

“The Pursuit of Exotica:” A Comment

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Michael Woolf’s article, “Come and See the Poor People: The Pursuit of Exotica”¹ is a provocative critique of what he calls the “new orthodoxy” of promoting study abroad in non-traditional destinations. (135) Woolf’s underlying point is that the current emphasis on promoting student mobility to non-traditional, ie non-European, destinations “is neither entirely realistic nor wholly desirable.” (135) Among the problems he identifies are the prevalent use of the language of tourism; the self-engaged nature of student responses; and the downgrading of “the inherent seriousness of international education”. (136) Underlying all this is the absence of an academic agenda to drive the movement. Woolf is also critical of arguments in favor of non-traditional destinations that highlight national security considerations, and he raises the interesting issue of the resource and academic implications of sending large numbers of US students to universities in these countries. He concludes by arguing that for the promotion of study abroad to non-traditional destinations to be legitimate it must “be driven by a combination of curriculum development on US campuses with an investment in building infrastructure in universities in those regions.” (144)

I could not agree more with this conclusion. I also agree with some of his more specific arguments, but there are a number of points of his analysis which could, perhaps, be more complete. This comment will take up some of these issues. It is intended as a friendly and supportive comment on Woolf’s timely and thought-provoking article as well as a broadening and sharpening of his critique.

As we all know, our location shapes our perspective. In reading Woolf’s article, I was amazed that someone situated in the UK and with previous experience in Africa should entirely leave out of his discussion one of the most striking features of the study abroad enterprise as practiced in the United States: its massively commercial nature. (Indeed, Woolf himself on occasion talks about “the market.”) This hit me like the proverbial ton of bricks the first — and only — time I attended the annual NAFSA-Association of International Educators conference. Walking into the main hall of the convention centre, I had to struggle to remind myself that I was at the annual meeting of an organization — ostensibly — dedicated to education. The sight reminded me infinitely

more of a trade show devoted to cars or better homes than of a meeting of educators. My point of reference here is the annual conference of the American Historical Association, which is not much smaller than the NAFSA meeting.

Woolf characterizes the promotion of non-traditional study abroad destinations as being couched in the language of tourism, but he does not mention that, as it is conducted in the United States, study abroad in general is a business in which universities off load the organization of the international education experience to for-profit “service providers” and charge their students hefty prices to participate. In this context, it is not the least bit surprising that the language of tourism, which feeds on the exotic, should be so prevalent. A question that follows from this, and one that Woolf does not ask, is the extent to which *all* study abroad is couched in the language of tourism. In arguing that the emphasis on location “implicitly sends a signal that” students who choose to study in traditional destinations in Western Europe are somehow having a less valid experience, Woolf is making the very large assumption that the sole motivation for these students is academic. As a historian of modern Spain, I know all too well the ways in which that country has for centuries been orientalized in the English-speaking world. Hemingway is only one of the most recent — and the best known in the United States — of a long line. I have serious doubts that this third most popular study abroad destination is promoted in terms of its being a modern, secular European society where gay marriage is legal and which boasts one of the ten largest economies in the world. Carmen, Catholicism and Civil War, not to mention bullfighting, are much more likely to be the terms of engagement.

Spain takes us easily into the question of Spanish and language study in general. Woolf argues that enrolments in languages and area studies programs demonstrate that “the call for the expansion of programs in non-traditional programs [sic] is not being driven by an academic agenda.” (137) I don’t question the conclusion, but his arguments do need to be examined more closely. The stagnation of enrolments in area studies programs is beyond doubt. There will be a number of reasons for this, but the recent emphasis on programs that are deemed more consonant with our globalizing age will certainly have contributed.² At my own university, these area studies programs have very few majors or minors. At the same time, the courses that make up these interdisciplinary programs, which are drawn from the traditional disciplinary departments, are full to overflowing. The History or Political Science major with an interest in East Africa or Brazil needs Swahili or Portuguese every bit as much as the student doing a degree in African Studies or Latin American Studies.

Moreover, there are other, newer internationally-oriented degree programs that are proving to be popular. At York University, and in Canada generally, International Development Studies is proving to be wildly successful among undergraduates. By definition, the places and — with the exception of Spanish — the languages involved are non-traditional. York's bilingual Glendon Faculty also has a popular program called International Studies.³ Newer still are programs called Global Studies.⁴

Nor can the analysis of the situation be limited to degree programs. There are other forms of academically-valid, non-touristic international mobility for students. Internships are one example. Four years ago, we created the York International Internship Program.⁵ This program provides York students to work in another country, or at an international host within Canada, for three months between May and August. Internship placements are arranged at a wide variety of government and non-government organizations. In setting up the placements, we work with the host organizations to ensure that the internships will be relevant to students' academic program by providing them with an opportunity to connect theory and practice. Students selected for an internship receive a stipend of CA\$3000 from the university and may also apply to the York International Mobility Award for money to cover their travel costs. In 2006, only 36 percent of the placements were in Europe or North America; Asia-Pacific and Latin America and the Caribbean had 23 per cent each; Africa had 12 percent and the Middle East 8 percent. Non-traditional destinations have always generated the most applicants and the same is true for 2007: the most sought-after placements are in St. Kitts, Japan and India. Students applying to work at the Canadian High Commission in New Delhi, the Sci-Bono Discovery Center in Johannesburg or the Canadian Education Centre Network office in Mexico City or Singapore are not motivated simply by a "missionary" or do-gooder impulse. Clearly, students want to go to non-traditional places, but it has to be in a context they consider valuable.

The language question also requires further consideration. Woolf cites the National Council on Less Commonly Taught Languages to the effect that four Western European languages: French, German, Italian and Spanish, capture over 90 percent of all language enrolments in the US, leaving only 9 percent for all the other languages in the world. There are at least two issues here. One is the simple matter of how many — and which — languages are taught at US universities and colleges. Outside the large research institutions, the number is probably very small and the languages present are likely to be predominantly western European ones. My university, which is a large research institution,

currently teaches sixteen modern languages, including a number of less commonly taught ones. Of those eight, however, Chinese, Hebrew, Japanese, Russian, Arabic, Hindi, Korean and Swahili, the last four have been added in the last four years as a key priority of our internationalization strategy. That strategy also includes the goal of integrating languages into degree programs, and to that end we have been creating new degrees, the International BSc and International BA, both of which require at least two full years of a language and a minimum one semester on exchange.⁶ The enrolments in all four languages have been very strong, with Arabic consistently oversubscribed. Build it and they will come?

The second question has to do with the status of Spanish, easily the most popular language on US campuses. The United States is the second most populous Spanish-speaking country in the world, behind Mexico and ahead of Spain, so some of its popularity has to do with its place as both a heritage language and the unofficial second domestic language. But these cannot be the only reasons that enrolments in Spanish dwarf those in all other languages, including more culturally prestigious ones such as French and German. Is it because all these students have a burning interest in *Spain*? I suspect not. Latin America is very much on students' minds. Most History departments have at least one specialist in Latin America while very few have specialists on Spain. Has anyone analyzed enrolments in literature courses in Spanish departments to see whether students are opting for peninsular or Latin American literatures?

Why then is Spain such a significant study abroad destination while Latin American countries, with the exception of Mexico and Costa Rica, which rank sixth and tenth in popularity to Spain's third, are not? The simple answer is that so many US universities have study abroad programs there. (Often these are "island" programs, in which US students are largely isolated from their local peers, but that is another matter.) How many equivalent programs are there in Buenos Aires or Santiago?

This leads us to Woolf's excellent point about the resource implications of sending US students to non-traditional destinations: "the demands that a substantial increase in US study abroad would make upon those communities," and his suggestion that US universities should direct funds "truly to support the infrastructure of host universities." (139–40) Even the most cash-strapped North American institution is immensely wealthy compared to almost any of its counterparts in the Global South.

I would ask how one can reasonably expect anything of the sort when study abroad is so dominated by for-profit service providers. A much healthier scenario would be to embed study abroad within mutually beneficial institu-

tional partnerships. In fact, the simple transfer of money may not be the most desirable, or the most desired, approach. My own experience is that universities in the Global South are frequently looking for ways for faculty members to spend an extended period, from three months to a year, at our university. We have been working on developing mechanisms, within the severe constraints of an underfunded public institution, to make this possible. Indeed, doing so is an explicit objective of our internationalization strategy.

The broader point is that US universities should have *partners* in non-traditional destinations, and that sending students there should be part of a relationship that speaks to the needs and interests of *both* institutions. This will require giving up the easy option of leaving things to service providers and taking a more direct hand in developing and running study abroad and other international education opportunities. Aside from making economic sense, this is the best, and perhaps only, way to ensure that all international mobility options are, as Woolf so rightly demands, “constructed emphatically in educational terms” (143) and anchored by the distinctive academic goals of each institution.

Notes

¹ Woolf, Michael, “Come and See the Poor People: The Pursuit of Exotica”, *Frontiers*, Fall 2006, pp. 135–46

² For example, the Ford Foundation’s 1999 report *Crossing Borders: Revitalizing Area Studies*, http://www.fordfound.org/publications/recent_articles/docs/crossingborders.pdf

³ International Development Studies currently has 366 majors and International Studies 410. Interestingly, the gender ratio in both programs is exactly the same: 76 per cent female and 24 per cent male. The ratio for the students chosen for the internship program, discussed below, has been the same in each of its three years: 87 per cent female and 13 per cent male. Gender differences in student mobility, and interest in the “international” in general, is a topic that needs much serious study.

⁴ See, for example, the recently opened School of Global Studies at Arizona State University, <http://www.asu.edu/clas/globalstudies/>

⁵ <http://international.yorku.ca/internships>

⁶ For details on the iBSc, see <http://www.science.yorku.ca/prospstudents/programs/iBSc/index.html>