Essay

Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad
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Volume 38, Issue 1, pp. 406-432
DOI: 10.36366/frontiers.v38i1.1195
www.frontiersjournal.org

Fostering intersubjectivity and empathetic engagements in short-term education abroad: Reflections on decolonizing transnational education arrangements

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Abstract

This article interrogates the assumed benefits of short-term education abroad programming within the context of colonial frameworks and neoliberal sensibilities. Reflecting on transnational programs we have run, and especially one in the Honduran Bay Islands, we apply Adkins and Messerly's (2019) framework to decolonize education abroad to consider interventions that foster intersubjectivity and empathetic engagement. By decentering the student-as-tourist, ahistorical trend of education abroad to instead privilege local people in design and implementation, programs can be positive for both students and the communities that host them.

Abstract in Spanish

Este artículo cuestiona los presuntos beneficios de los programas de educación en el extranjero de corto plazo dentro del contexto de los marcos coloniales y las sensibilidades neoliberales. Con una reflexión sobre los programas

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Date of Acceptance: April 11th, 2026

transnacionales que hemos dirigido, y especialmente uno de las Islas de la Bahía de Honduras, aplicamos las ideas de Adkins y Messerly (2019) para descolonizar la educación en el extranjero con el fin de considerar intervenciones que fomenten la intersubjetividad y el compromiso empático. Al descentrar la tendencia ahistórica del “estudiante-como-turista” en la educación en el extranjero para, en su lugar, priorizar a la población local en el diseño y la implementación, los programas pueden resultar beneficiosos tanto para los estudiantes como para las comunidades que los reciben.

Keywords

Central America; decolonizing approaches; intersubjectivity; neocolonialism; short-term education abroad

1. Introduction

A group of five students (two graduate and 3 undergraduate) from the University of Memphis (UofM) who were participating in a 10-day education abroad program in the Bay Islands of Honduras were standing in one of oldest fish factories in Utila Cays. They watched as one of the graduate students informally interviewed a fish cutter as he fileted and salted several pounds of barracuda. The cutter was one of four laborers who worked in this woman-owned factory, a modest wooden structure on a dock equipped with a scale, a few large freezers, several tanks for lobster divers, and a wooden counter for preparing the fish (if not done on the dock floor itself, which was more common for fileting). It is here that the students learn firsthand how fish travel, from the Caribbean Sea to a dinner plate in Miami, Florida and beyond. The interview begins with students inquiring about the fileting and salting process, and they learn that once gutted, fileted, and salted, the barracuda will remain in the salt for five days and then rest in the sun for 5 additional days as they dry out, enabling a shelf life of up to one year. Five minutes and 42 seconds into the discussion, the cutter caught the graduate student leading the interview off-guard by asking, “Can I ask you guys a question.” “Sure,” the student responded, to which she did not expect what came next. The cutter asked, “what are you going to do with all this information?” A year later, this former student presented with us (the authors) at the Society for Applied Anthropology annual meeting where we engaged in a reflective dialogue about her experience of being questioned directly on knowledge extraction. To this point, the student shared,

> His question caught me off guard as I fumbled for a response. I responded with jumbled words about hoping to create policy change, but I had no idea what that meant. Embarrassed by the encounter, his question challenged me to think about all we had learned in class about colonialism in the Caribbean, how one's positionality impacts the research process, and how Bay Islanders were seeing their islands transformed through tourism and conservation. But I had never been confronted head-on with these questions. What am I going to do with all this knowledge? . . . What is my responsibility to the people who afforded me this new knowledge? I began to reflect on my reasons for signing up for the Bay Islands program. I entered with the attitude of free vacation, doing some good, seeing cool things, and getting quick course credit. [When I joined this program last summer as an undergraduate, I did so because] I needed one class to complete my online bachelor's degree, but I had already taken every online course. Also, I worked full-time. Taking an in-person class was not an option so my advisor presented the possibility of a 10-day study abroad (Taylor et al., 2024).

This student's honest reflection about why they initially chose to participate in the program is likely similar to how many students end up in short-term education abroad programs – either to travel (perhaps thinking of it as a free vacation) and learn something new and different from what they are exposed to in their home communities and institutions, or to meet a graduation requirement for credit hours in a specific domain or a requirement to engage in high-impact practices. Of note, none of the reasons the student provided align with those you would expect for a program that sought to adopt principles of a decolonized education abroad experience (Adkins & Messerly, 2019).

As two anthropologists with decades of ethnographic engagement in Central America and years leading study abroad in the region, we take a lead from this student's inquiry and reflection to consider strategies to improve efforts to decolonize short-term study abroad programming, drawing on experiences with the UofM' Bay Islands' "Culture, Conservation, and Environmental Change" program and other transnational educational engagements of both authors.

We are both descendants of settler colonists in the U.S. and are committed to interrogating the implications of that identity in our work as educators, anthropologists, and researchers. Kent (the second author) frames this as "disciplinary humility," informed by Tervalon and Murray-García's

(1998) conceptualization of "cultural humility" and the works that theorize and strategize on the decolonization of disciplines and professions. We take seriously, for instance, Tuck and Yang's (2012) call to reject treating decolonization as a metaphor. Similarly, Arvin et al. (2013) urge us to examine the ways in which academic spaces and actors participate in and might divest from Indigenous dispossessions. In what follows, we apply lessons learned from the literature to interrogate the assumed benefits of short-term programming (including those we have led) and their tendency to rest on colonial frameworks (Kasun et al., 2024) and neoliberal sensibilities (Barkin, 2018). We take this reflection as a springboard to propose emergent models that embed decolonial pedagogical strategies into program design, including some partnerships that work to unsettle inherent colonialism of most study abroad models.

2. Interrogating the high impact practice of short-term education abroad

Studies interrogating the assumed benefits of short-term education abroad are growing quickly with the trend to "internationalize" higher education. The growth of short-term programs among U.S. institutions of higher learning is staggering: while semester-long study abroad had once been the dominant mechanism through which college-age students participated in education abroad, our analysis of 2022 – 2024 data, shows that approximately 60% of study abroad experiences had durations of eight weeks or less (opendoorsdata.org). These short-term programs are considered one of the primary ways in which universities can offer high-impact practices (HIP), which are aimed at preparing students for post-graduate success in the global workforce.

As originally conceived, a HIP, according to a report from the Association of American Colleges and Universities, has six core elements: (1) they are effortful and purposeful, requiring considerable time and investment of the student participant; (2) they offer intensive interaction among faculty and student participants; (3) they require students to engage across difference, including substantive interaction with diverse people and perspectives; (4) students receive continuous feedback throughout the experience; (5) they create opportunities for students to apply learning in various contexts, on and off campus; and (6) through exposure to other ways of seeing the world, they help students clarify their own values and beliefs (Kuh & Schneider, 2008). In later years, two new characteristics of HIPs were recognized, including that they

afford students the opportunity to apply what they have learned to real-world settings and demonstrate their learning in public forums (e.g., oral presentations to classmates, community partners, or peers in one's academic discipline) (O'Donnell, 2013). Short-term education abroad is a clear example of a HIP with potential to strike all these elements. However, while many short-term education abroad programs may be beneficial to the students who participate, the rapid growth of these types of programs brings us, as cultural anthropologists with commitments to reciprocal relationships with host communities, pause for several reasons.

In recent years, studies exploring the impacts of short-term education abroad programs have complicated the often-celebratory nature of such programming, suggesting instead that these programs may not be accomplishing much of what they set out to do (Barkin, 2018), raising a series of concerns for both local communities and students. For starters, these types of programs are another symptom of the neoliberalism of higher education, where short-term study abroad is another market-based endeavor that brings economic capital to an institution and leads to higher numbers of participating students, while promising students the accumulation of cultural capital via international exchange (Bodinger de Uriarte & Di Giovine, 2020). As Barkin (2018, p. 296) observes, these programs often take "as foundational the belief that getting students out of the country […] should be the primary goal of internationalization […] and that the nature of that academic agenda is at best a secondary consideration." The idea, it seems, is that simply by nature of travelling elsewhere, one cultivates global citizenship, and a sense of belonging and responsibility that transcends national borders. However, many have critiqued the degree to which such immersion programs truly engender global citizenship or offer robust experiential learning (Barkin, 2018).

Even the concept of "global citizenship" itself has been critiqued, for it obscures the fact that very few people have the privilege of traveling as a global "citizen" (e.g., Chakravarty et al., 2020; Zemach-Bersin, 2007). Zemach-Bersin (2007, p. 17) describes study abroad within this context as "falsely depoliticized rhetoric" that prioritizes U.S. interests and imperialism, and Muppidi (2004, cited in Zemach-Bersin 2007, p. 22) reminds us that, "the global is consistently colonized by the American national." Education abroad can thus be understood as a type of resource extraction (Zemach-Bersin, 2007), benefiting U.S. students and the U.S. more broadly. Such programs can also reflect colonialist exoticization and othering of local communities. For instance, Chakravarty and

colleagues (2020) found U.S. universities' marketing approaches present communities in the Global South in ways that perpetuate notions of white saviorism and superiority, rather than encourage understanding and equity. Through analysis of online materials for 50 of the top education abroad programs in the U.S., we conclude that the messaging is “reminiscent of colonial exoticization of the Other” (Chakravarty et al., 2020, 127). They point to an example of web-based information on a semester-long study abroad program: “In a country known for urban poverty, you’ll gain as much as you give, helping with education, health, or community building. Teach English to underserved children, foster professional skills in women, and much more” (Chakravarty et al., 2020, 130). Further, only two of the 50 programs researched by Chakravarty and colleagues (2020, 129) clearly indicate “what steps are taken to ensure that communities abroad benefit and are protected from harm as students provide education and service to them.”

Concerns such as these with shortcomings of the dominant model have been articulated by thinkers and practitioners in a variety of settings. In response, efforts are being made to address the problems. Hartman (2015, p. 98), for instance, developed the Fair Trade Learning (FLT) program, which “prioritizes reciprocity (i.e., mutual benefit) in relationships through cooperative, cross-cultural participation in learning, service, and civil society.” The FTL program facilitates the establishment of partnerships of mutual support as an alternative to the market-driven model. In their chapter, Lewin and Van Kirk (2010) explore approaches to program design that prioritize host communities and reciprocity through their analysis of a partnership between University of Connecticut and an NGO in Guatemala. The Critical Internationalization Studies Network serves as an example of a coordinated effort to address power and resource disparities, work towards more equitable relationships, and confront “complexity and complicity” through a newsletter, masterclass, bibliography, and other avenues (criticalinternationalization.net). Lastly, in their article, titled *African Homestays and Community Engagement: A Case Study on Reciprocity and Neocolonialism*, Wairungu et al. (2022) also provide a strong discussion of a program that has worked to equalize relationships and move towards reciprocal arrangements. Unfortunately, in many cases, the shortcomings of education abroad parallel those found in the tourism sector.

3. Neocolonialism and neoliberalism in education abroad: Is education abroad just another form of tourism?

Neocolonial attitudes and practices pervade many short-term education abroad experiences, critiques that are reminiscent of the critical literature on voluntourism (another short-term travel experience that is meant to be intellectually and culturally enriching). Both types of global exchange opportunities have been found to rest on a persistent "othering" of host communities and for participants to be motivated to 'make a difference' or 'do good' in the lives of local people through their presence (Adkins & Messerly, 2019; Guttentag, 2009; Wearing & Wearing, 2006). This is a direct outgrowth of humanitarian ideals that emerge from the colonial era, and which took root in Enlightenment ideas of the Self/Other distinction whereby the Self was "ideologically situated in a privileged position" and looked "upon Others as needing assistance" (Adkins & Messerly 2019, p. 79). The outcome of such othering processes in all cases (colonizer/colonized; voluntourist/aid recipient; international student abroad/local community member) is that those who hold the privileged position in the arrangement often do not recognize the imbalance of power and inequities in the exchange experience (Adkins & Messerly, 2019). Thus, the dominant model found in global education programming is marked by white supremacy and coloniality, positioning study abroad as a one-way consumer process (Thiam & Sorila, 2023). These arrangements divide groups into "those who travel, learn, and produce knowledge" vs. "those who stay in the field, are studied, and are defined" – hosts are "objects to be studied and therefore not human enough. This tradition is fundamentally colonial" (Thiam & Sorila, 2023, p. 172).

A secondary problematic outcome of such relationships is that those who are positioned within the "Other" category come to be inscribed and then reflect the hegemonic configuration of the Self/Other subjectivity, which is accomplished through anamorphosis (a distortion that requires the viewer to occupy a specific position in order to see its true form). Philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2000, p. 659) argues that ideology functions off anamorphic framings. In writing that "anamorphosis designates an object whose very material reality is distorted in such a way that a gaze is inscribed into its objective features [...] a blurred contour, a stain, becomes a clear entity if we look at it from a certain biased standpoint" (Žižek, 2000, p. 659) is describing how ideologies function —

ideology structures social reality such that we see the world around us through a specific (distorted, anamorphic) lens. There is an inherent paradox within anamorphosis: it "undermines the distinction between objective reality and its distorted subjective perception; in it, "the subjective distortion is reflected back into the perceived object itself, and in this precise sense, the gaze itself requires a supposedly objective existence" (Žižek, 2000, p. 659).

Applying Žižek's observations about how anamorphosis distorts reality to education abroad, Adkins and Messerly (2019, p. 81) observe that in such contexts, students, faculty, and program administrators inscribe local residents with identities that enable the student to become the Self they desire, one that is a globally-minded, cultural learner. The hosts then become positioned as Others without agency. While local people may indeed resist this interpellation, the process of anamorphosis has real consequences on peoples' lives, with material effects on those who have been marked as "Other" (Adkins & Messerly, 2019). The uneven distribution of costs and benefits of such arrangements are accelerated by the ways in which neoliberalism has transformed higher education over the last few decades.

Neoliberalism has shifted university education from a public good that embraces ideals of cultural enrichment and democratic engagement into a market-driven system focused on efficiencies, metrics, and student satisfaction. As universities increasingly adopt models of managerialism and budget austerity, the student is recast as a customer, and institutional priorities shift toward revenue generation (Barkin, 2018). Within this context, education abroad opportunities become marketed as a method to accumulate cultural capital which will make students competitive for employment in the global market upon graduation (Brondo, 2021).

Within the neoliberal context, it is no surprise that universities are sometimes turning to for-profit agencies to deliver short-term, faculty-led study abroad programs to generate quick revenue (Barkin, 2018). In other cases, they work with non-profits and educational organizations such as the School For International Training (SIT). Planning such programs is a substantial undertaking, and based on our experience and observations of the process at our institutions, it can be difficult for faculty and university study abroad staff to manage all the necessary arrangements without external assistance; they are labor-intensive and require significant local engagement (the latter of which university staff cannot have for all study abroad sites). They often turn, therefore, to providers for the heavy lifting required in the host communities.

Such entities vary, with some functioning as little more than tour operators, hence the caution that these programs may be no different than an extended vacation, or a form of "academic tourism" (Castiello-Gutiérrez & Gozik, 2022; Wearing & Wearing, 2006). There is also the concern that short-term education abroad contributes to overtourism and the sustainability challenges that arise in highly/over-travelled places, a topic we interrogate elsewhere (Brondo & Kent, forthcoming).

The sense that these programs are nothing more than touristic engagements is not helped by the manners in which both provider agencies and the neoliberal academy (in the case of programs designed by university employees) tend to market and design their programs. Marketing material often highlights the touristic elements of programming, with "Instagram-ready" visuals that entice student-consumers to travel. With respect to program design, even when the curriculum for short-term programs is curated by faculty and enrollment limited to small cohorts, the program typically remains monocultural in design, with participants operating in their small bubble, with limited cross-cultural engagement (Castiello-Gutiérrez & Gozik, 2022). Time is one of the most obvious barriers, as building rapport, establishing trust and reciprocity, and acting with intentionality cannot be done in a two-week period. Further, as discussed by Castiello-Gutiérrez and Gozik (2022), there is evidence that during these short-term programs, students primarily interact with each other rather than the community.

Adkins and Messerly (2019) offer a helpful summary of characteristics associated with the neoliberal subjectivity employed by neocolonial education abroad programs which we annotate here as a springboard to work towards decolonizing education abroad. They observe that Western-run education abroad programs tend to identify the "self" as an individual separate from and defined in contrast to the "Other"; focus on the individual participant's experience in transactional relationships that are cross-cultural encounters where the Self encounters the Other; and use that experience to gain professional, personal and educational achievement for themselves (Adkins & Messerly, 2019, p. 82). Given that we suspect that these dynamics mark the vast majority of U.S. run short-term education abroad, and the parallels between tourism and short-term education abroad programming, we are impelled by scholars documenting the impacts of such travel on host communities to account for "settler positionalities of privilege" and engage with the responsibilities that stem from these dynamics (Cooke, 2017, p. 4). We contribute

to a growing body of literature documenting efforts to undermine the neoliberal and neocolonial forces, as well as to analyze the barriers to genuine change. While not comprehensive, examples of pieces from that body of literature are cited throughout this paper.

4. Decolonizing study abroad: Learning from the literature

Despite the common refrain from institutions of higher education suggesting that internationalization of higher education is mutually beneficial, analysis about who participates in education abroad and where they travel for study reveals complexities. The vast majority of U.S. students participating in education abroad travel to Europe, and 80% of them go to just one of six countries: Italy, Spain, France, Germany, Ireland, and the United Kingdom. Other popular destinations are also Western, developed countries: Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (Castiello-Gutiérrez & Gozik, 2022). Further, global travel is an endeavor of the privileged, more likely to be undertaken by citizens of the Global North. Thus, “speaking of decolonizing study abroad must start with the process of decolonizing the very foundation of study abroad: access to international movement” (Thiam & Sorila, 2023, p. 166). These statistics and patterns reflect the strong need to decolonize education abroad. Consider, for instance, the difference in power when a program in London is attended by primarily upper-middle-class students of Euro-American descent versus attended by mostly racialized minorities from an HBCU (Historically Black College or University), or a program in Honduras attended by historically marginalized and minoritized students from a public U.S. institution. Further, the wealth and power of these “Global North” host countries can at least sometimes be a barrier to opportunities for critical immersion in disparities as part of interrogating neocolonial processes. Unless programs provide connections with the “majority world” (Alam, 2008) they risk reifying a narrow understanding of structural patterns and the programs risk aligning more so with the outcomes seen in tourism.

Castiello-Gutiérrez and Gozik (2022, p. 184) observe that decolonial education seeks to uncover the “ongoing violence of colonization that has created global inequities and attempt to work against it through education.” In practice, this means naming and denouncing the causes of inequalities and power imbalances between places and peoples and elevating/centering perspectives from formerly colonized places rather than continuing to teach

perspectives that emerge from colonial and neocolonial origins (Castiello-Gutiérrez & Gozik, 2022, p. 184). Applying this to education abroad, Adkins and Messerly (2019) offer guidance on how to operationalize a decolonial lens in planning and executing programs. Whether redesigning an existing program or starting anew, the program must remove all ethnocentric, uncritical, simplified, one-sided, and touristic understandings of culture and abandon any language and practices that align with the "savior complex." In their place, one's approach should be "respectful, reciprocal, critically self-reflexive, involve building long-term relationships, and seek to understand and interact holistically with local institutions and cultures and individual hosts – in all their profound complexities" (Adkins & Messerly, 2019, p. 75). Likewise, Thiam and Sorila (2023) push us to adopt models that are ethical, reciprocal, that center local perspectives in which the groups are partners, and that include a process of both learning and unlearning.

In confronting head-on the inequities and injustices of the dominant mode of education abroad, Adkins and Messerly (2019, p. 82) contribute to various efforts to "theorize and practice new ways of interacting with other(s) that might work against such detrimental forces as anamorphosis" (the distortion of objective reality and inscription of local residents, in this example, into the perspective of the colonial/traveler/student lens). In contrast to the neocolonial and transactional subjectivity where cross-cultural encounters are narrated through the perspective of the student/faculty/administrator guests, a decolonized education abroad experience rests on intersubjectivity, a way of understanding ourselves as emergent through empathetic engagements and communication with others, each of whom also has "multiple, competing identities" (Adkins & Messerly, 2019, p. 83). To put into practice a decolonized education abroad program, Adkins and Messerly (2019, p. 83) offer a framework and guiding principles, organized around three broad categories: "planning and recruiting, collaborating with local partners and communities, and employing decolonizing pedagogies that enhance students' awareness of their own positionalities and connect the education abroad experience to other parts of the educational continuum." We apply these strategies in the coming section as we reflect on our own experiences with education abroad and consider interventions and improvements in our effort to move further on the path towards decolonization.

5. Assessing the Bay Islands program through a decolonizing framework

The Bay Islands are an archipelago off the Atlantic coast of Honduras, located at the southern edge of the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef, the second largest reef system in the world. The islands consist of three main islands — Roatan, Guanaja, and Utila — and more than three dozen islets and cays. The Indigenous Pech were the first inhabitants of the islands, present before — and then subsequently decimated by — Spanish colonization in the 1500s. The British contested Spanish colonization of the islands throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, and the then mostly uninhabited islands experienced several military occupations as well as served as safe harbor for buccaneering activity. In 1797, the Indigenous Garifuna arrived in Roatan, forcibly relocated to Punta Gorda from St. Vincent after decades of warfare with the British. By the time of White and Anglo-Antillean settler colonization in the 1830s, the entire Pech population had been enslaved or killed. Soon after (in the 1850s) freed slaves from the Caymans arrived, followed by another wave of settlement in the early 20th century from Jamaica, Belize and other Caribbean Islands. The economy that these early settlers established was primarily reliant on fishing and trade of agricultural products, including coconuts and bananas. Today, tourism dominates as the main source of livelihood for islanders. Scuba tourism began in the 1970s across all three islands and large-scale cruise ship tourism arrived in Roatan in the late 20th century.

Along with the growth in tourism there has been a substantial population flow from the Honduran mainland seeking work opportunities or fleeing the crime and violence associated with life on the mainland, followed more recently by “lifestyle” migrants, or citizens of other countries seeking a vacation home or Caribbean retirement (largely from the United States and Canada). Understanding the entwinement of tourism development, environmental change, and cultural change became the focus of the Bay Islands education abroad program.

The Bay Islands program was a combination study abroad and field school developed in partnership with three small island conservation NGOs and a handful of community members recognized for their leadership in the community. It offered a two-week intensive hands-on experience in anthropological methods, conservation, and cultural heritage. The field experience was coupled with a mixed undergraduate and graduate course on

the intersections of tourism development, climate change, biodiversity preservation, culture loss, and ecological grief. Students conduct mini-field research projects on a topic of interest, and graduate students gained experience leading formal interviews as assistants on a larger research project. Pre-field coursework exposed students to critical theory, applied and engaged research techniques, and place-based knowledge of the field site, its inhabitants (both human and nonhuman), and the main challenges they face. Graduate students were assigned more in-depth readings on Indigenous and other minoritized groups, and the unique threats they face.

When the Bay Islands program was initially designed in 2019, it was done in very close consultation with the director of the Utila Chapter of the Bay Islands Conservation Association (BICA), an organization that we have worked closely with on a series of applied anthropology projects since 2016. The first offering of the program was slated for May 2020; the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic led to the cancellation of the physical program, and the program converted to a virtual internship with BICA, where students worked on independent research projects that aligned course content to small projects that met BICA's needs. The following year the program was cancelled again due to the pandemic, but by that time, Brondo (the first author) and BICA had launched a virtual field school with NGO leaders from across Latin America who were also National Geographic Explorers (see Brondo & Kent, forthcoming, for discussion of this program). The first in-person offering, therefore, was in 2022, and this discussion reflects on three offerings of the program (2022, 2023, and 2024). The program was discontinued at the UofM when Brondo moved to a new university in 2025.

The remainder of this section considers Adkins and Messerly's strategies to decolonize education abroad and the degree to which the Bay Islands program currently lives up to these interventions and how it might do better in its next iteration under a new academic home.

5.1. Reflections on planning and recruitment

With respect to planning and recruitment, Adkins and Messerly (2024, p. 82) emphasize the following strategies to decolonize education abroad: during the planning stages, faculty should collaborate closely with local people and organizations to envision a program that offers a variety of options to engage with a range of local people and issues; they should attend to sustainability in program activities (defined in their work as minimal impact on local resources);

avoid consumeristic advertising of the program; and engage in equitable recruitment and outreach by promoting the opportunity and ensuring access for students from underrepresented populations.

As noted above, the program was initially co-designed with the then-Director of BICA-Utila, but had to pivot to a virtual program for two years. It was first offered in person in 2022, but by then, BICA had a new director in place, and so Brondo expanded the Utila host NGOs to include another of our partners on Utila island — Kanahua Wildlife Conservation — an organization with experience hosting university groups. Brondo also worked with the BICA Directors of the other two chapters, such that students would engage with community members on issues of environmental change on the islands of Roatan and Guanaja as well.

Environmental NGOs are the primary partners for the program, which meant that sustainability was a shared value and activities were typically designed to have a low impact on natural resources. However, accessibility needs often conflicted with environmentally sustainable practices (see Brondo & Kent, forthcoming, for a focused discussion of sustainability). In thinking about access and recruitment of underrepresented populations in education abroad, the Bay Islands program stands out, as do most programs at the UofM. The UofM serves a highly diverse student population of roughly 20,000 students, 55% of whom are Pell-eligible and nearly 40% first-generation. While not officially designated as a minority-serving institution, only approximately 40% of students are White and the remainder of the student population represent a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. The two largest groups of non-White students are African American/Black (~35%) and Hispanic/Latino (~ 8% and growing rapidly). A large portion of the student population also work full-time, are raising children, or engaging in eldercare. The cost of education abroad (from the price tag to time away from home and work) means participation is quite low when compared to other institutions. Recognizing these hurdles, over two decades ago the students got together to advocate that a portion of enrollment fees be earmarked each year for study abroad scholarships, resulting in a substantial recurring scholarship fund. Simultaneously, the UofM began running more short-term education abroad programs, such that those who had limitations on their ability to be away for long stretches of time could participate. Even with these interventions, participation remains low. But what this means is that nearly all students who apply for scholarships for the short-term, faculty-led, and reasonably priced (another reason not to use an umbrella

firm to organize opportunities) have their participation costs nearly entirely covered (and often most are completely paid for in full). Improving access to these opportunities aligns with the goal of decolonizing programming. Many questions arise regarding student identities and decolonial approaches. Some students have experiences, familial backgrounds, and knowledge that better position them to engage in — and avoid the pitfalls associated with — the process of anamorphosis. It is important to continue to improve access to education abroad programming, but also critical to address the weakness of the short-term model.

Recognizing the realities that most UofM students do not — and often cannot — travel for long durations of time, Brondo's goal was to design an intensive short-term education abroad program that immersed students in dialogue and partnership with islanders, exposing students to other ways of living and being in the world. However, attracting students to Honduras remains challenging, due to the country's reputation for crime and violence and because students who may only have *one* chance to leave Memphis often desire to go to Europe. This point brings us to consider Adkins and Messerly's (2019) advice to avoid consumeristic advertising, something Brondo admits appeared in the UofM's promotion of the Bay Islands program, which featured picturesque scenes of the Caribbean Sea. Why, in a program that seeks to infuse decolonizing strategies, did Brondo allow such advertising to persist?

Over the years, facing difficulty recruiting students, Brondo reasoned that there was an appropriate tradeoff in advertising some of the more 'touristy' views of the Bay Islands alongside detailed descriptions of programming to generate program interest from a broad array of students, diversifying access. As noted above, very few students at the University of Memphis travel abroad, and many never even left the Mid-South (Brondo had also worked with students who never left the confines of the City of Memphis). Anecdotally, those who do participate in education abroad almost always choose programs in popular European destinations. For the handful who go to Latin America, they often join a program organized through a vendor agency, which as we noted above, can sometimes be little more than an extended vacation (Barkin, 2018; Bodinger de Uriarte & Di Giovine, 2020; Castiello-Gutiérrez & Gozik, 2022). Thus, advertising the program with imagery that showcases the Caribbean helped attract enough students such that the program would "make" (i.e., meets the minimum enrollment threshold to run). However, as the student's comment from the opening vignette about attending the program "with the attitude of a free

vacation" reveals, once in the pre-trip classroom, Brondo had her work cut out for her in terms of helping students understand that they would not be on a vacation. Far from it. Bringing in partners from Honduras before the students arrive via virtual platforms like Zoom or Teams helped manage student expectations to some degree, but it is not until the students arrive and are confronted by islanders themselves — as the student at the fish factory was by the cutter — that they truly begin to think through their role as guest learners in a new environment (discussed more in the next section).

5.2. Reflections on local collaboration and decolonizing pedagogies

We consider the additional two sets of strategies to decolonize study abroad offered by Adkins and Messerly (2024) in this section: local collaboration and the adoption of decolonizing pedagogies. With respect to local collaboration, Adkins and Messerly (2024, pp. 84-85) suggest the following: shared ownership of programming, such that both the local hosts' and university institution's values are considered in planning and execution; intentional selection of hosts and education of students about the host's role in local community; and prioritizing reciprocity in relationships whereby both hosts and students (rather than just students) are engaged in learning from one another. Decolonial pedagogical interventions include: enhancements to orientations, both pre-travel and upon arrival, whereby students reflect intentionally on their own positionalities and the role of culture; attention to appropriate prerequisites such that students receive foundational knowledge about the cultures they will encounter; offering programming upon return; and fostering pedagogies of global learning across the entire curriculum at one's institutions, such that education abroad reinforces rather than serves as a departure from, learning that emphasizes global experiences (Adkins & Messerly, 2024, p. 85). How did the Bay Islands program measure against these strategies?

As noted above, the initial Bay Islands program was developed with leadership from island conservation organizations. Much of the on-the-ground programming was designed to provide students with hands-on experience in protected species monitoring research, and educational exposure to sites of cultural significance. Meals were arranged at locally-owned restaurants (or in local homes) and included dishes of local tastes. Pre-field orientations and course material were curated by Brondo with input from local hosts and updated each year to correspond to changes in the field experience. In brief, pre-

field material covered an introduction to Honduras, with a strong focus on the cultural history of the Bay Islands and environmental challenges and their relationship to tourism and development; an overview of core debates and tensions in the field of environmental anthropology, with a focus on relationships between anthropology and conservation; critical literature on postcolonialism and the Caribbean; case studies of the commodification of culture and threats to cultural patrimony, including contemporary cases from the islands; methodological articles that emphasize decolonizing methods that are community-based and designed to immerse oneself in local knowledge (e.g., walking methodologies, a situated, relational, embodied, material, and sensorial method that engenders accountability, solidarity, and response-ability), as well as critical scholarship that interrogates short-term education abroad (Springgap & Truman, 2019). Overall, the material, we reason, offered strong alignment with the decolonizing tenants covered in the literature (Adkins & Messerly, 2024; Gozik & Hamir, 2022).

Examples of educational and cultural exchange activities that were included since the program's first in-person offering include iguana tracking and monitoring of the endemic and endangered *Ctenosaura Bakeri* (locally known as the "swamper"), a visit to Utila's oldest fish factory (mentioned in the opening vignette), hiking the dormant volcano of Pumpkin Hill on Utila, visiting the Garifuna Cultural Center and the House of Tea, a women's refuge and healing center, both in Punta Gorda, Roatan (the earliest settlement of the Black Indigenous Garifuna), assisting in BICA-Roatan's microplastics study, among others. In the first year, community members who Brondo had gotten to know over the years informally joined excursions and offered their own commentary. Over time, the program evolved to take more focused direction from local community members, who in the second and third years led their own tours of the island's history and culture, having full say on where to bring students and what to share. Each year locals serving as tour guides added new details. Again, this collaborative approach aligns with decolonizing tenants.

These additions were coupled with readings that challenged students to think critically about the interrelationships between development, tourism, conservation, and culture change, and we believe help overcome the othering processes that often mark education abroad. However, the largest challenge Brondo faced was that very few students did the reading, and the pre-field class meetings were simply not long enough to cover the core material. Time and student capacity limit an instructor's ability to provide in-depth content to

students for a variety of majors, ages, and so on with the limited number of sessions before and after travel. Thus, students often do not enter the field with a solid foundation to help them make sense of what they will experience. This reality poses significant challenges to fostering the intersubjectivity necessary to truly decolonize education abroad. It also points to the need to continue to improve resource access for marginalized or less-privileged students in order to improve learning opportunities with the pre- and post-trip content.

5.3. Settler colonialism and tourism development in Pech and Garifuna lands

Above we shared the complex history of multiple waves of settler colonialism in the islands, layering new ethnic groups that arrived via the Cayman Islands onto a landscape that was once controlled by the Pech. These islanders are known as Native Bay Islanders, and are formally recognized by the government as an ethnic population of cultural significance. The Garifuna, Indigenous to the Caribbean region and forcibly exiled to the Bay Islands from St. Vincent, are also formally recognized by the nation-state for their unique ethnic identity and cultural rights, distinct from the Honduran mestizo population.

Pre-field reading covers the cultural history of the islands from various disciplinary and individual perspectives, including readings from anthropologists and cultural geographers who have dedicated their careers to studying the islands (e.g., Davidson, 1974; Stonich, 1999), alongside works by Bay Islanders, e.g., Black Chest by Artly Emilie Brooks Smith (2013), an account of Black Bay Islanders communities and cultural practices. The complicated history of multiple waves of settlement and communities who stake claims as “local” is hidden to most visitors to the islands, who spend the bulk of their time underwater. And for those students who do not engage fully with, or were challenged to fully comprehend the pre-field material, it remained hidden to them until their arrival and initial encounters with hosts.

Throughout the program, students visited the small museums curated by islanders and environmentalist partners and joined walking tours where islanders shared their experiences with landscape changes. On Utila, walking tours took students to “Rocky Road,” “Old Indian Well,” and former settlements and resting sites of the Pech, places that second-wave settlers (Native Bay Islanders) have scraped of pottery, jade, and other artifacts for their own personal collections. In one important historic area known as Jericho, students

see remains from the past scattered across the landscape, broken pottery riddling the ground, excavated as the land was cleared and portioned up for private sale. In Guanaja, islanders take students into caves that have long served as islanders' safehouse during major storms. Within the caves, if they are lucky, their tour guide will show them hidden 'yabba ding dings,' what islanders call pottery remains and small sculptures that they found from when the Pech occupied the islands. Each year, students who did not fully engage the pre-departure material were surprised when the hosts they met were not from the Pech community, but rather were either Native Black Islander, Garifuna, of mixed descent, or foreign-born staff from one of the NGOs. This affirms one of the values of education abroad – experiential education is critical for many students when working towards equitable pedagogy.

Students also join Garifuna women leaders in Punta Gorda to learn about their struggles to reclaim usurped ancestral territory, and the activist work of the Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras (Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña or OFRANEH) to support recovery efforts. In 2022, six community members from Punta Gorda were violently detained and many more suffered serious injuries when the Honduran military police raided territory the community was recovering and burned down community structures they erected for shared use (Aguilar, 2022). The following year, the community had successfully recovered the land, constructed a community center and shelters, and several families had moved to the communal property. Prior to departure, students in the education abroad program that year watched footage of the police raid, filmed by community activists and were assigned to read articles about the case. In the field, they then met with the lead organizer and OFRANEH activist from Punta Gorda, who shared details about her work as a human rights defender, land activist, and community leader. The students learn that she helped launch the Casa de Té (Tea House), an ancestral health and healing center that employs Garifuna traditional medicinal practices and serves as a refuge for women experiencing domestic violence in Punta Gorda. The students toured the Tea House, learning about local remedies, and were gifted a bag of herbs to take home.

At Wagiari Le, the recovered communal lands, community members instructed the students on how to make machuca, a traditional dish that represents the Garifuna connection to land and sea, combining food sourced from both, a mix of cassava, plantains, coconut, and seafood. The students each took turns pounding boiled plantains with a hana, an approximately 4-foot-tall

mortar and pestle that is carved out of wood. Students joined community members in sharing the meal, which culminated in some dancing and music. Residents were dressed as they do on a daily basis, not in the traditional vibrant attire with colorful patterns representing their community as punta troupes will do for most tourist performances, but in casual clothing similar to the students themselves. Here and elsewhere students engaged in conversation, or sometimes interviews (for the graduate students). On behalf of the community, the land defender who organized the event shared her enthusiasm for the students to participate in their communal activities and to learn about their culture from the perspective of the residents, as they wished to share, rather than through a tour operator.

These encounters were a sharp diversion from the Garifuna culture presented in performances to cruise ship tourists, sanitized versions of culture divorced from historical context. Writing about Punta Gorda in the early 2000s, Kirtsoglou and Theodossopolous (2004) found that the Garifuna felt strongly that the growth of tourism had led to commodification of culture. They reported that residents of Punta Gorda argued tourism led to cultural appropriation and exploitation, with outside tour agencies commodifying and profiting off their cultural performances, particularly with respect to punta dancing. Residents were not against the celebration and commercialization of their culture; to the contrary, Kirtsoglou and Theodossopolous (2004) found that residents were interested in using cultural performance as a way to celebrate and amplify their unique history and culture. What they resisted, however, was for outsiders to control their narrative and to profit from their performances. Students were assigned this 25-year-old case study as a foundation for what they would encounter in Punta Gorda, with the expectation that they would place it in conversation with their visits and dialogue with residents they met. Yet, based on reactions and questions in the field, it became clear in the first two years of the program few students were completing the assigned readings, or they were challenged by the content and thus, they had a lot of questions about Garifuna history and culture when they got to Punta Gorda. This is why Brondo shifted to showing relevant videos in pre-departure class meetings (she had found students also did not watch them on their own time when assigned before departure). The live screenings in class were followed with a discussion that put the assigned readings into conversation with the video footage the students watch.

For those who do embrace all the pre-departure material, including the readings on positionality, reflexivity, and critical studies of education abroad, the program is partially successful in meeting some of the goals of a decolonized education abroad experience. The ultimate goal is to subvert the voluntourist/aid recipient; international student abroad/local community member relationship such that islanders control the narrative, as is shown in this example from Punta Gorda. In doing this, the Bay Islands program would upend the dominant colonial hierarchies commonly found in global education programing (Thiam & Sorila, 2023). In some ways the program has been partially successful, at least with respect to fostering critical self-reflection, as is revealed in the following quote from Sabrina Taylor (the student quoted in the opening vignette). In the same SfAA dialogue we referenced earlier, Taylor describes visiting the Garifuna community of Punta Gorda. She reflects on her culture shock, as well as her identity as a "white tourist" feeling "uneasy and out of place" (Taylor et al., 2024). Members of the community performed the traditional Garifuna punta dance and taught Sabrina and the other students so they could join in. In reflecting on this, she shared the following:

> I later realized this performance was arranged for us by our hosts catering to our touristic views. The encounter once again challenged me. While impactful for students, these staged encounters highlight our privileged position as mostly White American students. As we ended our program on the West End of Roatan – the tourist side of the island, there was a struggle inside me that blurred the boundary between tourist and student. I was grateful to be back in an area of modern convenience catering to my tourist privilege. However, I couldn't help noticing the contrast between the communities. The West End gives the feeling of a Florida vacation. The reality of the East side lingered in my mind as massive cruise ships blocked our line of sight.

> Sabrina also shared the following from her journal:

> We must look beyond our own ideas of paradise – white beaches and umbrella drinks to understand these ideas are killing others' ideas of paradise. I always leave this place with a new sense of responsibility in educating others regarding environmental sustainability…However, this time, I understand the cultural effects. Humans are perhaps the largest invasive species causing the endangerment of not only land, plants, and animals but other humans through cultural erasure.' (Taylor et al., 2024).

In this extended excerpt, Sabrina appears to be grappling with the process of anamorphosis, and the demonstrated resistance to it by her interlocutors in the community, an important pedagogical outcome for the program. She juxtaposes several aspects of her identity in contrast to her hosts, her Whiteness, her status as a visitor ("tourist"), her discomfort ("feeling uneasy, and out of place"; "I tried to hide my culture shock") in a community that did not resemble that which she was accustomed to in her other travels to Caribbean destinations (which more closely matched the West side of Roatan that she describes). Sabrina becomes the Self she desires, a globally-minded cultural learner, consistent with the effects of anamorphosis, as she unwittingly at the time, marks her hosts as "Other." But where she also lands in her reflection is in recognizing the community's resilience ("witnessing their resilience challenges me") and honoring the fact that residents were in control of what they wanted to share ("I later realized this performance was arranged for us by our hosts"). While Sabrina reads the dance, food, and soccer game as her "hosts catering to our touristic views" she states that "the encounter once again challenged me." While she describes these activities as "staged encounters" she also understands that her hosts were making deliberate decisions about which aspects of their culture to share with students, including their struggle to reclaim ancestral lands. They may also be making economic decisions given the fundamental importance of mobility for their livelihoods, but working towards hosting on their terms rather than those of the guest. In this way, Sabrina begins to reckon with islanders' resistance to interpellation that is common in short-term study abroad. At the end she is grappling with the impacts of development and land grabs – from walking atop Pech remains, bulldozed over to build houses for lifestyle migrants to learning about the territorial dispossession of the Garifuna in Punta Gorda.

5.4. Additional challenges to decolonizing the Bay Islands program and promising models

Co-designing the program with locals was beneficial in avoiding the pitfalls of a consumeristic and touristic education abroad experience. However, the partner NGOs often host volunteers, and their experience suggested a higher level of participant satisfaction when programs included some "fun" excursions, such as snorkeling. Initially the program intended for snorkeling activities to include coral reef health checks (to assist in NGO reporting) or for students to help with the application of antibiotic medicine to corals impacted by stony-coral tissue loss disease (SCTL), but the host partners determined there was

insufficient time for the training required for students to execute this work. However, the program kept snorkeling. In part, snorkeling and other recreational activities were retained and always featured in advertising materials because they aided in recruitment.

There are other pieces that Brondo feels the Bay Islands program has not achieved in reaching the model proposed by Adkins and Messerly (2019). These include ensuring appropriate prerequisites are met and infusing decolonializing strategies across the broader curriculum at her then-home institution. Both are difficult to achieve without buy-in from upper administration, and enforcing pre-requisites would also make it nearly impossible to attract enough students for the program to run, for reasons listed earlier. We also note that by opening the program to all majors, we keep to the principle of inclusivity in access to these opportunities. We observe the possibility that there is a tension between programs providing deep interrogation and introspection versus inclusive access to the course. This is because of varying interests, experience, training, etc., that is associated with each field of study pursued by students. If, for example, there are prerequisites, programs will likely have students from only one or two majors, which is counter to the decolonizing goal of reaching a broad set of students with these kinds of opportunities. Nevertheless, while the Bay Island program is rooted in decades of relationships and reciprocity and is designed to privilege the perspectives of Bay Islanders and unveil the processes that seek to erase people and communities, more work can be done to ensure students fully grasp and process imbalances of privilege and power, that genuine relationships of reciprocity and learning are formed across all actors involved (and that students are not the only one gaining new knowledge).

6. Concluding Thoughts

In addition to critical consideration of the Bay Islands program, we are also interested in alternatives to short-term study abroad travel. Virtual exchange programs like COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) may be arrangements that help to address the neocolonial and neoliberal traits in short-term programs. Under models like COIL, instructors from two or more institutions work together to develop curriculum, pedagogical approaches, and to guide students through projects. These programs can facilitate equal exchanges in which all participants give and take.

Elsewhere we analyze the potential of virtual education to facilitate reciprocal and collaborative transnational learning experiences (Brondo & Kent, forthcoming). What is clear, however, is that this approach is more accessible than programs requiring travel. There are many challenges, such as language differences and technology limitations, but we conclude that this approach has some clear benefits and additional research and analysis can help to document its full potential as a decolonizing endeavor.

In conclusion, many aspects of the Bay Island program provide examples of what a move towards decolonizing education abroad looks like. Thanks to the University of Memphis' willingness to allow faculty to work directly on its design with local hosts, allow for a small enrollment, and to generously support students on scholarship, the program did well in terms of improving access for a diverse range of students and offering a curriculum that aligned with host desires and infused critical reflection. We would be remiss, however, if we did not point to the years of relationship-building that provided a foundation, as well as the tenacity and dedication required by Brondo to navigate NGO turnover, travel complexities, and institutional challenges created by the neoliberalization of higher education as core factors in keeping the program going.

In our experience, institutions vary in terms of the resources available to support faculty with building these kinds of programs, which require a great deal of time and intentional care. For this program, Brondo — like other faculty who work in resource-strained institutions with limited staff — had to plan literally every detail of the program, from the syllabus and schedule of activities, to negotiating costs, booking hotel rooms, buying individual ferry passes for students, developing packing lists, preparing invoices, helping partner NGOs get registered as university vendors, and so on. She was also responsible for program recruitment, expected to visit classrooms, attend tabling events, and meet one-on-one with interested students. In order to keep costs down, she offered the course as a half-term course that met weekly post-spring break, with the travel session immediately after the close of the semester. This meant students were given incompletes for the course and after the in-field component concluded and assignments submitted, they received their final grades. This model kept the cost down for students, as the associated tuition became part of the flat spring semester fee (whereas if offered as a summer session, students covered their tuition). Running it in this way also meant that Brondo was not compensated to offer the program (whereas faculty who run summer study

abroad receive a salary since the program runs after their academic year contract has ended). These costs take a toll on faculty, who are already overstretched and continue to be asked to take on more and more in the changing landscape of higher education (Lu, 2025). While many forces will impact program structure, part of the process of decolonizing education abroad demands that we also name the barriers faced by instructors, faculty, and staff, and call on institutions to invest in programs adopting decolonizing principles.

Acknowledgements

We are immensely grateful to community members and NGOs in the Bay Islands whose hospitality and mentorship have shaped our research and study abroad programs over the years. Thank you for welcoming us and our students into your lives and work. A thank you as well to the anonymous reviewers for their careful feedback which helped us refine our argument.

Ethical approval

Information drawn on in this paper and the interviews conducted by students enrolled in the study abroad program are part of a broader research project approved University of Memphis' Institutional Research Board.

Funding

We are grateful to the University of Memphis for supporting the study abroad programs featured in this article and the National Geographic Society for funding support that led to the network of former Explorers with whom we collaborated on study abroad programming.

Use of AI

Generative AI was not used at any stage of the research and writing process.

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