bought me a pair of hand-painted mugs with Ecuadorian landscapes and indigenous women on them. They signed their names, “Recuerdanos para siempre!/Always remember us!” The vendor wrapped them in bubble wrap — Juana made sure to let her know that I was getting on a plane back to the United States soon. I thanked them as best I could for an unforgettable summer and we said our teary goodbyes. No words, however, could express the conflicting emotions I had when reflecting on this experience, nor the overwhelming gratitude I had for their patience and embrace of me in my successes and failures for eight weeks.

I left this experience deeply confused about my place as a tourist, an American abroad, but also deeply convinced of the personally enriching power of international education. If liminal spaces, such as college, allow us to reinvent ourselves, try new identities and explore convictions, then doubling that with travel, another liminal space with its own sets of expectations and outcomes, furthered and nuanced those identities. Through this experience I gained professional skills and flexibility — throwing myself into this discomfort and forcing myself to adapt. More deeply, however, I tested the limits of my American identity. It was the first time I had been abroad for more than a week, and, working, I was more deeply inserted into the local culture that any tourist. The depth of this insertion was contrasted starkly with the final week of my stay in South America,
where I met up with my Mom, Dad, Brother, Aunt and Cousin for a guided group tour of Machu Picchu. Here, there would be no interaction with locals other than the tour guide, and there would be no critical lens other than a critique of the altitude -- 11,000 ft is difficult for a tour group with an average age of 55. I felt that this experience was deeply inauthentic. I was frustrated that my family seemed satisfied with this “superficial” knowing of the country, and attempted to talk to Taxi drivers, waiters, anyone to break out of this tourist bubble I was now trapped in. Of course, everyone I met was in some way impacted by the tourism industry and would only have forced polite conversations with me, even if they were surprised that I could speak Spanish. Taking Munt’s (1999) ideas of youth tourism into account, this desire for a more authentic tourism experience while in Latin America reflected the cultural capital of the upper class I was becoming socialized into. So too then, did this experience reflect the ways that I was being socialized into different tastes of my parents, who were perfectly content with their week long guided tour.

I wanted my parents to have the same, life changing experience I had. I wanted them to know what it was like to work in Ecuador, to plan your daily travel all by yourself, to befriend locals. Of course, they could not. They had jobs and were unable to take a full 2 months to travel. They had tuition, mortgage and car bills that prevented them from spending the almost $3,000 I spent while in Ecuador. This was the climax to a hard truth I learned as a first generation college freshman: despite the sacrifice my parents were making to send me here, I ultimately could not take them with me to college. That is, I could not share this experience backwards, and allow them to have the same life-changing experiences that they were providing me with. I would come out of college, just as I came out of Ecuador, distanced from them experientially but recommitted to make their sacrifice worth it.
Granada, Spain and Havana, Cuba
September, 2015 and February 2016

I am asked if I’m proud to be American.

“Don’t tell me about terrorism. I know about terrorism; I live it every day.”

It was almost 10pm. I was in a crowded bar with four other people, all of us sitting at a table designed for two. We were meeting for a school project designed to get us to explore the bar/tapas scene of Granada. I was sitting across from Malcha, an Israeli woman in her late twenties and next to two other American women, both in their early twenties. We were speaking in English. “Do you feel proud to be American?” the Israeli woman asks the table. All three of us pause, contemplating our answers.

We were asked to bring a news article to class that morning and present on it. With the Syrian Refugee Crisis bearing down on Europe, the otherwise begin exercise quickly escalated to a heated conversation about terrorism and ISIS infiltrating Europe hidden amongst refugees. Most of the class, socially conscious Americans, expressed dismay at the notion that refugees should be kept out of Europe because of the “small” threat of terrorism. The professor, a vocal social critic of Spain, also wholeheartedly endorsed the admittance of refugees into Spain. Everyone seemed in agreement until Malcha brings up ISIS. “They say they’re coming in with refugees. That’s literally what they’re saying. So no, I’m not convinced that Europe should open their borders to refugees.” The professor responded, “but, do you think that the small threat of terrorism should completely deter us from helping these refugees.” The conversation escalated pretty quickly, with the professor pushing back on Malcha’s ideas until she exclaimed, “Don’t tell me about terrorism. I know terrorism; I live it every day.” With this sentence the conversation ended. I knew that she was from Israel, but with this sentence her nationality became hyper present for everyone in the room. I sat,
contemplating my American identity. Sure, I had thought about terrorism living in DC post, 9/11, just as I am sure everyone in the room had. But certainly DC did not need an iron dome to protect it from daily attempts at bombing. Were my political ideologies based in the privilege and safety my Americanness afforded me?

“I think I'm proud when I know how critical American citizens are of their government. For me, especially the ways that the academy is allowed to and encouraged to be critical are exciting.” I finally respond to her question in the bar. The two Americans next to me nod their heads in agreement with this assessment of American pride. Malcha agrees with me, “that is something to be proud of.” I think on it further, and hedge a little, “but in general I’m not very proud of the things America does and I'm skeptical of people who seem to be too patriotic.” We had learned that day that Spaniards are mostly skeptical of patriotism, associating the flag and pride in Spain with Fascism and the Franco dictatorship that ended just 40 years ago.

I thought that my response, hedging included, was good. I felt solid in my belief that America celebrated dissent, so when I was asked the same question in Cuba, this time by our late 50s American program director, I gave the same response. “Yeah, dissent is celebrated...until it’s not. Think about the FBI bombing the black panthers or Occupy being forced out of Zuccotti park. Whenever I think about American celebrating dissent I feel the police officer’s nightstick in my back, forcing me out of the park and destroying the Occupy movement.” It felt like the wind was knocked out of me. I had put such thought into my response to have it so thoughtfully dismantled. I spent the rest of my time in Cuba with no American pride. She was right, it seemed, as soon as any protest or political force actually threatened the status quo, America found a way to either assimilate it (in the style of MLK and civil rights) or they destroy it (in the style of the Black panthers). Of course, in the country where Assata Shakur fled the power of US (domestic) imperialism, I would need to rethink the ways that I believed America was successful.
Our program director also made sure to recognize that pride in the US is racialized. “I’ve never had a Black person tell me that they were anything but Black before they were American.” In fact, one of the Black students on the group raised her hand and agreed, “yeah, I was going to ask what if we don’t really feel American?” It would seem then, in Cuba more than in Spain I resisted Americanness.

According to Huntington (2004), there are several ways and reasons that Americans popularly resist national identity. Among them are “other-national” identities, or those associated with immigrant communities who remain loyal to an origin nation; “sub-national” identities, including racial and ethnic identities that are more salient in the lived experience of people of color than is an American identity. Finally, he argues that transnational elites also resist nationality, instead characterizing themselves as “global citizens” who in many ways share a culture with a global socioeconomic elite. My American resistance seems to fit into none of these categories, seeming to stem from a critique and discomfort of America’s foreign presence and history as well as an acknowledgement of America’s domestic injustices. Still, though, this resistance would seem flimsier than others — never would I deny an American identity — I never wondered if I “really [felt] American.” In my experiences abroad, American identity and resistance to it, seems more complicated than either Anderson, with *Imagined Communities* (2006) or Huntington allow for.
Amsterdam, The Netherlands  
November, 2015  

I’m told by a tour guide that there are just some tourists who are interested in pictures, and some who are actually interested in history, as we stop our bikes to take another picture.

“...Well can’t we do both?”

It was windy, rainy and cold. I brought only a leather jacket, unprepared for the chilliness of northern Europe compared to the warmth of Spain in early November. We had organized a bike tour of Amsterdam -- interested in seeing all of the typical sites in a locally authentic way. It was me and 3 friends on this tour, individual out of luck. We stopped several times while on the tour, slowing down the tour guide who became more and more irritated at us as the trip continued. Finally, once we reached our final destination she passive aggressively announced “Well, there are some tourists who are interested in the history of Amsterdam, and others who are just here to take pictures.” Disgruntled by the comment, we left her with the bikes as we went to get a picture with the iconic “IAMSTERDAM” sign. We returned the bikes and ended the tour with little pleasantries. One woman I was with wanted to refuse a tip, “come on, this is how she makes a living,” I reminded her and talked the group into leaving a tip. As we left the bike rental stand, Jane, a student from my program with whom I traveled to Amsterdam complained, “why can’t we be interested in both the history and in taking pictures.” The group shrugged, collectively annoyed with the tour guide but excited to move on and explore the city: we would only be there for 2 days, after all.

In many ways my semester in Spain, and the intensive tourism that it entailed, was a crash course in the tastes of the upper class. It was also a short example of the upward mobility that Swarthmore provided me with: I quickly inserted myself into a group of solidly upper class women, and was able to travel and have leisure-class experiences with them thanks to money from Swarthmore college. In one particularly illuminating instance, Jane looked up from her laptop and
loudly exclaimed “My parents just got my home appraised! It’s only 1.5 million dollars -- I was expecting it to be much more!” But there were subtler ways class was echoed throughout the trip. Becky, Jane’s best friend, had been to Granada before and would let the group know which hotels she had stayed at with her parents -- the nicest ones of course. Jane’s father had business friends in Istanbul, so when we were traveling there she made sure to let us know that if anything happened her father would be able to help.

Fortunately, I made quick and close friends with another first gen student, Amanda. We found support in each other in the midst of an otherwise isolating group. We shared stories about Jane and Becky, and complained that they assumed that money was no object for everyone else on the trip. The wealth, and obliviousness to it, expressed by these two women made it clear that no money from Swarthmore college could make me truly upper class, and Amanda was there to lean on as we both learned to navigate these relationships.

To be clear, the social class that was apparent on this trip was racialized as well. There was a single person of color on the trip, and he was quickly isolated from the group of rich women (and myself) who traveled frequently. One of our professors, a Black linguist, would try to bring up race in his Spanish culture class. “Why does he keep bringing up race in this class?” “Yeah, it’s not like it impacts me directly. I’m just not interested,” several students complained after the class had ended. While I am sure that these sentiments, and this level of wealth, exists at Swarthmore, this was my first experience with it. For me, this was as much a part of the learning experience as any classroom setting; gleaning the cultural capital I could from these women of a class I had never been exposed to, while learning to be flexible with my own class background. I passed as upper class when necessary -- to travel, dine out, go to clubs -- because of Swarthmore college and money I had received for exactly for this purpose. That is, the financial capital of Swarthmore allowed me to
access the cultural capital of tourism and old-money elites that I would have otherwise never had access to.

That afternoon, after the bike tour, we walked around the city stopping in cafes, shopping and waiting in line for the Anne Frank house. We went to a club until 5am, and tried to squeeze in a museum at 10am after only a few hours of sleep. We boarded our plane at 5pm and were safely back in Spain by nightfall. We were not concerned with meeting locals, challenging our stereotypes of Amsterdam, or even learning a single word of Dutch. In the purest sense we had “collected” Amsterdam, able to now say that we had been there whenever it might come up in conversation. Or better yet, wistfully cry “Oh, I did love that city! So beautiful!” It is in this way, then, that I flew around Europe in the Fall of 2015, adding cities to my arsenal of capital, and appearing ever more educated and elite for having seen 23 cities in four months.
Seville, Spain
November, 2016

A tour guide rebuffs my criticism of Christopher Columbus by bringing up Nixon.

"Pero los EEUU son malos también, vosotros respetáis a Nixon después de haber destruido América Latina"

"But the US isn’t great either. You all honor Nixon even after he destroyed Latin America."

"Nosotros los sevillanos somos muy orgullosos de tener el mausoleo y los restos de Colón aquí / We Sevillians are very proud to have Columbus’ mausoleum and remains here in Seville,” the tour guide explained as we stood in front of an ornate tomb with the remains of Christopher Columbus inside. I was shocked. I approached her as we were walking away from the tomb, “are you really proud to have him here?” “Of course we are, why wouldn’t we be?” she replied. I explained to her that I was surprised given the history of Columbus decimating indigenous populations across the Americas. She offered that he was understood differently in Spain. He was a national hero, she argued. He had furthered the Spanish empire and deserves to be celebrated. Again, I was shocked. Reacting to my shock, the tour guide became defensive, “but the US celebrates controversial figures as well. It’s not great either! You all honor Nixon even after he destroyed Latin America.”

I found this redirection to be a common tactic of both Spaniards and Cubans when confronted with critique. For example, when talking about racism in Cuba, Cubans, especially professors, would tend to mention that the US had problems with race as well. “At least our police officers aren’t killing black people on the street,” or its sentiment was a refrain I encountered whenever I brought up race. Enlightening, my host brother explained race in Spain to me, “we don’t have races. We have nationalities.” In saying this he was arguing that there wasn’t racism, rather national discrimination, in Spain either. In both countries, people I spoke to were concerned with my imposition of an American racial understanding onto their nuanced understanding of race.
Maybe it was because I spent my international experience in search of political conversations, or maybe it was because I was always intent to demonstrate my distaste for US foreign policy, but my Americanness was unavoidable in most conversations with locals. Ironically, in my desire to distance myself from the US, I all but ensure that I was identified by those I was speaking with as American, even if I was a critical American. “I don’t think he’s trying to be critical of Spain, but is concerned with global injustices. He criticizes the US just as harshly,” my professor explained to my Spanish program director after the incident at Columbus’ tomb. She was also defensive after my comments about Columbus, even though I knew, from previous conversations, that she was also critical of the history of Spanish colonialism. These convictions, however, and the intense emotional responses from both the tour guide and my director, demonstrate the depth of national identities, even if they are imagined communities of unique individuals.

In saying that America too celebrates problematic national figures, the tour guide was echoing Benedict Anderson’s analysis of required forgetting that comprises national narratives: “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (2006, 6). This imagined comradeship requires both present and historic ignorance of injustice. When pushed, both Spaniards in some way recognized that Columbus was not necessarily the pure national figure that he was presented as. Moreover, their defensiveness was likely because, as Anderson argues, the idea of nationhood is inherently limited (3). That is, the inclusion in nationality necessitates an exclusion of other nations (colors, languages, sexualities, etc.). It makes sense then, that they would view my critique as a stake for American superiority. Why else would an American be so interested in critiquing national figures if not to demonstrate the US is somehow better. The redirect response, therefore, follows as an attempt
to educate me about my own ugly national histories that are forgotten in many national narratives and an assertion that every nation has their dirty pasts and presents.
Havana, Cuba

April, 2016

I watch my Black salsa instructor of four months dance with a series of White women at a salsa club where white American women regularly go to pick up Black Cuban men.

"Y yo les dije, si alguien tiene algún problema, ustedes son los clientes y hay que respetarles y sus deseos."

"And I told them, if anyone has any problem, you all are the customers and we have to respect you and your wishes."

It was only 4pm but the dance floor was filled. Salsa music blasted out of the speakers. I sat, watching the salseros spinning around changing partners as the songs changed. The majority of the dancers were black or mulattos, the Cuban name for those with mixed-race backgrounds. However, several white Americans stood out in the crowd. They were tall, wearing clothes that a Cuban would not wear, and had an intangible quality that identified them as not only White, but also American, out of place. There were more American women than men, and they danced stiffly compared to their Cuban counterparts. I was on edge. I knew that sex tourism was very popular in Cuba, and witnessed uncomfortable interactions between Black or mulatta Cuban women and White American men throughout my time in Havana.

I met Anton through salsa classes organized by the program in Cuba. He was the lead salsa instructor amongst a group of Cuban instructors who were contacted by our assistant director. She had come to Cuba to dance, and had many friends who were happy to make money teaching Salsa to foreigners. After our first lesson I admitted to her that I felt uncomfortable. Salsa is an intensely gendered dance, and was being taught as if everyone in the lesson were heterosexual. "Where was the space for queer salsa?" I asked her? What does it look like? Does it even happen? She admitted that she didn’t know, but she took that impetus to ask her friends to help create gender-neutral Salsa lessons. In these lessons we would not refer to dance steps as “female” or “male” but rather as
“leading” or “following.” The next lesson, Anton announced the plan to the class, ensured everyone that the instructors had met beforehand and had agreed to this. He then asked us to make two lines: leaders on one side, followers on another. All of the men and two women moved to the leader’s side. The remaining women and myself moved to the followers side. I was nervous, standing with the rest of the women from the group around me. The instructors did not hesitate and proceeded with the lesson normally.

I left that class elated. I had never before given such explicit permission to explore my gender identity and its expression. Despite the gender transgression, I felt much more comfortable in the follower role than in the leader role, and these salsa classes became the best part of my week and, eventually, my entire experience. As we advanced from learning basic steps in a line, Anton became my personal instructor. I am not sure that I learned very much rhythm or actual salsa steps with these 3 months of classes, but I did learn more about myself and my own gender and sexuality than I had ever previously. These classes, and Anton, became intensely personally important to me and I loved going to them. The assistant director organized a dinner with three lead instructors to discuss the progress of this gender neutral experiment. She spent ten minutes explaining, in Spanish, as much for our instructors as for us, that gender was a social construct, that there was no reason that dance could not be gender neutral, and that she was thankful to our instructors for taking up this class with seriousness.

Anton listened carefully and then responded that he was excited to be doing this because it was a challenge to him, he had never taught a man to follow before, and that he could use this skill in case any other male client wanted to learn from him. He also said that he had not heard anything disparaging from the group of instructors, saying that when he was organizing the class he said “si alguien tiene algún problema, ustedes son los clientes y hay que respetarles y sus deseos. /if anyone has any problem, you all are the customers and we have to respect you and your wishes.” He was
less concerned with the ideological implications of the class -- resisting the gender binary, and was instead focused on the material consequences of refusing the class. After all, each instructor was getting paid $60 a week for the classes. For reference, the average monthly wage for Cubans employed by the state is $20. These classes, and the friendships that came out of them, could not be separated from the material differences of the American students (and their institutional sponsorship), and Cuban dancers. Americanness, in this context, was inextricably linked with capital. In a state where a taxi driver working with tourists can make more than a professor, most interactions with Americans were framed by market-based considerations.

Socially, there were many difficulties with my learning to follow instead of lead. Despite my progress, I would skip most salsa clubs, not wanting to dance with women and being nervous of dancing with men in an otherwise straight environment. In one particular instance, our Salsa instructors, who had we had considered friends at that point, took us to a birthday party of one of their friends. It was hosted in an open-air stage in a suburb of Havana. When we got there, I sat, not knowing how to lead -- safe in its communication of heterosexuality, and I was too nervous to follow -- a dangerous self-outing in an unknown environment. I began dancing with one of the women who was learning to lead, and was hyper conscious of my visibility. The more I dance without incident, the more comfortable I felt. I was surprised, though, when a male salsa instructor reached his hand to me, “me?” I asked, incredulously. He nodded and we began dancing as if there was no issue. I left that night, once again, elated that my gender expression had been validated in public -- that this supposedly straight Cuban dance instructor had asked me to dance.

The context of these classes -- a huge tourist market for Black cuban dance instructors -- was hinted at before, but I was never forced to confront it in such an obvious way as I did while watching that afternoon party. Anton moved through a seemingly endless stream of White American women who all knew how to dance. Several, it seemed, had even learned form him. I sat, growing
more and more uncomfortable with my place in a system of commercialized bodies. This experience that was so personal and important to me, was one that was shared by hundreds of thousands of white women, traveling to Cuba and enjoying its beaches as much as its Salsa instructors, usually Black men. Was I better than them? Less “tourist” than that? Was a mere recognition of this system enough to keep me clean? I left, unable to watch and contemplate my position any longer.

In Cuba, with these Salsa classes, my most intimate identities became uncomfortably inseparable. I was American, White, queer and I had money -- lots of it from institutions in the US. I ultimately gained cultural capital in these experiences, revealed to be typically tourist that afternoon. More importantly, though, I realized the impossibility of parsing these identities. As much as I wanted to I could not separate myself from my Americanness, and the money it suggested, just as I could not separate myself from my queerness and the danger it presented in many public spaces. I was at once American and critical of America, a tourist and critical of tourism, wealthy (at least with institutional support) and first generation. The cultural capital, a national identity transformed by international travel, experiences and opportunities that my parents had never dreamed of, were all products of this year of travel. Salsa in Cuba proved how uncomfortable and transformative they it had been.

**Conclusion**

When I returned from my full year abroad (an academic year and summer), I struggled to readjust to domestic life. All the friends that I had made while away were scattered across the US and around the world. All of the loved ones I returned home to seemed unchanged, and I was worried that this unchanging threatened the progress I had made on myself over the past year. I was frustrated that those around me could not relate to the experiences that I had while abroad; after the first week they became increasingly tired of my abroad stories. In hindsight, I was suffering from reverse culture shock, a common experience of returning students. I had not really experience any
kind of culture shock when traveling, at least not consciously, so I was hesitant to label my returning frustrations as such. After about a month I had readjusted to a domestic existence. I stopped looking for flights, programs, planning my next trip. I was excited by my internship and looking forward to returning to Swarthmore. Certainly, I had missed my American, liberal arts-style education.

And yet, while reverse culture shock is in many ways a convincing explanation, it was surprising how similar the frustrations with my family were when I returned home abroad to when I returned home after my freshman year. A part of me, in fact, believes that I traveled so much to avoid confronting the growing distance between me and my parents. I knew it would be difficult to live at home after my freshman year, so that summer I lived abroad. My parents, for all the time and energy they put into my education, have at the same time distanced me from them. Of course, they could not participate in my classes at Swarthmore just as they could not have the internship I had in Ecuador. As a first generation student, my life in college is the deepest ways inaccessible to my parents. As I am being prepared for life in the upper-middle class (with the travel, cultural tastes and knowledge that it requires) I am also being disconnected from the experiences of my family.

With that upper-middle class education also comes, in my experience, with a complicated idea of American identity. Perhaps it is part of Huntington’s “transnational elite” rejection of nationalism, but more believably to me it is the critical lens that is gained through education of and exposure to other cultural contexts. Of course, both of those things come with class privilege. Therefore, Swarthmore has provided me not only with the academic and cultural education necessary to enter the upper-middle class (exposure to the tastes of the dominant class), but also the international education that such a class transition requires. Swarthmore provided me with these educations in the most literal sense: paying for me to travel, to take classes abroad, to be a tourist in Europe and Latin America. It grounded those international experiences through domestic classes that ensured I maintained a sufficiently critical lens of my education but also exposed me to the languages, art
preferences, and theorists that the academic class necessitates. In these ways, I have spent four years in rapid transition from a middle class background to the upper/middle class, or at least to the tastes and identities of this class.
Chapter 3: Social class and education history abroad

Introduction

“People talk about the culture shock of a new city when you study abroad and I really didn’t feel that, it was just the culture shock of the group of Americans that I was with.”

Valerie had just landed after a 13 hour flight from Los Angeles to Vienna, Austria. She was waiting in the baggage claim, excited and anxious to meet the people she would be spending the next four months abroad with. Her mother grew up in Germany, and she had traveled to Europe several times to see family. In fact, she declared a German Studies minor because she wanted to deepen the connection to her mother’s history and culture. She was confident that she would be comfortable transitioning to living abroad; culture shock only sets in when you’re exposed to a new culture, and she had been exposed to the culture of German-speaking Europe since birth. Yet, as her peers started arriving to the airport, she sensed that theirs would be the culture she would struggle adjusting to. “After seeing how they spent their money I could kind of ascertain that they were of a different socioeconomic status than I was,” she commented, remarking that as time progressed, she didn’t struggle to connect to the culture of Vienna, but rather to the culture of her American peers.

A child of immigrants, Valerie was also a first generation college student. Yet, she expressed difficulty claiming that label because she went to a private high school. Here, she said, in order to be adequately first generation, “there are all these explanations that I feel very much that I have to give.” However, through the support of the college (a cash free campus, financial aid, understanding friends) being low-income was not an identity that she had to explore. Even studying abroad, she affirmed that “Swat does a pretty good job of supporting students financially. It’s not like that at a lot of other colleges.” But through study abroad, this identity, and her class transition, was actively explored. Class transition, and its sociocultural implications, became an active process as Valerie was
excluded from the group of American students because they were able to spend more money abroad but responded to that exclusion by distinguishing herself as a more "authentic" traveler. This distinction, that rich American students who travel all over Europe have a less authentic experience than those who do not travel as frequently, or who are more immersed in their experience, was a theme across first gen and non-first gen participants. It illustrates the facility with which codes of class distinction are absorbed, both by people who may have received those codes from their parents and by those who needed to find them somewhere else. Ian Munt (1994) describes this phenomenon, and especially its prevalence amongst youth tourists, as the "new postmodern tourism" and argues that it is an essential element in the development of modern middle classes.

This chapter will focus on these issues of class and access, and will explore the ways that students, especially first gen students, feel excluded from study abroad. However, it will also demonstrate that study abroad is a site of active class transition, where students are given the opportunity to employ the strategies of class distinction that define bourgeoisie and middle class solidification. Despite Valerie’s material exclusion from her upper/middle class peers, she knew to code that exclusion by focusing on the distinctions of tourism, where the number of places you are able to visit does not matter if you are not also able to immerse yourself (or be perceived as immersed) in the culture. For Valerie, this was the primary way that class transition appeared in study abroad. For other students, it appeared in their ability to integrate themselves materially and culturally into their peer groups of the upper/middle class and for others still it came from a combination of the two. Unable to spend the same amount as their peers, they blended strategies of thrift, “I would order the cheapest thing on the menu, always,” in order to include themselves when possible but knew to distinguish themselves when necessary. In talking about feeling American while abroad, one student mentioned that he felt American until he saw American tourists: “I would see groups of other tourists, or even other students sometimes, and I would think ‘well, I’m pretty much
Cuban at this point’ because they’d just be so oblivious.” Class distinction while abroad almost always intersects with American identity, and the next chapter explores the facets of nationality abroad and its implications for students in class transition/solidification. I begin with a note on methods and participant identities followed by brief biographies to be referenced as the chapter progresses. Overall, class and education history (and its intersections with race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality) while abroad are complicated, and students respond to its challenges in a diversity of ways. However, the significance of travel and its implications for socioeconomic class were not lost on any of my participants. International tourism, as distinguished from immigration, is an inherently classed experience, connoting leisure and disposable income. Each participant struggled with understanding these implications for themselves differently, but each of them also understood its importance to their experience at a private liberal arts college preparing them for upper/middle class life.

A note on methods and identities

I interviewed 11 students who had recently returned from study abroad. Part of the interview process was a survey that asked estimated family income level and whether or not they identified as First-Generation college students in order to better understand their experiences through the dual lenses of socioeconomic class and education history. Overall, my participants’ identities as First-Gen students coincided with lower incomes; each participant who identified as First-Gen also reported an annual family income of $100,000 or less. For comparison, each student who did not identify as First-Gen reported an annual family income of over $150,000. However, these identities and experiences were complicated through the interview process.

Depending on their experiences, students across class and education backgrounds identified difficulties and successes in their study abroad experiences. For example, Alexis, a biracial Black presenting woman who studied abroad in Western Europe, was not the first in her family to go to college, had traveled extensively with her family growing up, and reported a family income of over
150k, and yet she also reported difficulty integrating to life while abroad, having different values and
goals from her peers and also facing racism without sufficient support from the program or her peers. On the other hand, Samuel, a biracial White and Latino first generation college student who reported a family income of under 50k, studied abroad in North Africa and found a program and friends while abroad that allowed him to thrive -- meeting locals, engaging in complicated and
difficult discussions around race, national identity, and even American foreign policy. These two
examples typify the findings of this study. Experiences while studying abroad are complicated and
are impacted by issues of racism, sexism as well as program structure and attitude, that is, how
willing is the program to facilitate conversations that promote the integration of non-white, low-
income or otherwise marginalized students.

While incomplete lenses to understand the full study abroad experience, socioeconomic class
and education history are important entrees to a world dominated by high-income, White female
students. The questions central to this chapter are: how do students report support from programs
abroad in dealing with issues of social class, race, and gender? How do students navigate classed
experiences while abroad (travel, bars, nightclubs) and do these strategies differ between First-Gen
and non-First-Gen students? And, finally, what kinds of cultural capital are gained through the study
abroad process and how successful are students in internalizing that capital?

The participants I interviewed came from a wide variety of backgrounds and had a diverse
range of experiences while abroad. Participants were intentionally selected not to serve as a
representative for the types of people that study abroad, predominantly upper-middle class, white
women, but rather to represent the range of experiences that students might have. Out of eleven
participants, five were black and four were white. Four identified as Latino. Seven were women and
four were men. 6 were the first in their family to attend college while 5 had a parent or guardian who
graduated from college before them. They represented family incomes ranging from less than
$50,000 a year to over $150,000 a year and had differing experiences at Swarthmore and abroad because of money.

**Participant biographies**

*Michelle*

Senior Sociology/Anthropology & Education special major with a Spanish Minor, Michelle studied abroad in South America to improve Spanish and because it is a requirement for the Spanish minor. A black Latina, she was born and raised in San Francisco. A first-generation college student, she reports her combined family income to be between $50,000 and $100,000. She was exposed to prior travel abroad through her private high school. She was very nervous about being Black in South American and experienced racialized street harassment that affected her experience.

She studied abroad through a large international study corporation and most of her classes were with other American students while she had one class directly enrolled with only local students. She lived in a homestay but reported making friends almost exclusively with other Americans on her program.

*David*

David is a senior Medical Anthropology Special Major who studied abroad in the Caribbean to study Spanish and international medical systems. Born in Boston, Massachusetts, he is White and reports a family income of over $150,000. He is not a first-generation college student.

¾ of his classes were with other American students while 1 was with mixed American and local students. He lived in a type of homestay where a Cuban family looked after 6 American students but did not live with them. He reported being moderately satisfied with the relationships he was able to make with locals, but that because of his living situation most of his interactions were necessarily with other Americans.
Zoe

A Senior Theater Major and Educational Studies & Sociology Special Major, Zoe studied in Northern Europe. Mixed race White and African-American, she reported a family income greater than $150,000. She was born and raised in Madison, Wisconsin and is not a first generation college student.

She studied abroad through a large international study corporation. All of her classes were in English and with other American students. She lived in an apartment by herself within a dorm for local students but reported struggling to create friendships with either locals or other American students.

Rene

A Senior Psychology Major, Rene studied in Southern Africa. A Black student from New Orleans, she reported a family income of less than $50,000. She identifies as a first generation college student. She chose to study in Africa because of negative experiences other black travelers had in other regions.

She was directly enrolled in her local university and all of her classes were with a mix of local students and American students. She lived in a dormitory at the local institution with two local students as roommates, but most of her friends were still Americans.

Sadie

A Senior Sociology/Anthropology and Education Special Major and Chinese minor, Sadie studied for a semester in Asia and a semester in Europe. A Black student from New York, she reported a family income of more than $150,000. She does not identify as a first generation college student. She explicitly identified increased job/business opportunities as one factor pushing her to study abroad and learn a foreign language.
Sadie studied abroad in Asia through a large for-profit study abroad corporation where all of her classes were with American students. In Europe, she directly enrolled in a local institution and all of her classes were a mix of local and American students. In both locations she lived in a dormitory at a local institution. She reported being able to make more local friends in Europe than in Asia.

Julia

A Senior Computer Science and Sociology double major, Julia studied abroad in South America. A White student from Chicago, she reported a family income of more than $150,000. She does not identify as a first generation college student. She chose to study abroad in South America because she had hosted an exchange student from Chile growing up and because her brother had studied in Buenos Aires.

Julia studied through a large study abroad corporation that allowed her to directly enroll in several classes at a local university. Two of her classes were with only American students and another two were with a combination of local and American students. She had a bad experience in her homestay but had a family friend who lived in the area. This friend introduced her to other locals and helped to integrate her into daily life while abroad.

Anna

A Senior Economics Major, Anna studied in Northern Europe. A Black student from New Jersey, she reported a family income of more than $150,000. She does not identify as a first generation college student.

Anna studied with a large study abroad corporation. Two of her classes were with only American students, one was with a combination of local and American students and one was with only local students. She lived in an apartment with other international students but not any students from the host country. She was able to make friends with other internationals, but not with local students.
**Andres**

A Senior Comparative Literature major and Latin American studies and Educational Studies double minor, Andres studied in the Caribbean. A Mexican-American student from Chicago, he reported a family income of less than $50,000. He identifies as a first generation college student. Andres studied through a program run by a college comparable to Swarthmore and one of his classes was with only American students while three were with only local students. He lived in an apartment with other American students and was able to make friends with locals through extracurricular activities.

**Jeremy**

Jeremy is a Senior Political Science/Islamic Studies major who studied abroad in North Africa to study Arabic. Mixed race white and Latino, he was born in suburban New Mexico. He is a low-income first generation college student who marked that his family income was less than $50,000. Neither of his two older siblings went to college and his family had no idea what college was going to be like.

He studied through a corporate study abroad organization and all of his classes were with American students. He stayed in a homestay and reported making lots of local friends through the homestay and meetups organized by the program.

**Sean**

A Senior Political Science and Sociology Anthropology Double Major, Sean studied in Central America. A White student from rural Pennsylvania, he reported a family income of less than $50,000. He identifies as a first generation college student.

He studied through a non-profit study abroad organization focused on development studies. He had 3 classes with only other American students and 2 internship-style classes where he was working directly with local populations. Because his program switched countries several times...
throughout the semester, he reported difficulty creating friendships with locals. However, in each country he lived in a homestay.

**Valerie**

A Senior Art History major and German studies and Peace and Conflict studies double minor, Valerie studied in Central Europe. A mixed-race Latina and white student from San Diego, she reported a family income of between $50,000 and $100,000. She identifies as a first generation college student. She chose to study in Europe because of her mother's German heritage.

She studied through a large study abroad corporation and all five of her classes were with only other American students. She lived in an apartment with only other Americans but reported feeling culture shock not with the Europeans but rather with the level of class privilege expressed by her fellow American students. She struggled to make friends.

**Data analysis**

**Material support from Swarthmore**

Consistent across almost all participants was an appreciation for the amount of money that Swarthmore provided to students traveling abroad. While this money, for most, was not sufficient to travel to the extent that their peers did, it was an essential part of making study abroad accessible to all students. For several participants, this material resource provided by the institution allowed them to travel, something they had never been able to do in the past. Andres remarks, “My family didn’t really have the money or the time to go anywhere when I was younger.” Coming to Swarthmore, however, he was able to apply for funds to travel over the summer to Ecuador, “I applied for funding through the Lang Center and they provided the funds for me to be able to live there. I wouldn’t have gone otherwise.” Similarly, Valerie said that “Swat was pretty good at making [her] feel okay. They provided a pretty great stipend.” Of course, students from higher socioeconomic
backgrounds did have as great of a need for these stipends. Julia, when asked about her concerns of money before going replied straightforwardly, “I wasn’t concerned about money. My parents funded it.”

Regardless of whether students received funds primarily from their parents or from Swarthmore, all students reported being surprised by the amount of money they would eventually end up spending while away, especially if they wanted to travel. “I think while I was there, there was stress around ‘oh, you’re abroad’ and there’s this culture of doing all these different things, especially if you’re with other American students. There’s money associated with that,” remarked Sean, while explaining that, for him, Swarthmore gave as much as could be expected, but that the culture and background of the students he was with meant that this was not enough. Even students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds reported needing to save money before going abroad and that they had to learn to budget. For several, study abroad was their first exposure to budgeting of this kind. “I completely ran out of money while abroad. I did not budget well...There was definitely some tension between me and my parents during that time because I had to ask my parents for extra money,” Zoe told me, frustrated by her budget. Of course, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds did not have the same kinds of parental safety nets to rely on, and were more likely to report using on campus jobs as a way to fund their studies (and travels) abroad.

Most importantly for our purposes, however, is that because both domestic and international travel while abroad is essential to accumulating (inter)cultural capital, students with access to more material capital than Swarthmore could provide demonstrated that capital by traveling or going out, and were thus able to solidify their classed positions abroad.

Techniques and strategies

Many first-gen students easily compared their experiences with class abroad to their experiences with class at Swat, indicating that they had developed strategies for navigating class
difference or other marginalizations that they employed while away. Valerie continued to talk about her shock with the level of wealth of her peers abroad saying, "I felt more culture shock with the people on my program; I didn’t expect to see that kind of wealth...I guess I was also shocked when I came to Swat, I wasn’t expecting the level of wealth of my peers.” The ease with which these participants, usually first gen students, connected their classed experiences abroad to their classed experiences at Swarthmore supports the argument that study abroad is a continuation of class socialization. Moreover, this socialization can be isolating for those who do not have parents or other family members to talk to about their experiences as college students. In order to overcome this isolation from, some first-gen participants poignantly spoke about ‘teaching backwards. That is, where they could they would explain college to their parents in order to mitigate the distance between first gen students and their parents. Samuel, for example, talked about needing to teach his parents about what study abroad is, how it works, and what it means in the same ways that he had to walk them through the transition to college as a first generation college student. [His parents say] “you need to teach us, what is going on? What is Swarthmore? What are you learning? What are your classes like? So when I talk to them now, we’re still having these conversations. So when I tell them about my classes they ask, “okay, so is that common for all colleges or is that something that Swarthmore just does? They’ve been open to learning.” This backwards education was not the only means by which first-gen students navigated class transition while abroad.

Many participants cultivated relationships with peers that were like them -- with similar backgrounds, socioeconomically, racially, and otherwise. Rene, a first gen black student, told me, "schooling for me was very white, so naturally if I saw a face that looked like mine it was like, ‘I want to get to know you. I want to be your friend. So I saw that happen here, at Swarthmore, and it did happen in study abroad as well.” Most of the other American students on her program in southern Africa were white. She cultivated deep friendships with the three other black women on
the program, allowing her to navigate a deeply racialized and classed space with support. “Most of
the friends I made were African American and it was most of our first times going abroad, so we
were all thrown into this situation together and we share the same culture. I think we all just
gravitated towards each other.” In fact, for Rene, these friendships became so powerful that she did
not feel any need to make other friends -- African or American. It was clear that this solidarity in
shared experience was a common strategy for Rene, who learned to do the same in high school and
at Swarthmore.

Of course, Rene’s was not a universal experience. While abroad in China, Sadie
demonstrated that just because students share a race or even backgrounds, does not mean that they
share a culture or even goals for the experience. “I didn’t really vibe with any of the other black
women in the program at all. I didn’t vibe with a lot of the kids in the program in general...A lot of
them were international relations or business majors, and that is not why I study Chinese...So, all the
black girls in the program were business majors and they didn’t really care much about the culture so
it was kind of hard to have a conversation because they were there for very different reasons.” For
Sadie, students in China to learn business were not available friendships because their reasons for
studying were radically different from her own. It is important to note that Sadie had extensive travel
experience before studying abroad, and that while both participants went to predominantly white
schools, Sadie did not report seeking out other black students in order to support her. Able to more
easily transition to life abroad because of her experience and feeling disconnected with those sharing
her identities on the trip, Sadie did not need to form those relationships in order to have a successful
experience.

(Inter)cultural capital

Participants reported gaining the intercultural capital that study abroad offices claim as
benefits for study abroad. That is, students gain awareness and comfortable familiarity with
intercultural environments. However, participants who had traveled before reported already understanding this kind of capital, suggesting that it was tourism, not necessarily studying abroad, that allowed for access to this capital. Moreover, participants also reporting being hyper aware of the class that travel and, especially, their peers travel, communicated. This is especially important given the context of participants reporting receiving enough money to study abroad, but having to give up extracurricular travel experience when they do not have parents (or institutional funding) to support it.

There was a split between participants who studied abroad in Europe and those who studied in South America. Many participants who studied in Europe, such as Valerie, reported feeling isolated from their American peers because of their ability to travel or not. Just as Valerie characterized her experience as somehow more authentic than that of her peers, several students who studied in South America also suggested that their experience of immersion in one country was more authentic than short travel to several. For example, Julia expressed frustration at the students who 1) chose to study in Europe, 2) traveled to different cities around Europe while there, and who then, 3) posted photos on social media of their travels. She expressed that they weren’t “truly” getting to know the places they were studying in and instead seemed like they just wanted to check as many cities off a list as possible. “It seemed kind of a gross display of wealth to me that you would take a semester abroad and not even be where you wanted to be...I was really proud that I learned the city and I know the neighborhoods and I really felt like I lived there and that was really important to me. I guess, in that sense, it was decidedly not a vacation.” For Julia, the benefit of study abroad was immersion into the host culture. She went into her abroad experience knowing someone in the host country. This allowed her to make friends with locals and to immerse herself further into the host culture than other students were able to. Moreover, her distinction between this type of tourism and the type that students in Europe demonstrates Munt’s argument of youth
tourism, which employs authenticity as a measure of status in tourism. According to Julia, students who were able to have a more “authentic” experience have a better experience.

Curiously, Valerie, rather than focusing explicitly on differences, focused on the material wealth that “authenticity” requires. “But it’s really hard to know authenti...and what does that even mean ‘authentically’ experiencing a city. But you try to do that anyways usually, and I guess one of the ways you do that is you consume the culture. You go eat out in the restaurants and you go shopping and all these things take a lot of money, to always go out to lunch and always get coffee and all of that. I definitely could not do that.” Valerie notes that in order to consume culture, authentically or inauthentically, you need to have money. Despite her lack of funds as compared to her peers, however, she still managed to consume the culture of Vienna. Just as Julia talked about feeling proud that she immersed herself in her host country, Valerie spends the majority of her time in Vienna. She goes to art museums and babysits, making connections to locals that her peers who are traveling do not. While she expressed frustration that her peers were so blatantly able to spend, she got out of study abroad what she needed to. While talking about her peers going to clubs on a regularly basis she remarks, “I didn’t really participate in that because I couldn’t spend that kind of money and also that wasn’t the experience I was looking for in Vienna.”

Students understand class and race while abroad in complicated ways, just as they do back home. However, in many ways, study abroad becomes the site where the navigation of these identities becomes fraught and frustrated. Participants respond to challenges to these identities in a variety of ways. They may look for friends of similar backgrounds or they may find a way to more deeply integrate themselves into the host culture. Through all of these methods, however, students are developing (inter)cultural capital: the ability to navigate intercultural situations and employ those skills for adequate class distinction. Authenticity while traveling becomes the most important
question for this development, as those having more authentic experiences are doing travel “better” than those who are not, regardless of material wealth.
Chapter 4: American identity through study abroad

Jeremy was sitting in a crowded theater, exhausted after a long day of travel. The room was hot and the other people with him were ready to leave. He was struggling to pay attention to a speech on terrorism in Tunisia, the country he was studying in, when suddenly a man jumped up and began shouting. Jeremy speaks Arabic, but it was difficult to understand exactly what was happening. “In that moment, we all thought ‘oh, we’re gonna die.... We’re going to be the American kids on the news.” Jeremy was one of 12 Americans in Tunisia while he was studying abroad there. Whenever the group traveled anywhere, they were escorted by the police. Despite knowing that the threat of an actual terrorist attack was fairly low, there was a constant awareness of danger. The man shouting was not a terrorist. He was drunk and heard the speaker make a grammatical error. He wanted to make sure the speaker knew his mistake, and ended up being escorted away from the event.

After the incident, the academic director of Jeremy’s program in Tunisia facilitated a conversation to debrief. All of the American students were scared that there was going to be a terrorist attack in that moment. This conversation allowed students the space to process that event, and understand how they felt especially as Americans -- outsiders -- in that space. “Reflecting back we thought, ‘why did we feel that way?’ We had lived in Tunisia for three and a half months and nothing bad had ever happened.” Moreover, in this conversation Jeremy and his classmates were able to identify the tenacity of prejudice and stereotypes, “A common theme was that if people could just experience Tunisia [as we were] they would see that it’s different. It's a very liberal society that people don’t give it credit for. But in that moment, we all reverted back to a very primal ‘oh God, this is what’s gonna happen.’ In that discussion, it made me feel very American that, even after living there for three months, I still have some biases.” While the particulars of Jeremy's experience were unique amongst the participants of this study, the threat of terrorism was not nearly as salient
for anyone else, the outcomes were not. There were several programs, usually in countries where it is more difficult to escape the political baggage of being American -- Cuba, the Middle East, Central America -- that actively facilitated conversations that challenged students' biases and assumptions as Americans. Meanwhile, there were many other programs that did not facilitate these conversations and participants in these programs reported feeling more conflict or isolation from locals.

**Introduction**

According to study abroad professionals, one of the best reasons for studying abroad is that exposure to other cultures and nationalities increases one's comfort in diverse environments and challenges prejudices and presumptions in ways that are impossible domestically. Meanwhile, the research suggests that the truth about study abroad and its impact on national identity development is more complicated. While study abroad has impressive outcomes for language learning, confidence building, and indicates an increased level of tolerance (Nash 1976, Carlson, Burn and Yachimowicz 1990), it simultaneously increases identification with, and pride of, students' original countries (Jones 2014). This chapter will explore the seeming contradiction of those findings; how can students learn tolerance of other cultures and at the same time increase feelings of nationalism and national pride?

Amongst participants, all of whom were American citizens, two factors primarily affected responses to American identity and national pride: 1) the political attitude of the program (did the program facilitate conversations that challenged students' nationalistic assumptions?) and 2) the race or ethnicity of the participant (white participants generally had a more favorable articulation of American identity). The chapter will be structured to analyze these two factors with a following section analyzing the varied and complex response to the question "are you proud to be an American, and would your response to that question be different [?] if you were talking to someone who wasn't from America?" This question, with its various political implications, was the most
provocative question asked during the interview. Students had thoughtful, complicated, and at times contradictory responses to the idea of American pride.

**Programs Matter**

*David*

Student experiences abroad, especially those experiences that had the power to shape their understanding of national identity, varied greatly. Programs, and influential or visionary staff members especially, had the power to show students new perspectives and challenge the ways that students understood Americanness in addition to the ways that they understood the social and cultural dynamics of the host country. Especially participants who studied in countries where Americanness was actively contested -- because of political positions or historical interference -- the program staff had the power to transform student experiences, which, in turn, transformed the ways that they thought about being American. For example, we will see two participants who studied in Cuba and Tunisia, where key staff members allowed them deeper access into the host countries and facilitated important conversations about uncomfortable Americanness in these nations. On the other hand, students who did not have the key staff members providing that kind of support still had their Americanness challenged, but did not receive the programmatic support to process that in any meaningful way. For example, one participant who studied in Denmark reported feeling isolated from her peers and her program, and when she had an experience where she felt defensive of her Americanness, she did not have the support to process it. In this example, the program failed to facilitate a conversation with its students about what it means to be American in a foreign context. Without that support, the student interviewed felt alone and frustrated. Clearly, programs matter.

David was preparing for a night out. It was midway through the semester and the assistant director of his program in Havana, Cuba, Alex, had invited her students to a party at her house. He
was not sure what shoes he should wear. He had been learning Salsa for the past 4 weeks but still sometimes struggled to grasp the steps. Alex was an unusual assistant director, it turned out. She came to Cuba originally to learn salsa, but supported herself while there by working in the tourism industry. She had just landed this job with a study abroad program last semester, and revealed herself to be a natural teacher. She organized several events throughout the semester to help her students understand the complexity of living in Cuba. Weekly, she provided students with “paquetes,” or folders of documents and videos distributed via flash drives. Normally, Cubans used paquetes to distribute American movies and television shows in a country with censored Internet. Alex used the paquete to provide her students with academic articles on Cuba, tourism, and study abroad as well as episodes of Democracy Now! and other leftist material. One was devoted to Anarchism. Another was devoted to the history of the Black Panthers and their connection to Cuba. Still another was filled with critical articles on tourism -- encouraging her students to be self-critical of their time in Cuba.

Even more important to David than the paquetes were the salsa classes. Alex organized all of her friends who were salsa instructors to come and teach her students salsa. She could get her friends paid by the study abroad program and at the same time make sure her students are learning salsa from the best instructors she knows. These instructors, more than just teaching dance, served as vital points of access to a side of Cuban society that was often hidden or inaccessible through the classroom and other scheduled program activities. In a context where most interactions with Cubans were with professors or other people that were either associated with the government or older than students, meeting young Cubans who were self-employed was refreshing and different. These interactions provided access to Cuban culture in a way that was not possible when interactions were limited just to professors. David elaborates on the distinct sets of knowledge from the two:
"I would say that I learned different sets of knowledge from professors and from students and from non-professors and non-students. So I'll give an example. Near the end of our program there was a March for the first of May. What the professors would say about it was that Cubans are excited about their good labor standards and they get the day off on May 1st (which was a Saturday or a Sunday) and they celebrate by marching and just have a good time celebrating the revolution. But when we would talk about it with our salsa teachers it was in the context of trying to plan a trip to the beach and we were like 'do you wanna go to the beach on Saturday?' and one was like 'yeah!' and one was like 'no, I have to do the fucking march today.' And he was like, 'yeah, you have to line up at like 5am or 7am and stand in line for a long time and it sucks.' So it's like different perspectives."

For David, it was his interactions with young Cubans in his salsa classes that provided him a critical perspective on nationality. He eventually concludes that, "most Cuban people weren’t like, I hate the US government but I love the Cuban government, or Castro sucks but you’re doing it right in the US. It would be like; these politicians don’t know what they’re doing." Meeting Cubans that were as times as critical of the Cuban government as he was of the US government allowed him to connect better with Cubans and challenged his notions of national identity.

He decided that he would dress up for the night. He put on a button up and tucked it into his pants. Slipping on a pair of black shoes he walked the three blocks to Alex’s house. He greeted everyone at the party with a kiss or a handshake, and was quickly invited to dance. He was not as smooth as some of the other dancers, but each of them was an instructor and David could not compare himself to them. He danced with Alex as the night came to an end -- Alex’s landlord shouted from her bedroom window to quiet down the party. The music was quieter but David was staying on beat. Because of Alex he had learned to dance salsa and to be critical of his perceptions of national difference.

Jeremy

Jeremy was sitting at a cafe just a couple of feet away from the building he lived in. His host father, sitting across from him, had just ordered a pot of mint tea for both of them. They were chatting in Arabic about American foreign policy. "Tunisia needs a Marshall plan. We have a
democracy that we’re trying to prop up and we need monetary support,” his host dad lamented. America supposedly supported Tunisian democracy, but did not implement any policies nor devote any economic support to the post-revolutionary nation. These kinds of conversations, and the connections to other Tunisians that he was able to make through his host family, allowed Jeremy to develop a critical and contextualized perspective on American politics. His host family, that was supportive and caring, gave him the space to question and understand the particularities of Tunisia and the issues that Tunisians may have with American politics. Like David, Jeremy found that this support endeared him to other Tunisians, rather than isolating him based on his national identity. More than just his homestay, however, Jeremy’s entire program was interested in fostering the kind of environment that allows for the supportive and critical analysis of nationality that he experienced.

Jeremy discusses the importance of the program director in facilitating conversations about national politics: “Our program director was heavily interested in revolutionary politics. He was involved in the protests in the Arab Spring, so he was connected to a lot of those spheres. And that was kind of the focus on the program, the politics of revolution. Also that was a lot of the conversations on the street, too.” For both Jeremy and David, it was these key staff members that made the difference in their programs. Being able to question and critique national narratives and assumptions in a space that was intentionally constructed ensured that both of these participants left their programs with more nuanced and thoughtful perspectives on their home countries and on their own national identities.

Tiffany

Tiffany had just begun to eat the ham, mashed potatoes, and cornbread that she and her friend had prepared for their host family. Excited to try an American meal, the host family invited several of their friends from the neighborhood. These Danish adults and their young children eagerly began this meal prepared by two college-aged women. The conversation quickly turns to the
differences between America and Denmark. The Danes around the table point out that Denmark is consistently ranked one of the best places to live. They talked about their superior education system, medical system, and welfare system. Tiffany found herself defensive: “I've never felt like protective of America, I'm not too proud to be American...so it surprised me that I got so defensive of some of the things they were saying.” She wanted to remind them that Denmark was a homogenous nation that only recently began struggling with multiculturalism in any real way. “They're going through things that America went through a long time ago, but there isn't really a recognition of that. There's still a sense of denial that Denmark was becoming multicultural, so it was frustrating to hear them shit on America when I was seeing so many of those same issues happening in Denmark,” she argued. For Tiffany, one of the defining features of America was its diversity. She was mixed raced, had grown up in diverse neighborhoods, and went to diverse schools. Coming to Denmark she was shocked by the whiteness, both of the country and of her program. This lack of diversity, and the lack of any support from the program to address difficulties that might arise for non-white students, colored much of her experience. Fascinatingly, she had never felt defensive of America before. She did not consider herself strongly patriotic, and even now that she is back in American maintains that she is more disappointed than proud of America. And yet, during this dinner she found herself defensive of America because it had exactly that which her program lacked: diversity.

Participants who had less supportive environments, reported feeling more isolated when confronted with differences of national identity. Without a facilitated space to process or question the challenges they were facing regarding their national identity, these students tried their best to find support amongst each other but still reported feeling alone. In many interviews, isolation correlated with racism felt while abroad. Students of color, having developed support networks while at Swarthmore, were suddenly thrown into a new, predominantly white context and often struggled to re-create those supportive relationships while abroad. Tiffany laments this lack of
support, “No, I didn’t really have a lot of support. Hoachin was the only other person of color, there was another black [Swarthmore student] who was in Denmark at the same time and we would get coffee like once a week, mostly to just talk about being of color in Denmark because it was just so much of our experience. The program was almost entirely white, which was super surprising. I had no idea...It was pretty isolating.” Most of the non-white participants I interviewed had similar, if less extreme, feelings of isolation, with one notable exception: Rene, a black student who studied in South Africa. Even though Rene’s program offered little support and was predominantly white, because she was surrounded by black people from the host country, she reported feeling well integrated and made friends that she has kept in touch with. For others, however, the lack of diversity they experienced abroad was compounded. Students growing up in diverse places across America were taken aback by the lack of diversity in their home countries and, because the majority of their peers were also white, they had only a few people to commiserate with or rely on for support. Without programmatic support to handle the therefore compounded issues of racism abroad and challenges to national identity, students of color felt isolated and without recourse to support them.

**Race and national identity**

**Anna**

“I had a false perception that black people in Europe were somehow better off than black people in the US,” Anna told me. At the end of our interview I had asked her what she felt she had gained from her abroad experience. She studied abroad in the Netherlands. She was the only black person in her building. Out of about a hundred students, her entire program only had three other black people. She noted that her awareness of difference made her feel uncomfortable throughout her time abroad, “I never felt very comfortable while I was there. I just always had a sense of being
watched a little bit. Not in a creepy way or in a paranoid way, but just in the sense that I was an outsider.” With so few other black Americans to talk to, Anna searched for black people from other nations to talk to about her discomfort. Similar to Tiffany, she found that black people in Northern Europe were less common than in America. When she tried to talk about race and racism to her friends from other countries of all races, they could offer little support. “I found that people from outside the US really weren’t conscious of the concept of race just like navigating through daily life and that made it difficult to talk about with them.” Fascinatingly, the lack of diversity and of general awareness of race and racism abroad was, something that Anna was able to process thanks to previous travel experience.

When she was growing up, her dad made it a point to take her to the areas that were less well developed and not usually frequented by tourists. It was in these areas that she would see other black people:

“At least in every place that I’ve visited there’s always a minority and there’s always a group of people that are oppressed or that have always struggled to fight systems of oppression and not always completely successfully. I think that’s something that being in Amsterdam reminded me of and also my travel experiences before that because my parents always made it a point to see the parts of the city that people don’t normally see. And when you see the same things over and over again you start to realize, wow these are the groups of people who are less fortunate in the society.”

Seeing people that look like her in places where tourists are not, forced Anna to think about the privileges that she had. For her, while her blackness connected her to a shared, global struggle, her Americanness afforded her some privileges that separated her from that struggle. When I asked if she was proud to be American, she laughed. She thought about the people who are “so proud to be American,” the Americans who are too proud, chauvinistically proud. She countered that image by finding pride in a legacy of struggle, resistance, of triumph. She was proud of her blackness in the face of a pride that wanted to exclude her. Yet, she was also keenly aware of a tension. It was her
Americanness, not her blackness, that distanced her from the people she saw when visiting Brazil, Barbados, and the Dominican Republic growing up. "I think at times it's very disheartening to be American and to be constantly reminded that your life is so much better than the lives of other individuals but also to feel like you're often excluded from some of the narratives of Americanness." Anna's travel abroad, both during study abroad and previous to it, complicated her national identity. While she was exposed to a global story of black resistance and struggle, she was simultaneously distanced from it. Her privileges as an upper class American meant that she could travel. It also meant that her understanding of national identity had to hold the tension of racist national narratives and exclusionary experiences abroad. She felt excluded from the common narrative of Americanness, but her time abroad reminded her of the diversity and opportunity that America had provided to her and her family.

Valerie

For many students, the process of expanding a national identity started before going abroad. Both of Valerie's parents were immigrants and for most of her life she did not even think of herself as American. "I felt much more of this hybrid of these two nationalities rather than American." It wasn't until I was older that I was like, 'oh, that's actually common in America.'" The exclusionary narratives that Anna spoke to above dramatically impacted Valerie's experience of national identity, to the point that she did not even know that she could be considered American as the daughter of two immigrants. For her, Americans were people who made fun of her parents' accents, not the people who faced discrimination. It was not until she came to Swarthmore that her understanding of national identity shifted. "Learning American history at Swarthmore...broadened my understanding of who is American. It's not just these people I've seen discriminate against my parents, but there are Americans who are like me...Who has power and who doesn't determine who is and who isn't American."
When she was studying abroad, Valerie faced these distinctions in brand new ways. Austria, like much of Northern Europe, was dealing with a crisis of Syrian refugees while Valerie was there. Seeing the ways Austria was dealing with that crisis -- by becoming nationalistic -- reflected the exclusionary national definitions that she felt while growing up in America. Just like America, that national narrative contrasted sharply with the ways that Valerie experienced the city and understood her place there: “Vienna...it’s a city with a lot of immigrants and it’s a really international city so it wasn’t like I was the only brown looking person in Vienna. There’s a whole conversation about what is Austrian so it definitely made me think about my Latina identity in a different way.” Coincidentally there was another Latina student from California. She introduced Valerie to Latino musicians that comforted her in a way that she had never craved before. “I didn’t really listen to music by Hispanic artists before that, but I was definitely craving that part of my culture.” For Valerie, American identity could hold diversity -- immigrants, different races, multiple ethnicities. She felt very viscerally the ways that the diversity of her own household contradicted the dominant narratives of Americanness. Through study abroad, she was able to process and understand the ways that national identities can be pluralistic despite forces of white supremacy claiming otherwise. She was also able to connect with a part of her identity she had not explored previously. Despite being three countries removed from Mexico, becoming friends with another child of Mexican immigrants and listening to Mexican music provided her comfort in a nation that was struggling to understand and integrate ethnic and racial plurality into its national imaginary.

David

Each weekend David would walk three blocks from his apartment to a hotel. There, he would buy cards to use the Internet for two dollars an hour and would sit and browse. Sometimes he would order a coffee or a water when the hotel staff told him he had to be a customer, but often he would not. Today, he is sitting on his laptop, posting pictures to Facebook and talking to his
parents when a hotel staff member approaches. For a second, he thinks that he is going to ask him to leave; technically, he was not allowed to use the Internet unless he was a hotel guest. Instead, the staff member approaches a black woman at the table behind him. “You are not allowed to sit here unless you are a guest of the hotel,” he tells her in English with a thick accent. “What do you mean? I come here all the time and I’ve never had an issue.” From her accent, David thought she was American. The staff member insisted, and eventually the woman was escorted away from the hotel. No one approached David, he was allowed to stay until he was done with the Internet.

For David, this example of explicit racism linked to national identity demonstrated the ways that American identity is defined as white and exclusionary. “I think that white people have continually made claims to owning all Americanism with the authority to let certain people in and out of that…. It was my understanding that on the street or in the club [in Cuba], a person of color would be less likely to be marked as an American and that that could sometimes be detrimental.”

David’s program was unique in its ethnic diversity, six students of color out of twelve. He saw that in Cuba, tourists from America and Europe were always assumed white, and in those contexts if his race and national identity matched what was expected, he could win favorable treatment. Black tourists, on the other hand, were assumed to be Cuban first, American second. They faced daily differential treatment, unable to access the same locations that White + American tourists could without issue. Under certain circumstances, study abroad exposed White students to the ways that American identity was assumed white, just as it had exposed Anna and Valerie to the ways that America was actually ethnically pluralist.

**Sadie**

When I asked Sadie if she was proud to be American, she smiled and shook her head. “I would not say I’m proud to be American… I don’t strongly identify with what’s considered American culture.” To her, American culture belonged to people from the middle of America, white people. “I
know that’s bad because America has people from all different types of places.” She recognized that America was pluralistic, that there was no reason for her to presume herself out of American culture just because she was black. “My American cultures incorporates so many different cultures. I feel I identify more with American city culture,” she told me. She explained that growing up in New York, she appreciates when people around her are fast paced and direct. She appreciates that she can see people who look like her and lots of people who look different from her when she is walking to the store. She is impressed when public transportation has signs in multiple languages. The America she knows and belongs to is diverse and cosmopolitan.

She studied abroad in London. For her, this was the only city that could match the cosmopolitan character of New York. “London is the first place where I felt at home outside of New York.” Sadie identified with a city 3,500 miles away in another country before she did a non-urban area in America. Several theorists have identified this tendency to privilege cosmopolitan identities over national identities as common among global elites. With the economic power to ignore borders, these individuals come to shed their national identity in favor of urbanity. It is particularly fascinating the way that Sadie identified London as “home,” in a way that she could not identify any other place besides her hometown of New York. “It will be one of the greatest disappointments in my life if I don’t live in London again.” This feeling of identity to city over nation was deeply held for Sadie, and through study abroad she was allowed to explore the contours of that changing identity.

First generation students and American identity

The effects of study abroad on the national identity development of first generation college students were less clear. The hypothesis of this study was that study abroad served as an opportunity to complicate students’ understanding of American identity, and that they would be able articulate a
more nuanced understanding of the benefits of America while recognizing the problems and being open to new cultures. The expectation, largely based on my own experience of college and study abroad, was that first generation college students would have parents who more strongly identify the positives of America and through study abroad and college overall, they came to understand the histories and social contexts of America’s involvement throughout the world. Moreover, this understanding would impact how they do or do not identify as American or *proudly* American. For example, Valerie describes how she came to understand that her parents’ immigrant status does not mean that she cannot also be American: “Learning American history both in high school and at Swat and learning the realities of it contributed to ‘oh, America kind of sucks’ but it also definitely broadened my understanding of who is American, who are Americans. It’s not just these people who I’ve seen discriminate against my parents, but there are people are me.” Encouraging to my hypothesis, she specifically identifies learning in Academic environments as the catalyst for her changing understanding of American identity. We could assume, therefore, that this is a kind of learning that her parents, neither of whom went to college or even grew up in the United States, had access to. For Valerie, college made all of the difference in her understanding of self and national identity.

However, other participants had a wide range of experiences while abroad and there was not a clear connection between first generation status and the kind of national identity transformation that Valerie describes, or that this study expected. Specifically, while the majority of participants did report that they were critical of America and had complicated feelings about the questions of if they were “proud to be American?” it was true that parents of first generation students could be critical of America without a college education and that parents with college degrees could be uncritical of American identity -- the opposite of the expectation going in. That is, college education, and much less study abroad itself, is not the only or even the primary factor in developing a critical or nuanced
understanding of American identity. For example, Sean, a white, first generation student from central Pennsylvania describes that he has never really identified with America, and that no one from his family has either: “I don’t feel a very strong sense of American identity. Growing up I was never really into the pledge of allegiance. My grandmother who lived with us was very anti-bush. I was 8 when we invaded Iraq, and I feel that that really colored my perception of America as a young adult. Then the financial crisis happened and my family having a hard time financially.” It is particularly interesting to me that he developed a strong, critical view of America from his family and that he has maintained those views through college and study abroad. For Sean, while he noticed that there were people who “had more positive views of America than [he] did,” the experience of study abroad did not change his perspective nor his understanding of national identity.

On the other hand, Tiffany’s parents, college educated and black, were much prouder to be American, to the point that Tiffany has argued with them before about America’s history and her own conflicted national pride. I asked her if she felt proud to be American. She paused, and smiled, “If any of my parents heard me say that I was not proud to be American they would freak out.” She explained that her parents felt that she and her sister, both “hypercritical” of the United States according to their parents, were being “disrespectful to the progress that has been made” just over the past generation. However, she reported that, through study abroad, she came closer to her parents’ view: “But, traveling abroad and having conversations about what it means to be American and being reminded that I was American so often did make me a little bit more grateful of the types of opportunities and the that I’ve had by virtue of growing up in America and being born in America. And I sometimes catch myself being really critical of America and reminding myself that there are things here that I would never have access to had I grown up somewhere else.” For Tiffany, it was not just college education but the act of studying abroad that transformed her understanding of America. Similar to Valerie, after studying abroad she was more able to identify the
benefits of America, all while continuing to recognize its shortcomings. Interestingly, here we can see the process of study abroad as transforming students’ understanding of self through their national identity. Tiffany’s abroad experience allowed her to return to America and appreciate the ways that she feels able to identify as American.

Both Tiffany and Valerie’s college experiences demonstrate that there is a connection between going to college, studying abroad, and developing a nuanced understanding of national identity. Arguably these findings could be extrapolated to show that first generation college students, like Valerie, develop a national identity away from their parents while non first generation college students, like Tiffany, develop a national identity towards their parents, allowing a connection that first-gen students do not experience. This finding would connect to previous studies of first generation college students that suggest that a college education is a process that moves them away from their upbringings culturally, economically, and psychologically. However, responses like Sean’s remind us that first generation students’ experiences are not singular and that, for some students, college does not serve as a separating agent, but rather serves to demonstrate inequalities that impact their parents. In Sean’s case, the awareness of inequalities has pushed him towards his upbringing in an attempt to change them rather than overcome them.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

My mom, Jackie, always dreamed of going to Paris. Before studying abroad, I had been twice, once on a high school trip and a second time as a high school graduation present. A part of me felt luck and happy that I had been able to travel so much before getting to college, but another part of me felt guilty that because I was traveling so much, my parents could not. When I decided to study abroad in Spain, beyond the goals of learning Spanish and traveling Europe, I wanted to bring Jackie to Paris. So, I began a carefully-crafted plan to reduce the costs of her travel as much as possible. I withdrew $5,000 from my Evans Scholarship, money that I could use to travel while I was there and that would allow me to support myself during a one-week excursion in Paris. I had Jackie open a travel credit card, with a huge bonus if you spend over $3,000 in the first six months. I then talked my program into letting me buy my own flights, both so that I could extend my stay in Europe after the program ended and so that I could put the charge on the new card and be reimbursed for it later. We almost halfway to the spending bonus in the first month. She put all her other purchases on that card for the rest of the bonus period and we were able to use points to buy roundtrip tickets and partially pay for an apartment rental for a week.

This kind of trip would not have been possible without Swarthmore. Obviously, the financial capital provided by the Philip Evans scholarship even allowed me to think about studying abroad for a year, much less bringing my mother along with me. But I learned about that particular credit card and other financial tips for living abroad from peers who were more well-traveled. Thus, it was a combination of material capital and social capital that allowed my study abroad experience to include my mother. More importantly, the experience of taking my mother to Paris represented the culmination of years of concern as a first generation college student that my education, and the class status it would provide me with, was serving to distance me from my upbringing, from my parents. If class transitioning students are trapped in a kind of socio economic purgatory, neither lower class
nor upper-class, then being able to bring my mother with me on that transition served, for some part of me, as purification. I could let go of some of the guilt I felt for traveling so much without her.

Of course, our styles of travel and the expectations we had of the trip were as different as our education histories. Having been in several art history classes, I wanted to visit all of the art museums that I had not been to in my two previous trips. Jackie, on the other hand, wanted to visit Disneyland Paris. We did both. My educational background allowed me to enjoy French art in a way that she did not have access to, but I also enjoyed Disneyland. We were especially excited to go to Disney in order to compare it to the Disneyworld in Florida. While there, we ate lunch at a French restaurant modeled after the Disney Pixar movie, Ratatouille. The neighborhood this restaurant was in was a Paris in miniature, three blocks of chocolate shops, cafes, and souvenir stores mingled with lines for rides. The rooftops of Paris, designed as 2-D sets, continued into the distance, insinuating a continuous city while simultaneously revealing the fabricated nature of the whole park. Several theorists of tourism speak to a concern of the Disneyfication of tourist places, where locations and local people so cater to the Tourist Gaze, that the experience is inauthentic. That is, the local culture is no longer about the people producing it but rather the people consuming it.

French philosopher Jean Baudrillard has called Disneyland the most real place in the U.S., because it is not pretending to be anything more than it actually is, a theme park (1983). Jackie was not concerned about the (in)authenticity of spending part of our trip in Paris in a fake Paris inside Disneyland, she was enjoying the experience. For me, this trip to Disneyland Paris communicated something important about class difference in study abroad. Tourism is a constant negotiation between authentic and inauthentic experiences, as study abroad is no different. Mostly, this negotiation takes place in the background. That is, most tourists are not concerned that Disney (or Paris itself, for that matter), is inauthentic. In this project, several students reported feeling frustrated
that their peers traveled in large groups to different cities for weekends at a time. This frustration can be understood in a context where class distinction is excessively visible. It becomes clear which students are upper/middle class, and which are on financial aid in a way that was never possible on campus. In this setting, articulating authenticity becomes an important way to distinguish oneself as classed, even when that material capital is lacking.

Findings

Over the course of this thesis, I have concluded that study abroad is an opportunity for identity development on two tracks. 1) Given necessary financial support from institutions, students who study abroad are simultaneously exposed to the ways that upper/middle classes communicate their cultural capital through tourism, and are given the opportunity to communicate that capital themselves. Even if students do not have the material capital to travel as often as their classmates, they are able to differentiate their socioeconomic class by coding their experiences as more “authentic,” and “immersive,” with the implication that they were “correctly” studying abroad as opposed to those who traveled more often. 2) Depending on the attitude of the program and its willingness to facilitate conversations about national identity, students can have experiences which radically challenge their conceptions of Americanness. These students return to the US with a more nuanced understanding of their national identity, and are able to more clearly identify the benefits and privileges of Americanness, along with the downsides and challenges of American identity, than those participants whose programs did not facilitate those kinds of conversations.

However, rather than provide a prescriptive understanding of the function of study abroad, and especially study abroad for first generation college students, I have attempted to outline the nuance and complexity of study abroad experiences. Development along these two tracks can vary widely depending on factors such as race, gender, and sexual orientation, in addition to
socioeconomic status. Moreover, the wide variety of study abroad programs ensures there is no simple analysis of its impact on students. Just in this sample, there were participants who studied in programs with over a hundred other American students, all isolated in a single dorm, to a student who was one of eleven total Americans in his entire host country. In addition to the program’s structure, the program’s political attitude and the ability of its staff to facilitate conversations around topics of national identity, race, and political difference could completely change a student’s understanding of nationality through study abroad. Still, I have developed four key findings over the course of this research that hold true through all of the nuance and complexity of experience. They are:

1. Financial support from institutions is necessary. Without the base level material support from institutions in the form of financial aid or other scholarships, first gen and other low income students would not be able to participate in abroad programs. This support alone, however, is not enough.

2. Navigating class mobility: Students navigate study abroad with the same strategies they use in other upper class and predominantly White spaces. These strategies often imply a level of emotional distress, as first gen students are distanced from their upbringings.

3. Intercultural capital: Students gain intercultural literacies and other cultural capital associated with tourism differently based on education history. The ability to gain this kind of capital effectively is largely dependent on program structure, rather than students class backgrounds.

4. National capital: Students’ experiences abroad nuance their national identities. This forms a kind of national capital in which students are socialized into the particular national identities of the upper/middle class.

Limitations
While this study demonstrates that study abroad provides a critical opportunity for first
generation college students to amass cultural capital, its scope prohibits knowledge of the application
of that cultural capital. That is, does the cultural capital associated with study abroad translate into
the social and financial capital that are associated with class mobility. Longitudinal studies such as
Lauren Rivera’s *Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs*, which focuses on students of elite colleges
getting jobs in investment banks, consulting firms, and law firms demonstrate that cultural capital is
vital to the financial and social gains associated with those jobs. While study abroad surely fits into
this context, it is impossible to argue in the scope of this study that the cultural capital associated
international education provides a clear trajectory into financial and social capital. Similarly, this
study is limited in its ability to demonstrate the connection between national identity and class
transition through study abroad. While it was not clear in the majority of my interviews, there is a
potential that study abroad plants the seeds for cosmopolitan identities. Especially for those
students, like myself and Sadie, who had extensive international experience previously, study abroad
provides the opportunity to see oneself as global rather than national; acquire a cosmopolitan
national identity. However, this was not a common finding in the rest of my participants.

**Applications and future research**

While these findings might suggest that this study proved a specific hypothesis, I think if
there is anything it can add it is nuance into the discussion of international education and first
generation college students. Many of the previous studies of these topics either address the two
issues separately, or analyze them quantitatively. This thesis adds stories, nuance, and human
emotion as I attempt to convey the complex and intersectional experiences of the variety of students
who study abroad. From Valerie’s culture shock of being surrounded by rich Americans to Jeremy’s
fear of being in a terrorist attack at a festival, this study provides necessary depth to those things we
knew about study abroad: it is predominantly white, it is often prohibitively expensive, and it makes
people more open to other cultures while simultaneously making them prouder of America.
Specifically, finding number four regarding national capital is where future research needs to be
done. The students in this study had varied experiences with this concept, with several students
contradicting it outright. What is clear is that there is a relationship between college education and
nuancing American identity. It is less clear that first generation college students have particular
experiences different from their non-first gen peers when it comes to national identity formation
abroad. While some students reported the deepening of national identity, others suggested that their
understanding of America remained unchanged -- either by study abroad or college more broadly.
There may be several reasons that the relationship between first generation status and national
identity was inconclusive. The sample size was only eleven students, which allowed a rich analysis of
particular, nuanced experiences, but could not provide many conclusive statements. All of the
students were enrolled at Swarthmore College, an undergraduate college noted for its political
activism and left-leaning student body. Surely, had students of other colleges been included, the
responses regarding national identity would have been much different. Finally, the programs that
Swarthmore prefers its students go on are similarly academically rigorous and political liberal.
Despite my best effort to interview students from a variety of programs, I could not control for the
kinds of students that Swarthmore college attracts and sends abroad.
Or, the hypothesis that national identity and first generation status are somehow linked
could be wrong. First generation college students come from a variety of backgrounds and occupy a
wide range of identities. Any number of these identities can and do influence their national identity
and for some, first generation status could not be the primary factor in their understanding of
national identity. However, this thesis attempts to showcase the complexity of students who study
abroad, first generation or not. It details their particular struggles and pains and explains their
triumphs. Most importantly, it offers a glimpse of what it feels like to study abroad and how
students understand their experiences after study abroad. For me, this project was the ultimate
exercise in exactly that. It allowed me a full year to explore what it felt like to study abroad, and what
it meant for me as a class transitioning, first generation college student. In fact, almost every
participant commented the same thing to me at the end of their interview. They had not had a space
to talk about their particular experiences abroad in depth. And that is the true power, I found, of this
kind of sociological storytelling. The stories of first generation college students who study abroad are
fascinating, complicated, and worth being studied.
Appendix A

Interview Script

Why did you study abroad? Did you have any specific expectations, needs or concerns before going abroad?
Have you traveled abroad in the past?
How did your parents react when they learned you would be studying abroad? Have they traveled abroad?
How did you finance your experience abroad? Were you concerned about money before you left?
Were there opportunities while you were abroad that you feel had to miss because of money?
Did you feel that most of your interactions were with other Americans? How were you able to make relationships with locals? Did your program facilitate this?
What was the makeup of your program (POC? Low-income? Queers?)? Did you feel like you made friends easily with the other people on your program?
Can you describe a time you felt the “most American?” Who were you with? What were you doing?
Did you feel like you were treated differently because you were an American? How so?
Did you ever feel like you needed to defend or stand up for the U.S.? Or, conversely, distance yourself from the U.S.?
Are you proud to be an American? Does your response change if you’re talking to an American or a foreign person?
Did you feel like you made any close relationships with locals? Describe it.
What do you feel you’ve gained from your study abroad experience?
How do you feel your study abroad experience has informed your college experience?
Do you feel that study abroad has better prepared you to enter the workforce after college?
Appendix B

Pre-interview survey

Name:
Class year:
Major/Minor:
Race and/or ethnicity:
Circle the income bracket that best represents your family’s income level?
- Less than $50,000
- $50,000-$100,000
- $100,000-$150,000
- More than $150,000

What is the level of education your parent(s)?
- Parent 1: some high school, high school diploma, some college, college degree, post-grad
- Parent 2 (optional): some high school, high school diploma, some college, college degree, post-grad

Where did you study abroad?

Which of the below best describes your program:
- Private study abroad corporation
  Name: 
- Study abroad through a US College/University
  Name: 
- Direct enrollment at a local University
  Name: 

In what language were your classes taught?

How many classes did you have with:
- American students: 
- Mixed local/American students: 
- Only foreign students: 
- Other (please explain below): 

Circle the option(s) below that best describe(s) your living situation abroad:
- Homestay
  Apartment: 
    - Alone
    - With Americans
    - With local students
    - With international students, not from host country
- Dormitory at local institution
- Other (please describe): 

References


Baudrillard, Jean. 1983. Simulations. Semiotext(e), Inc.,


