

Anonymous Sojourners: Mapping the Territory of Caribbean Experiences of Immersion for Language Learning

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Introduction: Locating Small-State Sojourners

On the blog “Stuff White People Like,” entry no. 72 on Study Abroad begins:

In addition to accumulating sexual partners, binge drinking, drug use and learning, white people consider studying abroad to be one of the most important parts of a well rounded college education. Study Abroad allows people to leave their current educational institution and spend a semester or a year in Europe or Australia. Though study abroad are [sic] offered to other places, these two are the overwhelming favorites. By attending school in another country, white people are technically living in another country. This is important as it gives them the opportunity to insert that fact into any sentence they please. “When I used to live in [insert country], I would always ride the train to school. The people I’d see were inspiring.” (Clander)

Flippant as it may sound, this satirical vignette nonetheless captures certain aspects of the conventional wisdom surrounding at least one type of study abroad, indeed largely considered the province of “white people,” whose experience is viewed as an exotic rite of self-discovery, in which empathizing with the poor and acquiring impressively cosmopolitan tastes are cardinal features. This type of study abroad is generally available in countries in which either the State can afford to subsidize the cultivation of intercultural skills or participants can afford it themselves, traditionally making it a “white” activity to the extent that it is predominantly “white” countries that possess such affluence, and white students within them who are more likely to be able to access the programs (Woodruff et al.). Ogden’s recent designation of this type of developed-world sojourner as increasingly “colonial,” as a result of the packaging-for-comfort of some current study abroad programs, reflects contemporary unease regarding the increasing commodification of this type of study abroad:

“In essence, colonial students are becoming the creators and proprietors of their own cultural experiences. They are able to enter a new culture as consumer and proceed to linger within its pleasure periphery interacting only as needed and often in an objective and disassociated manner” (Ogden, *View* 10–11).

Evidently, there has long been a parallel stream of sojourners in the opposite direction, more commonly labeled “international students.” These sojourners were initially sponsored by the host nations, who in this way hoped to contribute to the development of the sending nations while spreading “international goodwill” (or, more cynically, while indoctrinating the recipients of their charity). Latterly, many of the sending nations became economically advanced, allowing the host nations to charge them large sums, so that international students are now an indispensable source of income for many tertiary institutions in the developed world. The benefit to the home nations of developing world sojourners has been questionable and the term “brain drain” was coined largely as a result of the tendency for sojourners to stay in or move back to the host country after unsuccessful attempts to reintegrate into the home society. Equally, the assumption of benefit to the host nation in the form of benign attitudes of gratitude pervading elite groups in sending nations has not always proven sound (Ward, Bochner and Furnham 143–45; Bochner, “Sojourners” 188).

It is the power relations pre-supposed by these two opposing streams of study abroad, the “white,” self-discovery kind with its deepest roots in the aristocratic “Grand Tour” of the European well-to-do in the eighteenth century, as against the “non-white” kind as a means of principally economic advancement—that underpin most discussion and research of study abroad and of international student sojourners. Traditionally, Anglophone Caribbean students have followed other developing-world sojourners in studying abroad in destinations which promise first-world educational prestige and thus improved employment opportunities: the UK, Canada and the U.S.. The existence of a regional university has also facilitated study abroad in other Anglophone Caribbean territories for many, though regional traffic between the University of the West Indies (UWI) campuses is now significantly less than in the past (UWI has campuses in Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica and Barbados, to which nationals of other CARICOM territories transfer full time after completing their first year at community colleges at home). All of these traditional destinations offer apparent cultural proximity, often the literal proximity of migrant family members, and the lack of a language barrier to be overcome.

More recently, however, increasing numbers of Caribbean students are opting to sojourn in destinations whose principal lure is the relative linguistic and cultural *distance* they have to offer (Mexico, Cuba, France, Colombia, Costa Rica), the opportunity to move beyond cultural boundaries, while often moving

sideways, rather than upwards, in terms of educational prestige or economic development. The implications of this type of post-colonial sojourning, in which the sojourner is from a former colonial territory but heads somewhere other than the former seat of empire or a more economically developed country, and principally for personal intercultural gain rather than economic or educational prestige reasons, have not been studied; there appears to be even less research, if any at all, into the unique experience of sojourners whose home countries are simply unrecognizable to their hosts because they are a minute fraction of the size, in terms of population, geographical area and global political profile, of the countries they visit.

This paper presents findings of a pilot qualitative study of Caribbean students undertaking overseas immersion primarily for the purpose of perfecting their knowledge of a language and understanding of a culture other than their own. The participants were a group of eleven UWI, Cave Hill (Barbados) graduates, five in Colombia, six in France, all working as English-language assistants for eight to ten months during the 2007–2008 academic year. Of the five in Colombia, four were Barbadian, one St. Lucian; of those in France, one classified herself as both Trinidadian and Barbadian, the others were Barbadian. Only one of the subjects, in Colombia, was male; all were of African descent. Three data collection instruments were used: diaries kept by participants throughout the sojourn; eleven semi-structured interviews averaging 56 minutes duration, with eight of these being after the sojourn and three during (after three months); a questionnaire administered six months after return. Regarding the content of the diary, sojourners were advised as follows:

The diary should be an honest reflection of your everyday experience in a new environment. The following types of experience are particularly of interest:

1. Encounters or happenings you find enlightening, stimulating or different.
2. Incidents or behaviors you find hard to understand or unusual.
3. Situations that are uncomfortable or humorous as a result of differing expectations.
4. Any other thoughts or feelings about your study abroad/immersion experience.

While diary-keeping was naturally variable and some were only sporadic chroniclers, some participants managed as many as fifteen thousand words by the end of the sojourn. Keeping the diary was mentioned by some as a therapeutic exercise in itself, an observation that echoes findings of previous research (Jackson 180; Patron 136, 147).

Though the small size of the sample and the open-ended character of the data collection instruments clearly limit the generalizability of the results, the aim of the study was necessarily exploratory: to begin to map the territory of the small-State sojourner experience as against that of sojourners from large, recognizable nations, whose study abroad experience has been examined from multiple perspectives for decades. This exploratory aim would have been undermined by over-determining the salience of particular aspects, so a wide-ranging response was encouraged in both diary entries and interviews.

It should be noted that the participants were not undertaking classically defined “study abroad,” as they were all employed as English-language assistants at various levels of the French and Colombian education systems and did not attend formal classes. Though some worked or were housed with other non-local language assistants, and others were close enough to compatriot fellow-sojourners to visit each other fairly regularly, none were part of a co-national group from the perspective of the institutions employing them. The reality is that this type of immersion-with-employment has thus far proved the only viable means of regularly involving Anglophone Caribbean language students in sojourns of longer duration.

Goals of the Study

One of the principal functions of the present study is thus to begin to fill a gap in the research by assessing how the relative size and “recognizability” of the home and host states may affect the sojourner’s experience. While this broader question may at least begin to be addressed by studying Eastern Caribbean sojourners, the specificity of national and indeed individual identity means that any study of this group must necessarily have a more limited principal focus: to observe and interpret what *these particular* sojourners experienced. This more specific goal will facilitate subsequent practical objectives of the study in the future:

- The development of relevant, origin-specific orientation and intercultural training mechanisms for Caribbean sojourners prior to departure, support mechanisms and appropriate interventions during the sojourn, and post-sojourn protocols such as reentry debriefings, monitoring processes, employment assistance and other support services;

- The cultivation of informed contact with host nation providers of study abroad and immersion opportunities so that these are aware of the specific needs and characteristics of Anglophone Caribbean sojourners visiting their nations and institutions;
- Preparation of the University of the West Indies and the societies it serves for the increasing internationalization of its student bodies and labour markets;
- Assessment of the broader social implications of increased study abroad, language immersion and overseas sojourning, such as increased “brain drain,” or the possibility of a larger number of more interculturally experienced and diversified persons in positions of responsibility in private and public sectors in future, etc.

The first two of these are primary, shorter-term goals, as it is known that the sojourn can be detrimental to the attitudes of both hosts and participants if it is simply assumed that the mere fact of living abroad will automatically be beneficial to all concerned (Tajfel and Dawson; Stroebe, Lenkert and Jonas). In the case of these sojourners, unlike those participating in programs emerging from the more openly consumerist educational ethos described by Ogden (“View”), the risk is an inadequate degree of comforting contact with the home culture: arriving from relatively much smaller and more homogenous societies, any assistance in integration on the ground in their new milieu—in many respects much “looser” and more heterogeneous than they are accustomed to—currently depends on the chance emergence of benefactors in their place of employment or in the local community.

As the third and fourth goals suggest, the reentry phase is also crucial if participants and the home society are to derive long-term benefit from the experience of sojourning abroad: as is well known, it is common to experience “reverse culture shock” as changes in outlook and habit, which have sometimes occurred outside awareness, fail to mesh with the comforting notion of “home” that sustains sojourners throughout their overseas experience. This issue acquires a greater proportional significance in the context of small States in which “brain drain” is a risk and a reality.

First Encounters

Commenting on a 1960 study of international students in the United States (Morris), Paige notes that these “were found to be acutely sensitive to host country attitudes toward their nations. If they felt their countries were viewed negatively

or as inferior, their attitude toward the United States would be negative and their adjustment to U.S. culture hampered” (169). Clearly, being identified as a member of a national group about which host nationals have certain associations is a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it carves out a ready-made niche for the sojourner to occupy in the scheme of things—one is a known quantity, an alien but with known attributes—on the other, this location can become something of a prison cell if the sojourner’s nationality triggers unfavorable associations or if hosts are prone to over-generalize in a way that distorts the sojourner’s own parameters of self-identity construction. Nonetheless, acculturation psychology suggests that some kind of niche is usually better than no niche at all, as sojourners “are under considerable pressure to ‘maintain and rehearse their national and cultural identity’ (p. 279) [because] cultural maintenance functions to preserve and enhance self-esteem” (Ward and Rana-Deuba 302–03, citing Bochner, McLeod and Lin). Again, the need to “maintain and rehearse” the home culture-based identity is particularly so in the case of programs, such as the assistantships undertaken by the participants in this study, that locate sojourners at a distance from each other and that offer no structured local support in the host country: there is emphatically no colonial “veranda” from which these sojourners may securely survey their new environs (Ogden, “View”).

Here are some accounts of the Caribbean participants’ attempts to locate themselves nationally to their hosts:

Female from Saint Lucia, interview after sojourn in Colombia:

The immediate reaction after “soy de Santa Lucía” would be a blank stare—“¿perdón?, ¿qué?”—they have no idea where “Santa Lucía” is... I try to link it with Puerto Rico, Jamaica, they know Jamaica so they say “¡qué rico!,” everyone thinks it’s wonderful that I’m from the Caribbean. But, it just became annoying because you always get the question, man, I mean, if I could just say a country and they could just say “ah, ok, how did you come here?” But it’s just that you always have to explain where Saint Lucia is, so I think when I go back I’m gonna start saying Brazil, or Africa or something...

Male from Barbados, diary of sojourn in Bogotá, Colombia:

[I]t was extremely difficult trying to explain where I’m from. Everyone, including and mostly the blacks, asked if I’m from Nigeria or South Africa. Then when I said Barbados, they would ask if it is in Africa, someone even

asked if it is in Central America... guess they skipped Geography. I had to use Jamaica as a reference which surprised me since I thought that only happened back in the U.S. years ago.

Female from Barbados, interviewed after sojourn in France:

The students had to guess where we [the English assistants] were from [...] in the last class a boy said, you're from the Caribbean, you're from Jamaica. I was happy he said the Caribbean, but Jamaica, no, I had to explain that I was from B'dos. "Where's that?," "it's close to St. Lucia," "where's that?," "it's close to St. Vincent, you know, where Pirates of the Caribbean was shot," "Oh, so you saw Johnny Depp!," "no...." It was frustrating. Then you had to say, "you know the singer Rihanna, she's from B'dos," "no, she's from the United States," "no, she's from Barbados," "oh, so she's your sister!." It was stressful at first, but gradually they start getting the point that there are other countries, other than Jamaica, that form the Caribbean." [...] [My colleagues] were excited, they wanted to know what typical foods we eat, they wanted me to cook for them, they love hearing the accent, they wanted to know everything about Barbados—Barbados specifically, not the Caribbean—they asked me questions I could not even answer, like how many square miles is Barbados, how high is the highest point... they asked me about the music, the culture, the food, if there are any white people there, any Arabs...

The common denominator of these and all other accounts is the tedium of rehearsing lengthy explanations of origin, coupled with a mild patriotic irritation at having to accept an association they feel as relatively distant, with Jamaica, in exchange for achieving some degree of recognizability. In the case of Colombia, it was also common for sojourners to be asked what country their territories "belonged to," as most Colombians seem to be aware that most of the Greater Antilles are fully independent, but assume that smaller Caribbean territories are island outposts of mainland nations by analogy with the insular Colombian territories of San Andrés, Providencia and Santa Catalina. In the case of France, a number of sojourners reported that Guadeloupe and Martinique were less helpful reference points than Jamaica, since while most were aware that the former were overseas French territories, few metropolitan French seemed to have a sense of their geographical location.

In the final account above, the more positive responses of the sojourner's adult interlocutors, as against the children she deals with in class, are included to avoid the impression that all was bleak in this area: clearly, some more interculturally

attuned adults in both Colombia and France were discerning enough to realize that an independent island over a thousand miles distant from Jamaica was likely to have its own identity, and enquired accordingly. None of the sojourners, however, reported meeting interlocutors who had direct knowledge of their home territories, so that answering questions, rather than sharing points of actual recognition, was always the common mode of interaction when addressing their national origin with hosts.

Emotional and Social Well-Being

As we see, Eastern Caribbean sojourners are often forced into a mis-identification, or an identification at several removes, because their actual national origin is simply a “null” category for their hosts. Faced with this lack of country-specific associations, we might posit that in the case of these “anonymous” sojourners, the maintenance and rehearsal of national and cultural identity alluded to above is more reliant on contact with other co-nationals and particularly those undergoing a similar experience. This was indeed very marked in the group in France, who habitually socialized with each other in Barbados before they left (perhaps a consequence of their relatively small and cohesive educational setting in the home culture), and who travelled together within and outside France on a number of occasions, as well as meeting up at each other’s homes on a fairly regular basis throughout the sojourn.

In the case of the Colombian cohort, a number of them also travelled together within Colombia and several cited fairly regular contact with co-nationals as an important emotional support mechanism. Against this, one might set the example of an earlier sojourner in Colombia, who was placed in Montería, hours from her co-nationals in Bogotá. While she initially requested to be moved and reported suffering isolation and loneliness, after several months she withdrew her application to be placed closer to her co-nationals and ended up staying out her sojourn in Montería. There is some evidence that although co-national relationships are emotionally sustaining while those with hosts are more merely instrumental in the early going, the long-term benefits of finding intimate rapport with host nationals may outweigh the early emotional and cultural difficulties of doing so (Ward and Rana-Deuba 302).

A still under-researched area in the literature is the role of modern communications technology in changing the experience of the contemporary sojourner. Use of social networking sites (at the time of this study Facebook predominated) to send photo reports and bulletins to relatives and friends at home and elsewhere, as well as to keep in contact with other sojourners, was universal and usu-

ally daily amongst both cohorts. Messaging software still appears to prevail over internet phone services such as Skype for more personalized contact with the home country, while purchase of a cell phone was naturally a priority for most on arrival. Though there has been some research into the use of controlled blogging and messaging exercises between students abroad and their home-study counterparts (Elola and Oskoz; Schuetze), the broader effects of these media need further examination as the possibilities of free, instantaneous communications that may include voice and video, and of keeping others apprised of one's experiences as they happen through Facebook and similar sites, would seem to represent a qualitative difference in the way sojourners relate to their home culture social network, and indeed to a wider network of international contacts, which in turn might be expected to affect reentry and its attendant challenges.

While the potential of social networking sites as support mechanisms appears promising, Ogden ("View" 54) includes limiting daily time spent on e-mail as part of his advice to sojourners to help prevent the "colonialization" of their experience through excessively persistent contact and identification with the home culture. For the Caribbean sojourners, while a degree of reassuring contact with co-nationals may mitigate the anxiety generated by the lack of host recognition in the early going, there is a risk that the more introverted or less interculturally prepared, particularly, might be tempted to adopt a wholesale separation strategy that would be detrimental in the longer term. Excessive use of Facebook, email and other communication tools might ultimately facilitate such a strategy.

Gender and Race

References in the research to the experience of non-white student sojourners have frequently tended to assume one of the two traditional contexts described above: developing-world students in economically developed countries, or "students of color" from countries such as the United States sojourning in a variety of countries, their experience naturally being compared and contrasted with their mainly white counterparts sojourning in the same destination. At first sight, it might seem predictable that citizens of a small, predominantly black Eastern Caribbean nation such as Barbados sojourning in a country such as France might experience more challenges in this regard than, say, African Americans, used to positioning themselves as members of a minority racial group and with experience of how this identity might need to be negotiated. While Barbadians are quite likely to have previously visited a country in which they too are categorized as belonging to a racial "minority," there is obviously a considerable difference between doing this as a tourist or family visitor, often with the buffer of locally-based kin, on the

one hand, and actually entering the labor market as a contributing and recipient member of the host society, albeit a temporary one, on the other.

Perhaps more predictably still, however, it turns out to be the specificity of particular practices, rather than any generalized notion of race, that has a determinant effect on sojourners' perception of how their own racial self-construction meshes with the constructions thrust upon them by the host society. The specific practice of most significance in this context also explains the conflation of race and gender here: to the extent that the issue of race arises in the literature analyzing U.S. experiences of study abroad, it is often associated with the experiences of non-white American females as victims of unwelcome sexual remarks or overtures that contain racial references or are racially specific. Thus Woodruff et al (191) cite the example of how an African-American student in Milan dealt with the perception amongst some locals that she was a prostitute, while Talburt and Stewart (1999), in a qualitative study of five female students on a summer language study in Spain, documented the adjustment difficulties that one student encountered when Spanish men responded to her as a racially different and gendered target of *piropos* in public settings" (Anderson 32).

In a similar vein, in Stephenson's study of U.S. students in Santiago de Chile, "the two black participants, both female, indicated feeling extreme unease in Chile (13)," while Twombly remarks that in Costa Rica "in the context of a very verbal culture in which terms such as *negrita* (darkie) and *gordita* (fatso) are regularly used as terms of description, even affection, *piropos* are accepted as normal if not flattering" (13). Bond, Koont and Stephenson report that on a U.S. university trip to Cuba, "the single African American participant was mistaken to be Cuban and asked for identification by a hotel employee and sexually harassed by a European man on a separate occasion," though it is unclear whether the victim was male or female here (109). Other research, while stressing cultural rather than overtly racial factors, has shown that the experience of female sojourners is often markedly—and usually negatively—different from that of their male counterparts in contexts where radically unfamiliar male and female gender roles generate stressful obstacles to integration. Thus U.S. women in Japan were frequently uncomfortable conforming to Japanese constructions of female identity (Siegal), while in Russia they suffered distress at the predatory behaviour of Russian males (Polanyi).

The prevalence and tolerance—albeit grudging—of masculine "calling out" behaviour in Anglophone Caribbean societies, where it may also contain racial epithets, seems to make at least this experience, while not exactly welcome, at least significantly less shocking to the participants in this study than it might be for many U.S. sojourners, for example:

1. They would say little things like “morenita” and tell you what they would like to do with you... It happens here in Barbados too, on the streets men tell you these kind of things. [...] For me it’s not really a problem in Colombia, cos I’m accustomed to it here in Barbados. [...] “Morenita” doesn’t bother me; “negrita,” at first it didn’t bother me but then I found out that “negrita” is kinda like a derogatory term in some ways, even though to me it just meant, like, “little black girl,” nothing too... but some people in Colombia were saying they felt it was derogatory so it started bothering me a little bit more...
2. Colombian men behave like Barbadian men, really macho; they think as long as they call at you, you’re supposed to answer. Their way of calling to women would disgust me sometimes. Sometimes. Like, this one man was saying, “I bet you fuck really well,” that’s what he was saying in Spanish [...] I walked pretty fast, [laughing] so I started to run, chip, walk, run, to get home. Then this other one said he wanted to have a baby, so I thought “he might rape me,” so I walked pretty fast again. But then sometimes they would call you, like “reina,” “queen” and “negra bella”; I didn’t used to like the “negra” part, but I didn’t mind cos they were saying that I was beautiful.

Though these and similar accounts frequently express a degree of contempt for the perpetrators, they also communicate a very strong sense that female Caribbean sojourners are both habituated and equipped to deal emotionally with these kind of predatory behaviors, which represent an area of overlap between Latin American and Anglophone Caribbean social practices. Indeed, as Patron (62) also reports in relation to French sojourners in Australia, an *absence* of harassment can generate discomfort if it is commonplace at home, as experienced by this Barbadian in Colombia:

I don’t seem to be noticed by guys or girls for that matter. In Barbados I don’t have that problem. Is it their perception of beauty? Must I have long hair, clearer skin... I get noticed by men who are not my type or near my age. I have seen two mixed couples but then I don’t really see that many black people. So I decided to do my own research. I left home in a tight jeans, no jacket, hair open etc. Luckily, the weather was not very horrible that day!! I got looks or glances but no approaches. The construction guys kept the most noise but they do that in Barbados too. It is part of their culture! My research will continue but in a more

subtle way. I don't need pneumonia to get an answer. It is not like I am searching for a boyfriend cos I already have one. It is just that I find it strange, I am not accustomed to this type of behaviour. I mentioned that I did not notice racism but is this discrimination, am I too black? Who knows?

While it thus seems that the contours of race and gender in their home cultures equip Anglophone Caribbean females to negotiate "piropos," even where these are racialized, other aspects of gender relations may prove more problematic: a majority of sojourners in both Colombia and France mentioned being initially discomfited by open displays of affection between couples in public places, which are relatively uncommon in Anglophone Caribbean societies. First in Colombia:

Female sojourner:

During the night, I went to an internet café. [...] The way love is demonstrated in this culture is too much for me. She just kept kissing and touching him while on her knees of course. I mean relax woman no one wants your man! These people need to leave some of this affection for the bedroom. In Spain, the behavior was the same, these people kiss and embrace as if the other person is going to war and they will never see them again. They don't even stop to breathe, it's incredible! Ha ha! It is no wonder that there is a high pregnancy rate among young people.

Male sojourner:

It seems like everywhere you go a couple are kissing, and I don't mean the traditional Latin American greeting, I mean KISSING!! At school, at the bus stop, in the restaurants, on the bus. One evening while waiting for the bus, no fewer than three couples came right in front of me, one after the other, going at it. I thought I had a kissing booth sign on me or had mistakenly been standing in front of one. Another night, on the bus, these two were so intense I thought they would have done the deed right there if the bus was empty. Get a room people!!! Even the gays walking the streets holding hands.

Turning to race alone, two of the sojourners responded affirmatively to the question that they had experienced racism. One experienced a perception that she was treated differently "spread across a variety of experiences," for example security

guards in Colombian stores who seemed more inclined to single her out for a bag search than other customers. The only member of the French cohort who cited a specific instance of racial discomfort identified other non-whites as the source (she worked at a school with a large proportion of immigrant students):

One little guy from Turkey called me “caca,” which means shit, he said you look like what comes out in the toilet, you’re the same color. I said, “okay.”

Another encountered black African appeals to a sense of racial solidarity she found hard to reciprocate:

What I found weird was the Africans would always tell themselves “we have to stick together,” even though they’re in France, more or less “invading,” they’re saying “we have to stick together.” [There was African music] in the club once and the French were dancing out of time and this African guy came up to me and was pointing and laughing at them and saying “they can’t dance; that music is in your body and in your blood.” [...] That was his excuse for getting my number: seeing that I know how to keep in time, I should be able to give him my number, cos he knows how to keep in time as well. I don’t know how he thought that would’ve worked with me, but it did not work with me.

The unease of these and other interactions with non-white interlocutors tends to echo the findings of Landau and Chioni Moore (2001), who report on the greater incidence of misperception between African American students and their hosts in Ghana, when compared with white American fellow sojourners. The easy and categorical location of sojourners as Other on the basis of a superficial characteristic such as different skin color, it seems, might provide a buffer that mitigates possible offence caused by culturally inappropriate behaviour. In some instances, there may thus be more pressure on sojourners who are superficially more similar to understand and to conform more readily to local practices, and a more pointed mutual distrust may arise if they fail to do so (Ogden, “View” 47).

Against this, we should note Patron’s (132–33) finding that the two Franco-Asian participants in her study reported feeling bolstered in Australia by their bi-cultural background. We might also consider the testimony of the lone male participant in the present study, who reported spending most of his social time with Colombians of African descent, in marked contrast to his female fellow-sojourners, because he felt actively accepted by this group more than by others. Only further research can establish whether this is a generalizable pattern in the Caribbean-Colombian encounter. Female sojourners in Colombia tended to find that Afro-Colombian men approached them in overtly sexualized fashion, while

Afro-Colombian women were guarded at best towards them, a reaction also reported by the sojourners in France when encountering sub-Saharan African women (none specifically reported encounters with other “non-white” women).

Intercultural Learning

In assessing the sojourners’ gains in intercultural competence, I follow Byram in seeing language learning as dependent not “on a concept of neutral communication of information across cultural barriers, but rather on a rich definition of communication as interaction, and on a philosophy of critical engagement with otherness and critical reflection on self” (71). In the following discussion, moreover, I use Byram’s taxonomy of intercultural skills to evaluate the sojourners’ developmental gains in this area, comprising broadly:

- *Intercultural attitudes (savoir être)*: curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one’s own.
- *Knowledge (savoirs)*: of social groups and their products and practices in one’s interlocutor’s country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction.
- *Skills of interpreting and relating (savoir comprendre)*: ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one’s own.
- *Skills of discovery and interaction (savoir apprendre/faire)*: ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction.
- *Critical cultural awareness (savoir s’engager)*: an ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries.

My assessment of the sojourners’ capacity to critically reflect on self is, in turn, made against the background of Downey’s analysis of the pitfalls of sojourner narratives on study abroad. Downey identifies three patterns, “achievement,” “theological” and “theodical” narratives, which “have a dangerous tendency to pre-maturely ‘close’ the international experience, cutting off its potential effects,

including on-going transformation” (117). In brief, these framings imply the following interpretations of the sojourn’s meaning by the sojourner: achievement—positing the host country, its culture and people as a series of hardships to be bravely tolerated; theological—summarized by Downey as the “touched by an angel” motif, in which a “messenger” is providentially “sent” to enlighten the student of “the possibility of transcendence by the individual without consideration of social systems”; theodician—the conclusion on the part of the sojourner that they are “sooooo blessed” at not being forced to suffer the travails faced by nationals of the impoverished host country.

While Downey’s categories apply specifically to sojourners crossing a starker divide, on the face of it, from the developed world to poorer countries, strains of the theodician tendency are certainly evident—perhaps unsurprisingly—amongst the Eastern Caribbean students in Colombia, relatively unaccustomed to the visibility of poverty in large developing-world metropolises:

Every single day, I pass vagrants on the streets, people on buses showing off their deformities and asking for donations for medical procedures, men and women talking about their situations and asking for money to feed their children, young people singing, rapping, playing the guitar....anything to make a dollar (or a peso!) It is quite sad and I do give but sometimes it really can be annoying especially the people who reveal twisted limbs from bone cancer when I’ve just had lunch. Things like that really make you realize how well off we are most of time in the Caribbean.

Downey’s “achievement” motif also appears to have general currency—“There were times I wanted to go home, but I thought ‘if I can stick it out, I will be very proud of myself for staying the 8 mths’, and if I can do it, being an only child and having to become independent straight away, anyone can do it”—.as there are inevitably very real obstacles and anxieties generated by immersion experiences, regardless of whether an obvious socioeconomic divide is crossed from home to host nation. In citing these narrative patterns, there is obviously no suggestion that the sentiments expressed are in any way insincere: Downey’s identification of these common strains in sojourner narratives merely serves to point up certain commonplace epistemologies in sojourners’ attempts to derive meaning from their experiences, and suggests that true intercultural agency requires a movement beyond these inevitably egocentric early considerations.

Despite the natural tendency toward clichéd interpretation of the experience described above—all were first-timers in the context of long-term immer-

sion outside their own language and region, after all—evidence of enhanced intercultural skills is not hard to find in the sojourners’ testimony:

I figured maybe I should start writing more about what’s going on in Colombia as much as it doesn’t directly affect me. Reason being, as much as my entries and pics have changed a few minds and I have some friends who actually want to visit this country, others are still caught up in the stigma of cocaine and kidnappings. So to provide a balanced view of life here and avoid having people think that it’s paradise☺....I’m going to start reading the papers more often and provide some details of what’s going on.

Here, the sojourner’s acute awareness of her role as a cultural intermediary, interpreting the reality on the ground for her home culture interlocutors through her blog, is evident, spurring her to acquire greater knowledge (*savoirs* in Byram’s classification) of the broader social and political reality in order to temper her accounts thus far, which she clearly feels have gone too far the other way in seeking to counteract the violent and unstable stereotype of Colombia. In taking stock of this role as a source of informed critique of the host country, she consciously seeks to move beyond pure introspection and the immediate circumstances of her life in Medellín and her subsequent submissions reflected this broader focus.

A similar commitment to researching the causes of current events (Byram’s *savoir apprendre*) also arose from a plan to travel to Ecuador on the part of a number amongst the Colombian cohort, ultimately thwarted by political developments, which the male sojourner assessed as follows:

The funny part for me was how on earth did Chávez get involved? When I heard that Venezuela would be sending troops to the border, and Señor Chávez making war threats after Colombian armed forces had killed FARC’s “Raúl Reyes” on Ecuadorian soil, I had to scramble for my map. The last time I checked, Ecuador was south and Venezuela north of Colombia. Yet, before you could say “patria o muerte,” he was all over this thing. And I wonder what would have happened if comrade Fidel was in good health, or still at the reins of Cuba...

This sojourner’s burgeoning interest in the political situation leads him to observe an anti-terrorist street demonstration:

Speaking of the anti-FARC rallies, that was another interesting experience. Imagine Kadooment Day, probably ten or fifteen times larger at least,

without the music trucks and everyone wearing white T-shirts; balloons, confetti and streamers flying all over the place. The streets were jammed as people, clad in their “No más FARC” shirts and carrying placards bearing the names of kidnap, murder and torture victims marched from all directions to Bolívar Square, which is about 15 minute’s walk from my apartment. I got an invitation from some Afro Colombian students to join in, but not having any comprehensive knowledge of the marching/protesting culture I politely declined, or rather, made myself scarce. I did go to the Square and I have never seen so many people in one place. And what was pleasantly intriguing was that with so many people, nothing got out of hand.

Though cautious of affiliating with a participating group, the sojourner nonetheless attends, comparing the scene to an event in his home culture, the Kadooment Day street parade that is the culmination of the Crop Over carnival season in Barbados. Having witnessed violent small-scale demonstrations involving incendiary devices and stone-throwing in Bogotá, he is intrigued by the festive atmosphere and lack of aggression, despite the seriousness of motive and vast crowds. One senses a growing curiosity to understand the nuances of social conflict and protest in the host country, borne of a willingness to engage directly with at least some of its manifestations (Byram’s *savoir être*). To acquire full-fledged critical cultural awareness (*savoir s’engager*) in an area as complex as Colombian civil strife, however, one suspects structured research of the type advocated by Downey would be required.

In other perhaps less complex areas, such as dress, development of the sojourners’ skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*) is almost inevitable, as the gulf between their own norms and those of their hosts is apparent daily. Ultimately, this leads to a reflection on the broader implications of greater or lesser conformity in this area:

I dressed like a European this week with a short dress, leggings and boots on. I don’t know what I was thinking. The dress was so short I felt weird but no one looked at me different. I love how liberal these people are. That makes me wonder. If I get a piercing somewhere crazy like the secretary in the office nothing will change, but I know as I land in Barbados, all the malicious Bajans [Barbadians] would have something to say. It just amazes me the things that we waste time thinking about. The French are definitely more liberal when it comes to things like that. We in the Caribbean think too much about how we look when in truth and in fact no one’s looking cause

they're too busy checking their own selves out. It's pitiful actually. I'm glad I had the opportunity to come out here and broaden my mind and realize what is important from what is not. I now understand what people mean when they say that some West Indians will get nowhere because they too busy looking at the smaller picture or living in the past. Please Lord let them grow up some time because they would sadly miss out.

These sentiments regarding the “malicious” character of Barbadians (in local parlance, the term specifically means nosy and judgmental of others) are echoed in a number of sojourners’ re-entry testimony, particularly the French cohort, an indication that their attitudes have become somewhat imbued with a sense of the individual freedom permitted by the relatively “looser” and less conformist host culture. Elsewhere, they find the *laissez faire* of the French much less palatable: as discussed above, in relation to public displays of affection (though some evince greater tolerance of this as the sojourn progresses), or hygiene norms (food preparation, public spitting, or the approach to dog excrement, for example). While they may not yet all be able to integrate their responses to these elements by seeing clearly that both the characteristics they come to regard as superior (lack of judgemental attitudes) and those they continue to find inferior (laxer hygiene norms) are frequently two sides of the same individualist coin, the willingness to reflect critically on their own cultural mores at all should not be underestimated in the context of their education amidst often unmitigated nationalist or ethnocentric rhetoric in public discourse in their home States.¹

Re-entry

A number report having to use their new skills of *savoir comprendre* sparingly and diplomatically on return in order to avoid being accused of an affected cosmopolitan snobbery by those around them (a problem shared by Patron’s (34) French sojourners returning from Australia):

Strangely enough, [coming back] has been very difficult. [...] I tend to see things that I didn’t see before here, flaws and faults, and my interaction with people is different. I wanted to eat French food! I wanted cheese that I couldn’t find, I went to Super Centre to find cheese... It’s like you have blinders off, you see tiny flaws that you didn’t see before; it seems smaller, it seems a little, what’s that word... not backward, it just seems less advanced. [...] Generally people here aren’t that interested in my experience, funnily enough, I thought people would have more questions, but I find I’m the one

who's more prompting conversation about my trip or I see something on the TV and I say "oh, I was there!" But people here really aren't interested, you know, they live in Barbados, Barbados is great, they don't want to know about anyone else, really. It depends on what I say, but people will throw in comments like "oh, you've been away and you think you're better off now." Or, "you're criticizing because you've been away, but remember you're a Barbadian," you know, that kind of thing, you know, kind of scolding me if I point out things that I think are wrong.

The sojourners' new ethno-relativism thus sometimes generated familiar problems of reverse culture shock: "communicating with friends, dealing with stereotypes, uncertainty over cultural identity, social withdrawal, and decreased relationship satisfaction" (Ward, Furnham and Bochner 163). Despite these difficulties, however, a number of the sojourners are able to apply their new capacity to distance themselves and relativize their experiences to the re-entry process:

While being in Barbados I also discovered that the small things that used to bother me about living in a small island no longer get on my nerves like a late bus or people gossiping. I think that is because being in Colombia and seeing major problems before your eyes makes trivial things pale in comparison; in fact I laugh to myself cause I think we don't have those major issues to deal with and should be over the moon about it but we aren't. Yet I can't judge cause if not for this experience I wouldn't have known this either.

Others, however, are both more appreciative of the comforts of home they had previously taken for granted, and more critical as they no longer accept as natural other less benign traits:

There are many aspects of my home and country life which I view differently since I've returned. They range from "trivial," for example the physical state of the country—its small size, the seemingly poor infrastructure. Before leaving, these things were a fact of life, not extremely important, but on my return, they stood out in my mind as horrible inadequacies. I also feel differently about, and question many social and cultural norms—the mentality of the Barbadian regarding religion, education, gender relations, just to name a few. My feelings however, are not all negative. While I am reeling from the apparent "backwardness" of Barbados, as compared to my host country France, I also have a greater appreciation for these so-called

shortcomings. An example, the small size of the country makes travel much easier than it is overseas.

While the sojourners were able to cast a more discerning eye on their home culture on return, the pressing practicalities of reentry also quickly began to assert themselves. In a number of cases, the strain on relations with friends and kin generated by the subtle cultural disconnect arising from the sojourn was further exacerbated by the express desire of many returning sojourners to leave home again as soon as the opportunity presented itself, also remarked by Patron (309). While this desire was partly motivated by a new-found cultural curiosity and a nostalgia for aspects of the sojourn, bleak local employment prospects were also cited by multiple participants:

I have earned a deeper appreciation for my country with regard to our standard of living and the accessibility of education and chances to improve and further oneself. However, my experience also opened my eyes to the relative passivity with which we live. I am somewhat concerned about the lack of career enhancement and money-making opportunities or the dissemination of information on such opportunities for people within the language-learning fraternity. [...] There is dire need to show possibilities and opportunities using languages, both teaching and non-teaching.

Employment is naturally one of the principal concerns of returning sojourners, who have often experienced relatively long-term employment and financial autonomy for the first time while abroad. All participants in this study have found employment as language teachers in secondary or primary education, where their immersion experience clearly gives them a competitive advantage, but the majority do not view education as a long-term career choice. While it would seem that the intercultural skills acquired during study abroad and language immersion would be highly valuable in economies dominated by inherently international activities such as financial services and tourism, as are many in the Caribbean, anecdotal evidence suggests that there is a high degree of conservatism amongst Caribbean employers with regard to types of relevant experience, with qualifications from traditionally prestigious universities carrying much greater weight than experiences such as overseas immersion, which cultivate “life-skills” not explicitly recognized by educational institutions. Employers in areas such as tourism or government may thus continue to opt for candidates who need less initial training but who are likely to remain more ethnocentric and less able to relate effectively with interlocutors from outside their culture.

Conclusions

The “self-shock” (Zaharna) experienced by all first-time sojourners risks being exacerbated in the case of small-State sojourners as a result of the non-recognizability of their national origins. Their efforts to locate this origin for their hosts frequently involve recourse—not always successful—to recognizable mass cultural references (overwhelmingly the performer Rihanna in the case of Barbados) and, more often than not, other territories in their region with which they are then manoeuvred into an uneasy identification (mostly Jamaica). It would seem that the most realistic way of mitigating the discomfort caused, aside from due discussion during orientation, would be to equip students actively to educate their hosts regarding their home countries. This might involve the production of a portable presentation, including embedded film to make it more immediate, tailored for particular host nations and using comparative elements, giving basic information and a flavour of life in Eastern Caribbean home territories. Production of such material would be a stimulatingly practical project for potential sojourners to undertake in collaboration with their returning counterparts, opening up issues of self-presentation and stereotyping in a productive manner. Equally, as simple a step as equipping sojourners with appropriately designed t-shirts, file-folders, stickers, bookmarks and other day-to-day items showing images, maps and basic data on the home territory might alleviate some of the irritation generated by the need for repeated lengthy explanations of origin. Approaching home-country bodies such as the tourist authorities and Foreign Affairs ministries for adaptable material and sponsorship in this endeavor might be a gentle nudge to these authorities regarding the ambassadorial and promotional potential of sojourners abroad, a link that might ultimately militate in favor of the sojourners’ employability in such institutions in future. As a contingent benefit, the sojourners’ frank assumption of the non-recognizability of their origin and willingness to assist hosts by offering information in this form is highly likely to generate positive affect amongst recipients. Future research might report on the efficacy of these measures.

Turning to the issues of gender and race, it appears thus far that Anglophone Caribbean sojourners’ generally robust self-perception—and habituation to sexualized and sometimes racialized “calling out” behaviour in the case of females—precludes any necessity of hard warnings about either *piropos* or racial attitudes in these host countries, at least. However, working on the principle that forewarned is forearmed, it may be of interest to incorporate within existing language/culture courses the testimony of former sojourners regarding race and gender issues in specific territories, or into specific orientations for sojourners. This

use of sojourner testimony as part of language and culture courses can be viewed as a practical component of a larger project for regionally tailoring the material presented in such offerings in the University of the West Indies, currently often based on foreign textbooks. The immersion experience will thus feed back into curriculum design and materials development in a productive manner that will help to generate increasing relevance in the UWI's language offerings. Offering sojourners remuneration to produce short multimedia modules to a specified format on aspects such as "my experience of *piropos*" or "multicultural France" would be a productive way to link graduate sojourners back to the UWI and generate culturally specific material for language programs therein. The increasing availability to sojourners of recording media such as DV cameras, stills cameras with moving image capacity, mp3 recorders and the like makes such projects within the reach of many and in some cases would merely entail extrapolating, working up and structuring material already gathered for posting on Facebook or similar forums.

With respect to gains in intercultural competence, it seems clear that while these were made, they could be maximized through more extensive orientation mechanisms and, particularly, post-sojourn enquiry of the type promoted by Downey to ensure ongoing reflection and to prevent impoverishment of the experience through egocentric mechanisms of closure.

With regard to the employment issue, the relative intangibility and difficulty of measuring intercultural competence, though it may make the difference between a highly effective employee and a largely ineffectual one, mean that educating potential participants alone regarding study abroad is only one component of the task ahead. If sojourning abroad is to become an integrated component of the Caribbean educational experience, employers and decision-makers in the society at large need to be convinced of its worth. While this may happen by dint of sheer attrition as participant numbers rise, interventions in popular communications media (newspaper articles, documentaries) may expedite the process, as has already begun to happen (Hanton). Ultimately, the accession of former sojourners to positions of responsibility in Anglophone Caribbean institutions and businesses in future is likely to prove the decisive factor in enhancing the value placed on study abroad and immersion experiences (Trooboff, Vande Berg and Rayman 24–26), which are surely crucial to optimizing development in this most hybrid and international of regions.

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Note

¹ When asked to produce descriptions of their own country, Barbadian students often reflexively generate what sounds suspiciously like tourist advertising copy. In a letter-writing exchange with students in Equatorial Guinea, for example, these latter frankly described less attractive aspects of their national origin, such as petro-corruption, chauvinistic attitudes and poverty. Contradictorily, the Barbadian students agreed they appreciated this frankness on the part of their African correspondents, but were justified in self-censoring their own account in response. Similarly, in an essay-writing test a majority of students who answered the question argued in favor of the proposition that "it is right to contradict a foreigner who criticizes your country, even if the criticism is justified."