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Committing to 'Stay with the Trouble': Theorizing Global Commitments Through Future Teachers' Study Abroad Reflections

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Abstract

Study abroad programs can both extend and undermine social justice pedagogy. We examine this tension through an analysis of interviews with six future teachers from the United States who studied abroad in Ghana, Ireland, France, and Canada. We ask, how do future teachers understand the knowledge they develop from studying abroad? What absences, silences, and ignorances are sustained by these knowledges? A feminist theoretical framework attuned to how knowledge produces ignorances underpins our paper's arguments that study abroad stimulated deep, yet delimited, critical insights for future teachers in this study. We examine how notions of Western superiority were at-once destabilized and upheld for students by international engagement. Our analysis leads us to theorize Global Commitments which enable teachers to "stay with the trouble" to examine positionalities and imagine new possibilities for education.

Keywords

Feminism; global citizenship education; global competence; study abroad; teacher education

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1. Introduction

Studying abroad offers future teachers important opportunities to develop global commitments. Yet study abroad programs can also perpetuate coloniality, deficit perspectives, and white saviorism (Samou, 2022; Williams-Gualandi et al., 2022). Amid simultaneous pressures on universities to both internationalize and generate new streams of revenue (Andreotti et al., 2016; Woodman, 2019), study abroad programs often position students as "consumers" and offer a curriculum of carefully curated—challenging, yet comfortable—experiences evocative of colonial travel tropes (Ogden, 2008). Scholars urge for the development of modes of global education that resist and dismantle these tropes in order to make space for justice-oriented ways of being and relating (Ribó, 2023; Saito et al., 2023; Stein et al., 2023).

This paper builds from critical study abroad literature on how study abroad programs can both extend and undermine social justice pedagogy (e.g., Cacciattolo et al., 2020; Jackson, 2019). Within this field, scholars identify how "skilling" study abroad—emphasizing linguistic acquisition and cross-cultural competence—reaffirms a "cosmopolitan cloak that is falsely innocuous" in that it fails to disrupt Western ideological and linguistic dominance upon which study abroad, particularly from U.S. institutions, depends (Barros, 2016, p. 59). In this paper, we weave critical questioning from the HEADS-UP tool (Andreotti, 2016) with feminist epistemologies of ignorance (Tuana, 2004) and constellational thinking (Lange, 2016) to analyze the insights—and silences—in six future teachers' study abroad reflections. The future teachers featured in this paper studied abroad through programs in Ghana, Ireland, Canada, and France in 2022. Specifically, we pursue the following questions: How do future teachers understand the knowledge they develop from studying abroad? What absences, silences, and ignorances are sustained by these knowledges?

We begin our paper by historicizing the global imperative in teacher education. This historical analysis surfaces competing notions of Global Competence: as decontextualized skills versus critical understandings of global systems of power and privilege and intersectional positionalities within these systems (Andreotti, 2014). A feminist theoretical framework attuned to how knowledge produces ignorance underpins our paper's arguments that study abroad stimulated deep, yet delimited, critical insights for future teachers in this study. Our analysis leads us to theorize Global Commitments as an alternative to Global Competence. Global Commitments, we contend, enable teachers to "'stay with the trouble' to confront their own participation in unsustainable

forms of living" (Haraway, 2016, cited in Ribó, 2023, p. 7). As such, Global Commitments provide an avenue to support future teachers' ethical practices amid the current era's multiple human-generated crises, including the climate and natural emergency, ethnoreligious nationalism, and militarism (e.g., Barros et al., 2024; Stein et al., 2023).

2. The Global Imperative in Teacher Education

The field of teacher education has gestured towards the significance of "global education" for decades, though the rationale and enactments for global teacher education have varied tremendously. Here, we review Global Citizenship Education and Global Competence as two distinct but related initiatives. Both initiatives undergird what Yong Zhao (2010) has called a global "imperative" in teacher education. For teachers, this global imperative derives from content knowledge that requires thinking beyond national boundaries and the reality of educating increasingly multinational, multicultural, and multilingual student populations (Zhao, 2010). While Global Competence and Global Citizenship Education are salient to other professions, we review them here as related to teaching given this paper's focus on future teachers.

While Global Citizenship Education (GCE) is a contested term, GCE generally aims to prepare students to be active and responsible individuals within an imagined global community (Goren & Yemini, 2017). GCE emerged as a field of study in 21st-century educational discourse within the Global North, notably in the context of North America. With nation-states, multinational corporations, and individuals becoming increasingly interconnected, mainly due to technological developments and transnational capital circulation, GCE generated broad appeal because of its potential to facilitate international cooperation.

The origin of GCE can be traced back to the Second World War, with the Cold War and 9/11 as important inflection points (Torres & Bosio, 2020). As Nygren (2016) states, international organizations like UNESCO that aimed to promote peace and development around the world "rose from the ashes of World War II" (p. 201) and played a central role in promoting education for international understanding. Pigozzi (2006) highlights 9/11 as a significant historical juncture that prompted educators, and organizations like UNESCO, to recommit to "learning to live together" (UNESCO, 2014, p. 4). Similarly, a resurgence in interest in GCE follows the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change caused by human emissions and activities (Ribó, 2023). GCE continues to

be held as an ideal by many International Organizations and NGOs as a framework to realign to global goals (UNESCO, 2023).

Critical scholars demonstrate the ways coloniality shapes both the histories and contemporary applications of GCE (e.g., Saito et al., 2023). In 2006, education scholar Vanessa Andreotti called for GCE to be understood as either "soft" or "critical," with soft GCE motivated by impulses to "help"—and informed by charity mindsets—while critical GCE seeks to understand and dismantle the injustices that sustain inequality. Later, Andreotti (2015) emphasized the need for "up the river work" that searches for the roots of problems, rather than only responding to issues that appear downstream. Estellés and Fischer (2021) argue that GCE, particularly in the teacher education field, needs to be understood in a critical manner: their literature review of GCE in teacher education surfaces an "excessively naïve discourse" of global education that holds teachers—and their students—responsible for resolving complex webs of injustice in which they themselves are also situated (p. 223).

GCE is often cited as foundational to building teachers' "Global Competence." Like GCE, Global Competence is a debated term (Engel et al., 2019), yet it generally refers to skills to navigate the world. Overlapping within Global Competence are related concepts—"Intercultural Competence" and "Multicultural Competence"—which also appear in teacher education discourse to emphasize cross-cultural capacities (e.g., Dervin, 2016). We center Global Competence because it offers a consolidation of these multiple concepts.

A definition of Global Competence advanced by Zhao is "the knowledge and skills to function successfully in the globalized world" (2010, p. 427). Others argue that, rather than skills, Global Competence is an ethical foundation—"who we are and how we are connected to others in the world" (Tan, 2024, p. 1). The concept of Global Competence has been disparately applied, yet several themes arise in how the term is used. According to Sargent (2022), these include: "an emphasis on collaboration and communication, investigating the world, valuing diverse perspectives and languages, commitment to global equity, and taking action through civic and global engagement" (p. 2).

Global Competence is key among many study abroad programs' purported aims. Neoliberal institutional climates of U.S. universities often shape the meanings of Global Competence, with the term often vaguely linked to "globalization" and "skills to compete in a global economy" as study abroad programs are under pressure to generate enrollments and revenue (Cantwell &

Kauppinen, 2014; Stromquist, 2007; Woodman, 2019). Within environments where students are treated as "consumers," study abroad programs often attempt to minimize the undesirable aspects of study abroad while promoting the positives—fun experiences, expanded worldviews, and practical skills. The result, Ogden (2008) contends, is a "colonial student" who travels with a sense of excitement and entitlement while maintaining a "view from the veranda" rather than critical and substantive engagement. The unearned advantage of facile mobility—what Habib (2023) calls "passport privilege"—is mobilized but unexamined by the "colonial student" archetype (Barros, 2016).

Samou (2022) argues for decolonizing both the gaze and the approach of study abroad to attain "more respectful, egalitarian, and productive cross-cultural practices" (p. 249). Other critical study abroad literature has surfaced the key role of leader supporting and program construction in supporting decolonial reflections (Major et al., 2020). This background informed our research methods as we sought out to address the following research questions: How do future teachers understand the knowledge they develop from studying abroad? What absences, silences, and ignorances are sustained by these knowledges?

3. Data and Methods

Our research team includes several teacher educators, which led us to this study of future teachers' global learning. This article builds from an interview study of six future teachers' experiences studying abroad in Spring and/or Summer of 2022. All paper authors conducted interviews with the participants, and, when possible, participants were interviewed before and after their programs. Interviewees were recruited through purposive sampling based on the research team's networks; the researchers were not involved in any study abroad programs featured in this paper as program assistants or leaders. We recruited students who were participating in a range of program types in order to learn about diverse experiences and insights. The pedagogies and design of the study abroad program varied, with one program specifically designed for pre-service teachers.

The study's data collection was supported by exempt Institutional Review Board approval through our institution, Michigan State University. We were transparent with participants about the purpose of our research, and we created a consent form entailing how our study would be done and the

confidentiality of any information shared with us. Participants were offered $25 Target gift cards to convey our gratitude for their time and attention.

We took an ethical stance to ensure participation in interviews was not only voluntary but also co-constructed by participants. We were mindful of the power distance between the researcher and the participant and identified interview modalities that suited each participant. We allowed participants to choose the modality (Zoom or in person), the time, and the day that was convenient for them for their interviews. Interviews were semi-structured to allow participants to raise things that were of interest to them and enabled a relaxed, conversational feel. Given the open-ended nature of our interview questions (E.g., "what are you most excited about?"; "what were your days like?"; "what surprised you about your experience?"; "how did the experience make you think about the world differently?"), participants had agency to direct the conversation around things that mattered to them. We also asked follow-up questions to pursue topics that were important to participants. For both pre- and post- interviews, we invited participants to bring a photo that reflected their expectations for the experience (pre) or the impact the experience had on them (post). This artifact elicited deeper reflections around abstract things like expectations, impacts, and powerful experiences.

Pseudonyms are used for all participant names and other identifying details. While we did not collect information about participant racial identification, one student (Brianna Robertson) mentioned in the interview that she identifies as a person of color; all other participants were white-presenting. All participants used she/her pronouns. While we did not solicit information about sexual identity, two students mentioned in the interviews their identification with the LGBTQIA+ community (Hilary Mack and Maryann Smith), an identity which shaped their experiences abroad. Table (1) presents more details on the participants in the study, their study abroad programs, and their engagement with this research.

TABLE (1)
RESEARCH PARTICIPANT AND PROGRAM INFORMATION

Pseudonym	Program Setting & Length	Program Description	Interview Participation
Aly Jones	Ireland, four weeks	Studied at a university in Dublin (took a course on child development).	Pre & Post Interview

Brianna Robertson	U.S. and Ghana, four weeks total	Faculty-led reciprocal exchange designed for preservice teachers in the U.S. and Ghana. Semester-long joint virtual seminar before travel.*	Pre & Post Interview
Hilary Mack	Canada, two and a half weeks	Literacy-focused faculty-led program in Toronto and Montreal. Visited writing university and community writing centers.	Pre & Post Interview
Kayla Moore	France, eight weeks	Faculty-led and homestay program in Tours. Took language, culture, and history classes.	Pre & Post Interview
Maryann Smith	U.S. & Ghana, four weeks total	Faculty-led reciprocal exchange designed for preservice teachers in the U.S. and Ghana. Semester-long joint virtual seminar before travel. *	Pre & Post Interview
Joanna Jeffries	Ireland, three months	Studied at a university in Dublin (took courses on history and politics).	Post Interview

** Program specifically designed for future teachers.*

Data generation and analysis were carried out across members of the research team, often in collective spaces, and conducted in a manner that ensured multiple team members either participated in or reviewed interviews. This enhanced the richness of our analysis because each interview was encountered by multiple members of our research team. To draw attention to both what was present and what was absent in the data, our analysis process both looked at what was and what was not being said. This involved "implementing a mode of analysis which reads contradictions within texts as refractions of structural, material and ideological contradictions. It means being attuned to the cracks, absences and discontinuities in stories" (Chadwick, 2017, p. 11).

Our research team's backgrounds facilitated collaborative reflections on what we noticed in the data. For example, many on our team have experience administering and leading study abroad programs or developing alternative forms of cross-cultural engagements. Across our team, we have worked in teacher education spaces internationally and contributed to global development projects. We have collectively spent substantial time in different contexts, including the United States, Sri Lanka, Malawi, Kazakhstan, Russia, Nigeria, and South Africa. Our team began working together on a curriculum review project in 2022 which led to this research project.

We conducted multimodal analysis, meaning that, beyond writing and coding, we also analyzed through conversations, charts, texts, and images. Some members of the team participated in first- and second-cycle coding using ATLAS.ti. In first-cycle coding, we applied deductive codes generated from literature (e.g., "cultural differences," "confidence," "relationships," "ethnocentrism"). Writing memos and talking about the transcripts as a group led us to another layer of coding, second-cycle coding, where we added in inductive codes to capture emergent ideas we wanted to trace through our data (e.g., "physical discomfort," "gun violence," "seeing America in new perspective"). We each engaged with this process in different ways--some of us were more involved in coding whereas others wrote memos about transcripts. In the following section, we describe the analytic entry points that helped us organize our findings into the arguments presented in this paper.

4. Analytic Frames

We braided three analytic strands to focus our attention on power and privilege. The first, Vanessa Machada de Oliveira Andreotti's HEADS-UP tool (Andreotti, 2016), supported interrupting the reproduction of power imbalances through critical questioning; feminist scholarship helped us theorize the production of ignorance; and constellational thinking became a tool to identify the connections both present and absent in the interview data.

4.1. Critical Questioning (HEADS-UP tool)

We found analytic guidance in the critical questions Vanessa Machada de Oliveira Andreotti offers through the HEADS-UP tool. Andreotti developed this tool to succinctly analyze and unsettle power in international development practices (Andreotti, 2016). HEADS-UP is an acronym for Hegemonic practices, Ethnocentric projections, Ahistorical thinking, Depoliticized orientations, Self-serving motivations, Uncomplicated solutions, and Paternalistic investments. The HEADS-UP tool can be generatively applied to international engagements such as studying abroad, given shared histories and sociopolitical contexts shaping both educational and development efforts. We build on other study abroad scholarship that has applied HEADS-UP questions in study abroad. Williams-Gualandi and co-authors (2022) argued that HEADS-UP questions are particularly important for future teachers given that "unexamined [study abroad] programs may result in the perpetuation of Western-centric views and the reinforcement of dominant social scripts" (p. 145). We found the following HEADS-UP questions most central to our analysis of participant data:

- What is projected as ideal, normal, good, moral, natural, or desirable? Where do these assumptions come from? (Hegemonic Practices)
- What analysis of power relations has been performed? Are power imbalances recognized, and if so, how are they either critiqued or rationalized? (Depoliticized Orientations)
- Has the urge to "make a difference" weighted more in decisions than critical systemic thinking about origins and implications of "solutions"? (Paternalistic Investments)

Posing these questions in our data analysis surfaced critical insights from students in some domains, while revealing silences, complacencies, and ignorances in others. We sought to more deeply understand how curriculums of study abroad, and knowledges generated, also sustained problematic ignorances. To do so, we turned to critical feminist scholarship.

4.2. Probing Ignorances

Critical feminist scholars have long understood how knowledge production practices also sustain ignorances (e.g., Harding, 1998; Sedgwick, 1990). In "Coming to Understand: Orgasm and the Epistemology of Ignorance," Nancy Tuana (2004) demonstrated how female pleasure has been obscured from the biological knowledge base. This, Tuana illustrated, underscores that "ignorance—far from being a simple, innocent lack of knowledge—is a complex phenomenon that, like knowledge, is interrelated with power" (Tuana, 2004, p. 226). As Tuana argued, we cannot simply understand ignorance as "a passive gap in what we know" (p. 196). Ignorance is constructed through the processes that produce knowledge, with both broader power systems and individual reactions to discomfort fundamental to how this occurs (Chadwick, 2021).

Thus, ignorances are important to probe to understand power and the maintenance of inequality. Charles Mills (1997) famously theorized that "white ignorance"—"a cognitive model that precludes self-transparency and genuine understanding of social realities"—sustains white racial privilege (cited in Menashy & Zakharia, 2002, p. 467). Similarly, Francine Menashy and Zeena Zakhara (2022) identified how white ignorance is nested within and sustained by extant global education structures. We found the metaphor and practice of "constellational thinking" a productive analytic entry point to unravel these ignorances.

4.3. Constellational Thinking

"Constellational thinking" was initially offered by activist and scholar Alex Lange. In 2016, Lange introduced the term in a popular article released in the wake of the tragic Orlando nightclub shooting which killed 49 people at the Pulse Nightclub, one of Orlando's few gay clubs. Lange urged the public to view this massacre not as an isolated incident, but as part of a constellation of issues including racism, intimate partner violence, LGBTQIA+ violence, and narratives of erasure. "Let's see the interconnected stars," they wrote (par. 10), explaining that,

> Constellational thinking is how we begin to make connections between the social, environmental, and economic justice issues of our time as grounded in a socio-historical, interconnected context. For instance, we cannot possibly address issues of climate change without seriously addressing issues of war. The U.S. Department of Defense remains one of the world's top emitters of carbon. Constellational thinking forces us to make the connections where they seemingly do not exist (par. 3).[1]

Constellational thinking is a practice of noticing how systems of injustice are mutually reinforcing in reproducing violence. Constellational thinking can be seen in global racial capitalism, which acknowledges the constitutive nature of racism and capitalism. As Melamed (2015) explains, "capitalism is racial capitalism…capital can only be capital when it is accumulating, and it can only accumulate by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups—capitalists with the means of production/workers without the means of subsistence, creditors/debtors, conquerors of land made property/the dispossessed and removed. These antinomies of accumulation require loss, disposability, and the unequal differentiation of human value, and

[1] In the example Lange cites—the U.S. military emissions—the deliberate production of ignorance is at play in *obscuring* constellational thinking. When the United States signed the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, which set binding emissions targets for signatory nations, the United States heavily lobbied for an exemption in military activity. This exemption was later removed, but reporting is optional. A 2019 study found that the U.S. military was the "largest institutional consumer of hydrocarbons" (Belcher et al., 2019). A corporate initiative— "carbon footprint" campaign—was invented by an advertising company hired by British Petroleum in an effort to frame fossil fuel emissions as an individual issue. (Solnit, 2021). To date, military emissions for the United States are not well-known and are not subject to international decarbonization efforts. In other words, what is "known" and "ignored" about military carbon emissions is a product of political and corporate agendas and interventions.

racism enshrines these inequalities that capitalism requires" (Melamed, 2015, p. 77, cited in Gerrard et al., 2022).

Nigerian-American novelist Teju Cole (2012) relates these ideas to international travel in an essay explaining how what he terms the "White Savior Industrial Complex" maintains global racial capitalism. Criticizing a journalist whose writing reinforces "soft" global citizenship (Andreotti, 2014), Cole (2012) writes that

> his good heart does not always allow him to think constellationally. He does not connect the dots or see the patterns of power behind the isolated 'disasters.' All he sees are hungry mouths, and he, in his own advocacy-by-journalism way, is putting food in those mouths as fast as he can. All he sees is need, and he sees no need to reason out the need for need. (par. 10).

Constellation thinking—like "up the river work" (Andreotti, 2015)—leads one to "reason out the need for need," Cole explains. For Americans, Cole argues, this means turning the critical gaze inward to ask how U.S. foreign policy has contributed to the "need for need" in the Global South. The urge to "help" or "make a difference" is part of a larger complex:

> The White Savior Industrial Complex is a valve for releasing the unbearable pressures that build in a system built on pillage. We can participate in the economic destruction of Haiti over long years, but when the earthquake strikes it feels good to send $10 each to the rescue fund. I have no opposition, in principle, to such donations (I frequently make them myself), but we must do such things only with awareness of what else is involved. If we are going to interfere in the lives of others, a little due diligence is a minimum requirement (par. 22).

We applied these three frameworks—Critical Questioning, Probing Ignorance, and Constellational Thinking—in concert to analyze the knowledges, and ignorances, cultivated through studying abroad.

5. Findings

Our analysis found that student reflections on study abroad demonstrated both deep and delimited student growth. The following sections draw attention to how this occurred through a number of facets: recognizing privilege, confronting White Saviorism, and titrating (dis)comfort. Our critical

reflections on the themes identified through multiple layers of analysis made it clear that knowledges developed simultaneously produced ignorance in relation to relationships among white supremacy, colonialism, and anthropogenic climate change. These data-rich sections feature insights and absences from student reflections, leading us to theorizing Global Commitments in the paper's discussion.

5.1. Linguistic Privilege

Minoring in French, Kayla Moore studied abroad for eight weeks in Tours, France with a primary goal of advancing her French language skills. She lived with a host family in France and spent most of her free time during her eight-week program with her host family. Her bond with her host family was fundamental to her language-learning, particularly because her host-mom intentionally avoided the use of English around her. On a Skype call with Kayla's family in the Midwestern United States, Kayla was surprised to hear her French host-mom's fluent English. For Kayla, navigating language-learning in France led her to confront the dominance of the English language as well as the positioning of the United States:

> It made me think a lot about how the U.S. is positioned in the world, more than I ever have, and how privileged I am to have grown up in the U.S. in a lot of ways…if I needed to, I could have spoken English to anyone and most people would have been able to help me out, or at least understand me… That was always an option, but not everyone has that option. English isn't a lot of people's first languages.

For Kayla, learning French as a second language led her to confront her identity as a first-language English speaker and to appreciate the linguistic privilege bound up in this. She also saw how English dominance refracted through the landscape, even in France, where she could have "spoken English to anyone" and where her French-immersion required the commitment and collaboration of her host family.

While learning French made apparent to Kayla her linguistic privilege, similar insights did not come up in every instance of language-learning. Brianna Robertson, who spent two weeks in Ghana as part of a reciprocal exchange, learned some of a local Ghanian language. "It was so fun," she explained, elaborating that her efforts with the language demonstrated to her Ghanaian peers her interest in their culture. Her Ghanaian friends "would laugh at us," but they were patient and helped the Midwestern students improve their

pronunciations. That language-learning could be treated in this way—as something fun that signals interest but does not require proficiency—stands in sharp contrast to how many people around the world (including, likely, her Ghanaian friends) experience the dominance of English language, particularly in their education. English is the official language in Ghana, but Brianna noted it was not the first language of any of her Ghanian peers. However, in this instance, Brianna did not reflect on the colonial violence in Ghana, entangled in English imperialism and domination, and how this violence continues to affect people.

Other students traveled to new linguistic environments without attempting to learn languages. Hilary Mack, who spent two weeks in Canada (Toronto and Montreal), reflected on her different experiences in the two cities. "Toronto was a little bit easier to navigate because I don't speak French…In Montreal, they don't mind people speaking English, but they're very protective over the French language." Hilary told a story of struggling with doors at the metro in Montreal and how strangers trying to help her only spoke to her in French, which she could not understand. "Toronto was a little bit easier to navigate," she restated, "I liked it better."

Students varied in their critical reflection with respect to language. For Kayla, the dominance of English was evident since it required gymnastics in her conversations with her host family. This prompted her to recognize her privilege as an English speaker. For both Hilary and Brianna, the privilege of being an English speaker did not come up in interviews, but their encounters with other languages predicated on that privilege (treating language as fun, or as irksome) did. Why was it that in Ghana, Canada, and France, travelers could reasonably rely on English? The absence of this wondering in interviews struck our research team, given the ways the English hegemony has been interwoven with cultural erasure.

Addressing these ignorances would require thinking beyond the individual experience and examining issues of colonialism, white supremacy, elitism, and American Exceptionalism. Howard Zinn (2005) defines American Exceptionalism as the myth that the United States "has the right, whether by divine sanction or moral obligation, to bring civilization, or democracy, or liberty to the rest of the world, by violence if necessary" (p. 20). The notion of American Exceptionalism rationalized "Manifest Destiny" and has been deployed to justify imperial expansion, violent intervention, land theft, and cultural erasure behind the American Empire (Immerwahr, 2019). For some

students, being outside of the United States fostered critical reflections on the normalization of violence and empire. New perspectives on current events often spurred these reflections.

5.2. Critical Insights from Afar

Away from their familiar contexts, students grappled with jarring news from the United States. This experience resulted in critiques about the United States and the violence to which students felt they had become accustomed. In her post-interview of her experience in Ireland, Aly Jones reflected on what it was like to hear about the school-shooting in Uvalde, Texas, which took the lives of 17 students and two teachers on May 24, 2022. Aly explained how upset she was by the tragedy, but she also became curious about the difference in how her American friends received the news compared to her Irish ones. "In Ireland, they were like, 'Wow. That was such a tragedy' … It was shocking, I guess, to them. It wasn't shocking to us (the American students). It was just so sad." Her observation that "it wasn't shocking to us" (and her distinction between shock and sadness) underscored to her the normalization of gun violence among Americans. This normalization is enmeshed in a desensitization to violence itself, which Kayla Moore reflected on after being in France during a mass shooting on July 4, 2022, that occurred near her hometown outside of Chicago and resulted in seven deaths. Kayla explained,

> I realized how much those things affect me … I think with a little bit more distance, I became less used to it. I was more affected by it than I am here (in the United States), when it's around me all the time … [When the shooting happened,] I was just less desensitized to it, I guess. That was something that I didn't necessarily expect, but something that I think I'm gonna probably continue to—it's not good to be desensitized to those things, but at the same time, it's also a survival mechanism.

This experience of seeing the U.S. from afar frayed assumptions of U.S. superiority, virtuousness, and benevolence. The myth of American Exceptionalism was unsettled for students, at least to a certain extent, as they put in global perspective issues like gun violence and incursions on bodily autonomy. For both Hilary Mack and Kayla Moore, they found themselves in an unusual position of needing to explain—as Americans—the overturning of Roe v. Wade as well as U.S. anxiety over talking about racial inequalities in schools. Hilary described an instance where her group was approached by a shopkeeper in Canada who figured out they were Americans: "She came up to us and she's

like, 'What's going on with critical race theory in schools?'" Hilary explained that she felt comfortable having these types of conversations that allowed her to be critical of U.S. culture with Canadians who had a slightly different perspective yet didn't feel too "at odds" with her.

Kayla Moore found conversations with her host-mom helpful for gaining perspective on U.S. current events. Her host-mom said to her, "'If it can happen in the U.S., it can happen here too, and that makes me afraid.'" Kayla continued,

> It was interesting to hear her perspective on how it was something in a completely different country that's so far removed, but that it has ripple effects there too. I thought that was really interesting. I think it is an indication of how connected we all are. Especially the U.S. has so much more cultural and even just literal power than I had previously really understood.

A heightened perspective on the U.S. cultural hegemony was likewise felt by Maryann Smith in her travels to Ghana. "Everyone in Ghana knew about America, but if you talk to most people in America … Most people don't know where Ghana is … Things just are not quite on equal playing ground." For Joanna Jeffries, new perspective on the United States came about through taking a U.S. History course at an Irish university. "It was really cool seeing [the U.S.] from an the Irish perspective, an outside perspective… I felt like I would learn more about looking at American history objectively."

These experiences punctured the myth of American Exceptionalism and helped students register the extent of North American privilege. In one case, these learning outcomes were scaffolded into the program. Brianna Robertson described how, before going to Ghana, students had seminars on White Saviorism. Maryann Smith, who joined the same program to Ghana, observed that she and her peers had many conversations about colonialism, which their pre-travel seminars had seeded. Maryann found the group continuously asking questions like, "'Why are [things] like this? Was it a direct result of colonialism?'" It was interesting to our research team that students brought up colonialism in Ghana, but framed colonialism only in reference to the Ghanaian context. Across interviews, colonialism in the United States rarely came up.[2] The absence of significant sensemaking around colonialism signals another ignorance:

[2] The one interview where we heard about U.S. colonialism was Hilary Mack's pre-interview. Here, she expressed interest in learning how Canadian schools compared to U.S. schools in their treatment of colonial histories.

although students are identifying evidence of American Exceptionalism (treatment of Western superiority, etc.), they were not systematically interrogating the histories of colonial violence and their own complicities within as the United States expands its imperial ventures. The intricacies around this were also apparent in how students grappled with White Saviorism.

5.3. (De)stabilizing Saviorism

White Saviorism often surfaces as an impulse to "help" and "make a difference" when encountering systems of oppression (Khan et al., 2023; Zakaria, 2021). Citing Cammarota (2011), Harrell (2022) elaborates that White Saviorism renders the people of color "incapable of helping themselves" and "lacking the capacity to seek change…[thus,] they become perceived as dispossessed of historical agency" (Cammarota, 2011, p. 244, in Harrell, 2022, p. 6). This complex, according to Teju Cole (2012), is imbricated in global travel and international aid. We noticed students grappling with it in both obvious and subtle ways, particularly as they made sense of their identities within new contexts.

While in Ghana, Brianna noticed differences in gendered "power hierarchies," alluding to women being positioned as inferior. She reflected, "as women, we were treated a little bit differently." Personally, she felt challenged by this, but she also tried to interrupt efforts to try to "make a difference" in Ghanaian gender inequities:

> A lot of us were wanting to be like, "Oh, we want to make a positive impact. We want to make all these positive"—and then coming to the realizations like, "Okay, but we're not"—we can't. As much as we want to make these positive impacts and changes, it's unrealistic for us to think that we could do something especially within this short of time … We had to just really take it in and analyze.

In part, Brianna self-critically interrupts White Saviorism by intentionally shifting towards "take it in and analyze" and away from a tendency to "make a positive impact." Epistemically, however, White Saviorism persists: the underlying assumptions Brianna makes—of U.S. superiority in gender equality—are left unexamined, despite mounting evidence that gender-based wage gaps continuously render women underpaid in the United States (Kochhar, 2023) and that the top rank of U.S. leadership—the Presidency—seems fundamentally inaccessible to women due to deep-rooted sexism (Alter, 2020). Indeed, Human Rights Watch has gone as far as to caution that the U.S. is unsafe for women, especially women of color, given rising maternal mortality rates and

the erosion of bodily autonomy protections (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Klasing, 2018). Yet the trope of the emancipated Western woman is sustained at the intersection of stubborn systems of saviorism, white feminism, and American Exceptionalism (Zakaria, 2021), and can be reinforced when experiencing overt gender differences abroad,[3] rather than the insidious forms of patriarchy in the United States.

Issues around experiences of the LGBTQIA+ community in Ghana became a significant space for both disrupting and reinforcing White Saviorism and American Exceptionalism. Maryann Smith described "disharmonious moments" on the trip when the group was challenged by differing perspectives on LGBTQIA+ rights. The trip leaders encouraged the group (a mix of Ghanaian and U.S. Midwestern students) to engage on the issue, and Maryann said of this that,

> It was definitely a different perspective of, you have to meet people in the middle. You just can't tell them that they're wrong … you have to build trust with those people, and you can't just be like, "Your opinion is wrong," cause that's not going to get you anywhere.

While Maryann acknowledged that these tensions challenged her disposition toward conflict, her comments suggest that she continued to view this state of conflict as evidence that other people weren't understanding her view, which she held as righteous and correct. Listening, in this instance, seemed transactional—an intermediate step necessary to "get" somewhere, with the direction predetermined. In contrast, Brianna described listening in order to understand, and the self-awareness required when she felt personally misunderstood,

> I had to stop myself a couple of times from speaking, because it was more of a reflex of me trying to either be defensive or try to if it was a misunderstanding, immediately trying to be like, "No, that's not what we meant" … I had to really push myself to listen to what they were really saying … It was just so different that I think a lot of our feelings were coming up, and some of us were speaking on our feelings rather than speaking how we would want to … Yes, I think the thing I was challenged the most was just to really listen to what my colleagues were saying or

[3] Another example of this is Kayla Moore's additional rationale for not wanting to live long-term in France, because of frequent microaggressions in the form of "cat-calling."

> the administrative staff, or whoever was speaking to us just to really take into what they were saying and trying to actually understand what their meaning of it was.

Brianna's comments reflect a disciplined effort to understand a perspective other than her own. Our research team became aware of the intentional conditions—from program construction, to group dynamics, and leader support—that enabled Brianna's stance of "push[ing] myself to listen to what they were really saying" and to self-critically challenge a saviorist tendency to intervene, correct, and "save."

While Brianna described a dispositional change—striving for understanding instead of intervening—we noticed that both Maryann and Brianna left unchallenged that notion that progressive Americans had it "right" when it comes to LGBTQIA+ issues. This "single story of forward" (De Oliviera 2021)[4] ignores the colonialism's differentiated impacts, including the European imposition of the gender binary and heternormativity alongside colonial violence. A quick search on Google shows that, in Ghana, homosexuality was criminalized in 1892 as part of a British law (The Offences Against the Person Act 1861) that criminalized sodomy and was implemented in all British colonies. Legal scholar Mofokeng (2021) argues that this history demands reparatory justice. Yet students wrestled with emergent savioristic tendencies to diagnose problems from an ethnocentric American lens, while ignoring problems in the U.S. context such as persistent discrimination and violence against the LGBTQIA+ community (Lange, 2016). This absence obfuscates the everyday and escalating violence experienced by the LGBTQIA+ community (Butler, 2024), producing ignorance about both safety in the United States and the politicohistorical experiences of (post)colonial nation-states. We questioned what the absence of curiosity signals for how teacher educators can better prepare future teachers to "stay with the trouble" of discomfort.

It is worth pointing out that these conversations, which led to nuanced insights into White Saviorism and American Exceptionalism, only emerged in interviews about one program—the reciprocal exchange in Ghana. This speaks to the trip's overall critical stance and consistent engagement with issues of power and privilege. In the majority of interviews, conflicts and uncomfortable

[4]As asked in the HEADS-UP tool, "What is projected as ideal, normal, good, moral, natural, or desirable?"

conversations like these were not referenced. In part, this can be explained by the multiple ways study abroad experiences titrate discomfort.

5.4. Titrating Discomfort

In every interview we conducted, students mentioned either comfort or discomfort. In pre-travel interviews, as students prepared to go abroad, they anticipated discomfort with excitement. After their study abroad experiences, they mentioned discomfort as they reflected on upsetting conversations, feeling like an outsider, and unsettling realizations. In general, students sought discomfort through study abroad while also taking intentional and unintentional steps to mitigate the discomfort.

An early titration of discomfort emerged through students' selection of program setting, duration, and itinerary. One student, Hilary Mack, spent two weeks in Canada. Upon returning, she shared that she felt it was "study abroad-lite" since the environment did not feel "completely paralyzing new." Other students looked forward to new experiences and the discomfort inherent in them. For instance, before going to Ireland for her four-week program, Aly Jones commented, "Going into the city, seeing what it's like without knowing much about it at all… That's really intriguing to me. I'm excited to be a little bit uncomfortable." Joanna Jeffries, acknowledging that her discomfort was titrated with English language familiarity, described still being able to "feel displaced" during her three months in Ireland:

> I felt like a foreigner…[Ireland] is, obviously, a different country, but they still speak English, so it probably isn't as big of a culture shock as some others. I still felt displaced. I felt that, now, I have a better understanding of people who immigrate to new countries… I saw a big change in my perspectives…when you're somewhere where you're comfortable, it's a little hard to step outside the box or grow.

Many of these stories from students align to a broader narrative of study abroad that sounds something like: you will be uncomfortable, and you will grow personally. Yet there is a great difference between feeling a "little bit uncomfortable" and "staying with the trouble" (Haraway, 2016) of discomfort in an effort to critically reflect. Staying with the trouble, at the least, involves examining how the process of titrating discomfort is, in itself, a privilege.

We saw additional examples of titrating discomfort as students explained how their experiences abroad influenced their desire to live outside

of the United States for an extended period of time. Kayla Moore had been considering returning to France for a French government-sponsored program to teach English. However, after spending eight weeks in France, she determined she would not want to return for a longer stay. Her reasons ranged from discomfort with the microaggressions she experienced as a woman in a French city to the absence of climate-controlled environments. The lack of air-conditioning was significantly challenging for her during a heat wave in 2022. Living in France, if it meant relying on public transportation and being physically uncomfortable in the absence of climate control, were discomforts to which Kayla did not want to subscribe. "I just so much prefer being able to rely on myself and my car," Kayla explained.

Our research team was curious about the contrast between Kayla's critical reflections on sociocultural aspects of the United States—where she had diagnosed and described North American privilege—and her ultimate personal decision to elect for central air-conditioning and a car-based lifestyle, available to her because of North American privilege and enmeshed in systems of global racial capitalism and American imperial power. We noted that she was able to articulate linguistic and cultural hegemony, through the lens of "English" and the "U.S.," but she stopped short of critical self-reflection and personal accountability for the climate and natural emergency. We were intrigued by the absence of a connection made—between how her own lifestyle, normalized as ordinary middle-class life in the United States, and a global climate crisis producing heat waves (among other dangerous impacts). None of our interviewees mentioned the climate crisis. Indeed, the heat waves and other natural disasters (occurring at greater frequency around the world) could be understood as linked to choices for central air and individual cars, as well as U.S. government's military emissions and continuous investments in a fossil fuel-based economy (Borunda et al., 2023).

Like Kayla, Maryann Smith, had been seriously considering teaching abroad post-graduation. After spending two weeks in Ghana, she questioned whether this was the right path for her. In the post-interview, she shared that she would not want to live in a location where she needed to take anti-malarial medication; she had taken this while traveling to Ghana, given the prevalence of mosquitoes where they were traveling. However, since the medication made her feel unwell, she wasn't sure she could tolerate it long-term. Further, she continued, "I don't know what [illnesses] I'll get when I go abroad." Our research team noted assumptions within these statements—pragmatically, an

assumption that living in malaria-dense areas requires antimalarials, which omits that the majority of the population lacks access to anti-malarial drugs and avoids malaria through other strategies; more troubling, though, is the idea that leaving the U.S. exposes a person to heightened risk of disease. This assumption has, for many, been destabilized by the U.S.'s clumsy handling of the COVID-19 pandemic (contrasted with African governments, Moore, 2020) and the recurrence of malaria in parts of the United States. Further, the notion that the United States is "safe" and "superior," is contradicted by the uniquely American pervasiveness of gun violence (mentioned across this study).

Physical discomfort could be a powerful avenue for empathy: Empathy with those who are experiencing extreme heat; people living in places with rising mosquito-borne diseases; with populations made increasingly vulnerable by LGBTQIA+ marginalization. More often, however, we found discomfort among the future teachers in this study was met with the response of titrating its effect: revert to air-conditioning, accept familiar conceptions of safety, and maintain one's cultural values to be superior. In short, while we observed that future teachers had opportunities to confront global inequalities in new ways through international experiences, we also noted the subtle ways that notions of Western superiority were upheld through these experiences as students treated American lifestyle comforts as normal and unproblematic while resisting unfamiliar ways of being and knowing.

6. Concluding Thoughts: "Stay with the Trouble"

The data presented in this article offer windows into students' "before" and "after" reflections on study abroad. These reflections can be diffuse, contradictory, and difficult to capture. Our dataset would have been enriched by interviews or observations with students during programs and interviews with program directors or other program participants. Still, students brought up in interviews salient reflections; many shared that they anticipated the interview during their programs as a space to reflect.

Despite the study's limitations, the findings in this article add to the critical study abroad literature base by illustrating how study abroad prompted diverse, deep, yet delimited insights for the future teachers. Some students reflected on English dominance and alluded to how their privileged mobility was entangled in this dominance, yet histories of domination—with respect to English language—were not raised in student reflections. This is not to say that students were not critical in their interviews. In fact, they were quite critical. It

is the contours of their criticality that we found the most interesting: what were the future teachers in this study wrestling with? What were they leaving intact? We add to Major et al.'s (2020) observation, that the leadership of a program has a large role in how different students wrestled with, or sidestepped, global inequities.

Some of the future teachers we interviewed challenged American Exceptionalism—the notion that the United States is uniquely superior, progressive, and benevolent (Zinn, 2005). Distributing news from the United States stimulated these reflections for Kayla Moore and Aly Jones, both of whom relayed a new self-awareness around how they had been socialized to accept gun violence in America that came from processing U.S.-based shootings in different communities. Our research team, comprising several scholars who had not grown up in the United States, found these insights from students particularly poignant as we grieved a fatal shooting on our own campus in February 2023.

While many of the future teachers in this paper relayed astute and critical insights, we also noted silences and absences sustained by these insights: students wondered how everything in Ghana connects to colonialism while framing colonialism as an issue abroad but not in the United States; others resisted the urge to "make a difference" in Ghanaian gender relations while upholding a conceptual superiority of American gender relations; some critiqued American Exceptionalism while treating the American lifestyle as unproblematic. In other words, while students' diverse insights were deep, they were delimited—bounded, separated, and distinct. We believe that an important part of this education would be to develop Global Commitments that, importantly, go beyond national boundaries and identity politics.

Skill-based understandings of study abroad, whether embedded in Global Competence or Global Citizenship Education containers, are too thin a foundation to build upon for today's future teachers. Defined by Zhao as "knowledge and skills to function successfully in the globalized world" (2010, p. 427), and elaborated by Sargent (2022) to include qualities of collaboration, investigating the world, valuing diverse languages and perspectives, and taking action, Global Competence is broad enough to capture experiences of every student in this study: Aly Jones was able to "function successfully" as she navigated a city in another country; Kayla Moore "valued diverse languages" as she deepened her French language skills; Hilary Mack "investigated the world" through her new experiences in Toronto; and Maryann Smith "took action" by

participating in challenging conversations about LGBTQIA+ experiences. While validating the growth of the future teachers in this study, Global Competence can also leave intact the underlying power relations that sustains inequality (Dervin, 2016).

Global Commitments are necessary to support future teachers' ethical engagements with our current era's multiple human-generated crises. What would it look like for future teachers to "'stay with the trouble' to confront their own participation in unsustainable forms of living" (Haraway, 2016, cited in Ribo, 2023, p. 7)?

These are, as feminist scholar Donna Haraway indicates, urgent times. The globe is warming at an alarming rate, ethnonationalism is on the rise, bodily autonomy is eroding, and cultural erasure is creating a curriculum of American Exceptionalism at the expense of epistemic diversity (An, 2022). How can we prepare teachers not to turn away, but to, as Haraway (2016) urges us, to "stay with the trouble"?

> Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent responses to devastating events… In urgent times, many of us are tempted to address trouble in terms of making an imagined future safe, of stopping something from happening that looms in the future, of clearing away the present and the past in order to make futures for coming generations.
>
> Staying with the trouble does not require such a relationship to times called the future. In fact, staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or Edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings (Haraway, 2016, p. 1).

Critical feminist scholarship may offer teacher educators guidance for how to "stay with the trouble." In reflecting on feminist methodology, Rachel Chadwick (2021) argues for the importance of analyzing discomfort:

> Starting, and staying, with discomfort is advanced as a potentially productive tool in the development of 'methodologies of the privileged' which resist the reiteration of comfortable and normative truths, commit to intersectional modes of knowledge production and refuse ongoing epistemic colonisation and silencing (pp. 559–560).

Leigh Patel (2020) points out that "dissonance is hard and necessary." She encourages us to "find a comfortable cushion." Through this article, we have

sought to intervene in a discourse that offers a seemingly benign call for Global Competence in future teachers. We observe that this call depoliticizes global issues in its focus on discrete skills like language acquisition, cultural adaptation, intercultural competence. We urge teacher educators take up a more radical stance—Global Commitments—that demands students critically interrogate their positionalities within global issues of competing empires, human-generated climate crisis, wars, and racial capitalism.

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This project received ethics approval through Michigan State University's Institutional Review Board.

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