

CULTURAL MEMORY IN FOCUS:
DESIGNING A TRAVEL/STUDY PROGRAM FOR THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA
ANTJE POSTEMA

During the BLC fellowship period, I researched and drafted a proposal, budget, and syllabus for a month-long travel/study program in summer 2018 in three countries in the former Yugoslavia: Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia. The program is designed as a travel/study program, which means that it moves between three major, and two minor, sites. It has a cultural studies focus, rather than being an immersive language program. More specifically, the program takes as its methodological and thematic focus the socio-cultural memory of ongoing legacies of war, as well as exemplary moments of peace, in the region over the long 20th century. In presenting this program and work done on it over the BLC fellowship period, this report first outlines important scholarship on study abroad programs, then situates the Balkan Bridges course within cultural memory studies. Finally, it makes the argument that the program's explicit focus on cultural objects allows students to understand most effectively the relationship between history and memory by foregrounding the vital role culture plays in shaping social memory.

Before moving into the program itself, it is necessary to sketch a brief historical context of the region. The territory of the current states of Bosnia Hercegovina, Croatia, and Serbia was once part of the socialist federative republic of Yugoslavia – a country that included the current nations of Slovenia, Montenegro, Kosovo, and Macedonia. Yugoslavia came into being during the Second World War in 1943, and was headed by the leader of the Yugoslav Partizan movement, Josip Broz Tito. Yugoslavia was destroyed by a series of bloody wars between 1991 and 1995. But Socialist Yugoslavia (or Tito's Yugoslavia, as it is often called) actually immediately followed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which was the colloquial – and later the official – name that the coterminous Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, a state founded in 1918. And before this period, the territory was controlled by a number of nations and empires. From the medieval to the early modern period, this region was part of the Byzantine Empire, the Ottoman Empire. Parts of contemporary Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia were part of, or on the crucial military border with the Austro-Hungarian Empire. And certain regions, particularly on the Dalmatian coast, were part of the Medieval Republic of Venice. The 19th century saw the rise of nationalism in the region, and the emergence of the independent nations of Serbia and Montenegro.

Two things must be underscored from this rapid backwards and forward overview of the politically-informed maps drawn over the centuries in the region. First: the place has been, from the start, ethnically and religiously diverse, inhabited by people from various regions and adhering to various faiths (but primarily Orthodox Christianity, Catholic Christianity, Islam, and Judaism). Those living in the region over time have spoken a common language: one of the regional varieties of what is now called Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian. And the second thing to point out is that all of these historical periods – the Byzantine, the Ottoman, the Austro-Hungarian, the First and Second Yugoslavias, and the post-Yugoslav – are read in various, and often opposing ways, largely through the lens of contemporary debates over national and ethno-religious identity in the current post-Yugoslav countries.

These issues are energetically discussed in the region. Moreover, they are worked out not only in historical narratives, but also in artistic production, in the media, in museums, and in passionate coffeehouse debates. The choice of program location and the choice to focus on cultural production thus provides a trenchant site for investigating how memories are both informed by cultural practices and, in turn, determine the valence of cultural practices.

Balkan Bridges is thus conceived of to expose students to regional diversity and to witness firsthand some of the sites where questions about identities have been, and continue to be, debated actively. Students begin the program in Belgrade, the capital and largest city of Serbia. They spend a week and a half in Belgrade. From Belgrade, they take a short trip to the northern Serbian city of Novi Sad. The program then moves to Sarajevo, Bosnia's capital city.

There, they spend about one week. While being based in Sarajevo, students take a day trip to Srebrenica, the Eastern Bosnian town that was the site of the 1995 genocide of primarily Bosnian Muslim men and boys. From Sarajevo, students will next travel to Dubrovnik, Croatia. They spent five days in Dubrovnik before traveling to Mostar, back in Bosnia, where they spend two days. The group then travels back to Sarajevo, and then finally back to Belgrade for its curricular conclusion and departures.

Before returning further to the program, however, it is necessary to situate some of the curricular and pragmatic decisions at stake in designing such a course within two additional larger contexts. The first of these that I will delve into is scholarship on education abroad, particularly research that treats travel/study programs that take cultural studies approaches. During the BLC fellowship and prior to designing the course, I researched these trends in order to make informed curricular choices.

Additionally, because the theoretical underpinnings of the program lie in interdisciplinary cultural memory studies, it is necessary to detail some of the founding tenets of this field. Individuals and groups remember the past in particular ways that are mediated, either in subtle or in more overt ways, by socio-cultural practices that include commemorative ceremonies, artistic representations, and historical narratives. I make the case that the course's grounding in cultural objects (such as literature and film, museums and galleries, monuments and cemeteries) allows students to most effectively understand the relationship between history and memory by foregrounding the way culture shapes social memory. Keeping the course attentive to the practices and the stakes of memory, I argue, provides students with a more nuanced understanding of the former Yugoslavia, these same insights will guide them as they evaluate historical and contemporary claims about identity and belonging that are built on assertions about, or implied ownership of, particular social memories.

My brief discussion of study abroad programs begins in the same place as most analyses of these programs: with a reference to the well-documented fact that, since the 1960s, American students have started studying at non-American institutions at an ever-increasing rate. These programs take many forms – from semesters or years abroad at international institutions, to shorter Maymester or summer programs, to so-called “island” programs run by the home institution but conducted abroad. The varied, and at times conflicting, rationales for running travel/study programs (for institutions) and participating in them (for students) will be discussed a bit later. What is also well-documented in the research on travel/study programs, and which should be laid out in tandem with the statistic about “ever increasing numbers” is the fact that more scholarly and practical attention is being paid to the quality of travel/study programs, to the way they accomplish their intended goals, and to the potential they have for educating students in a more interculturally competent or interculturally sensitive manner.

In 2003, Lilli and John Engle conceived of a way of classifying study abroad programs according to “levels” that took into account program length, the linguistic abilities of participants at the beginning of the program, the language of instruction, the program's institutional and instructional context, student living arrangements, the provisions made for interaction with the local culture through experiential learning, and the mechanism established for guided reflection on these so-called cultural experiences (Engle & Engle 10-11). As is clear from such a schematic, different program goals and desired outcomes can make one type of program or another more suitable for individual students and institutional contexts. This can perhaps be seen most clearly when we look at language competence. Clearly, if the goal of a program is to increase the linguistic ability of students, a longer period of study in a region where the target language is spoken is to be preferred over a shorter period. And, likewise, programmatic concerns like housing options, institutional or academic work context, or even length and season of program can be identified as bringing fixed constraints that dictate whether one kind of program is to be desired, or is even possible. The progression from a short program to a longer program along some of the other rows identified here, however, reveals that many – if not most – of the identified variables of any program must be assessed together in order to identify the most suitable type of program for both an individual student and a

given institution. As Engle and Engle go on to argue, while the categories in such a system are broad and the options created by the intersection of various of these categories might be meaningfully (if perhaps endlessly) sub-divided, this system could have widespread value if institutions were to adopt it in thinking about their existing or new programs, if it were used in presentations or marketing of travel/study programs, if faculty and administrators were to use its vocabulary and rubrics in advising students, and if students for their part were aware of it in making their own plans for studying abroad (ibid 14-15).

The question remains: how to properly and adequately evaluate the intended outcomes of a travel/study program – for an individual student, for a group of students, or for an institution. Six researchers at Emory University proposed a 2015 study that took up this task of “evaluating the evaluators.” They arrived at the following formulation: “The goal of most if not all study abroad programs is to provide students with a set of life experiences that will broaden their perspectives and expectations and have a positive impact on the way they live and think” (McLeod 1). Engle and Engle, mentioned earlier, posit that its goal should be “to present participants with a challenge – the emotional and intellectual challenge of direct, authentic cultural encounters and guided reflection upon those encounters” (7). The idea of cross-cultural contact can be seen as existing front and center of both the mission statements and packaging of the majority of education abroad programs – both programs that teach language and those that do not.

And a large number of scholars have made the case that education abroad not only aims at, but also succeeds in facilitating its intended intercultural awareness, if not intercultural competence and sensitivity (Medina–López–Portillo 2015; Rexeisen 2013; Anderson, Lawton, & Hubbard 2013). In a 2004 study, for example, Chieffo and Griffiths have tackled the composite idea of “global awareness” among study abroad participants, arguing that, compared with their peers who remained at US institutions, students who studied abroad were “more confident in their levels [of] intercultural awareness and functional knowledge than their peers who remained on campus” (167). Qualitative and quantitative studies investigating the outcomes of study abroad programs have made recommendations about how best to manage program variables – that range from program length and curriculum type to the priming of student expectations – all with the express purpose of increasing the degrees of intercultural competence and sensitivity achieved by students through the program. Adriana Medina–López–Portillo, for example, identifies how factors internal and external to participating students and programs, respectively, can be calibrated to maximize the potential that students will develop intercultural competence (192).

The majority of the investigations I have mentioned here have focused on, and in some way privileged longer programs that at least include, if not entirely consist of, explicit language training. What about the shorter summer programs that are in many ways exported from campuses and led by faculty at those campuses? These such programs are the most common and popular variety offered by the Berkeley Study Abroad Office, and are the one whose contours most ideally satisfied the criteria I have identified as important in designing a new program in the former Yugoslavia. These include some of the criteria that Susan Goldstein identifies in her research on properly exported programs, including: accessibility to students without much (if any) language proficiency in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, the possibility of a pre-approved curricula that remains consistent with Berkeley’s academic requirements, and a context that facilitates learning of the students’ own culture (whether focusing on the US or other home cultures). Could an exported four-week summer program focusing on history and cultural production be designed to facilitate intercultural competence? And, further, could this program, perhaps, even do so in a more robust and inclusive fashion than the language-focused programs which already exist at a number of US institutions, but for which there is a relatively high barrier to entry?

These were some of the methodological and philosophical issues at stake as I have worked to design the program in Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia. The choice to focus explicitly on cultural memory emerged naturally out of my research and previous teaching on South Slavic

literature and culture from the perspective of cultural history and memory studies. Pairing cultural products with site visits, all within a designated curriculum that makes explicit the historical and ideological context of these objects and sites, I maintain, holds the best potential to catalyze a broad range of intellectual, personal, and interpersonal insights. In my estimation, this cultural memory focus of the course, moreover, is poised to facilitate intercultural competences and sensitivities even among true novices to the region, its culture, with little or no linguistic ability in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian.

In its attempt to ground a curriculum in cultural objects that gesture towards complicated and fraught historical legacies, the program owes vast theoretical debt to theories of cultural memory that have been eloquently articulated, primarily in the Western European academy, over the past several decades. Rather than privileging notions of individual memory, thinkers like Jan and Aleida Assmann, Astrid Erll, Susannah Radstone, and Ann Rigney foreground the social and communicative nature of memories, and, in particular, the work of cultural mediation that shapes and disseminates memories synchronically and diachronically.¹ Cultural memory studies draw originally on two seminal works: Maurice Halbwachs' 1952 *On Collective Memory*, which elaborates the social and collective "frames" of memory, and Pierre Nora's 1996-1998 *Realms of Memory* project, which identifies the crucial role of sites, objects, and concepts in social memory. The scholars mentioned above focus on the cultural and, in particular, literary techniques and channels used by societies and individuals to remember and narrate the past.

Let me now turn to an overview of the program, to discuss the ways in which this focus on cultural memory is intended to be martialled to give students insight into the region they are studying, visiting, and integrating into their own lived experience. As mentioned above, the program moves around between six sites – three major sites (Belgrade, Sarajevo, and Dubrovnik), and three shorter excursions (to Novi Sad, Srebrenica, and Mostar). Much of the initial period upon arrival in Belgrade is spent acclimating to the new environment. Students will have read two seminal texts before embarking on the program. Mark Mazower's *The Balkans: A Short History* provides useful general background information about the region. And Ivo Andrić's historical novel, *Bridge on the Drina*, presents the same period covered in Mazower's book from a literary perspective. Thus, students arrive at the program ready to discuss how the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires impacted the region, when and how ideas of the nation and Romantic Nationalism came to the fore, and the specific circumstances that made the formation and disintegration of Yugoslavia possible and hastened these processes. The thrust of the course, once students arrive to the program, is on the relationship between history and society as mediated by cultural products. Course readings and lectures are paired with targeted excursions to museums, galleries, and sites of historical significance. During the course, students have the opportunity to meet with local specialists working in various culture industries.

In terms of assessment, the course has two ongoing assignments in addition to its final examination. Students are individually required to keep a reflective intellectual journal for the entirety of the course. These journals allow them to reflect upon their experiences and

¹ Foundational texts in the field of cultural memory studies include the following works: Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992 [1952]); Pierre Nora (ed), *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996-1998); Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity" (*New German Critique* 65, Spring-Summer 1995), 125-133; Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture* (London, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (eds), *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008); Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney (eds), *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009); Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz (eds), *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010); and Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

observations, and to synthesize material that they read or learn in lectures with that which they see, experience, or discuss with their peers. Students also work together on a group video project, which they will present at the course's culmination. The video project treats some aspect of the course's engagement with overarching questions about cultural memory and issues of contemporary or historical identity formation in the former Yugoslavia.

The course's guiding questions are as follows:

- **When and how have histories been “contested” in the region? How, where, and when do these contestations happen, and what are the social consequences of polarized interpretations of the past?**

This question will be primarily addressed with reference to the different ways the Ottoman period, the Yugoslav period, and the wars that saw Yugoslavia's disintegration have been interpreted by different ethno-religious groups in the region. Students will see first-hand these contestations by visiting museums like Belgrade's "Museum of Yugoslavia" and learning about history textbook initiatives in the region that present periods in starkly different ways.

- **What kinds of identities have been important for individuals and groups over the region's history (religious/ethnic, national, supra-national, local, etc.)?**

In approaching this question, students will have the chance to visit religious institutions and to discuss the various roles these institutions have played at different times in the region's history. They will also hear from locals about how these individuals view their own identity in national, religious, and ethnic terms – or in opposition to these categories.

In order to get a sense of how identities have been solidified and conceptualized in the region, a good deal of attention will be paid in the course to how the demographics that existed during the Yugoslav (and pre-Yugoslav periods) differ from the post-Yugoslav period. And while clear ethno-religious majorities exist in certain parts of Yugoslavia, other parts were characterized by a lack of a clear majority and by the widespread mixing of different ethno-religiously identified individuals.

The course will make the case, however, that ethnicity or religious affiliation offers some insight into the ways individuals have conceptualized their identities and belonging to groups – but that this is not the end of the story. And that there are other factors at work in thinking about identity – ones that often overlap or intersect with ethno-religious affiliations, but are distinct from them. To that end, the course considers the following question:

- **What role has language played in thinking about identity, belonging, and difference in the region?**

In order to grasp some of the nuances of how language has informed ideas about belonging in the former Yugoslavia, students will need to be “primed.” Which is to say, they will learn in lectures about the intertwined legacies of language policy and nationalism during the 19th century, and the ways in which these debates about language and identity persist into the present day. They will learn some crucial differences between the spoken varieties of Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, and in particular between the use of Latin or Cyrillic scripts.

The persistent focus in the course's discussion of language will be on the way these aspects of language are present in the environment of the city, and used to make larger claims about identity. Students will have the chance to discuss many of these issues with a group of linguists in Sarajevo. They will also perceive uses of language and script in their lived environment.

- **How is historical trauma visible in the landscape and culture-scape of the region? How do locals highlight or downplay these visible signs of trauma?**

Historical trauma has not only had a long-lasting impact on societies in the region, but trauma has shaped the way that individuals and groups remember and tell their histories. Trauma often undergirds notions of identity, both individual and collective. The program will devote considerable attention to the lasting legacies of the Wars of Yugoslav Succession that raged from 1991-1995 and have left visible scars on the physical environment, and on individuals and communities. Students will visit Srebrenica, the site of the 1995 genocide. They will read short texts and watch documentary and fictional films produced during the Siege of Sarajevo. They will visit museums that represent and engage with these and they will have the chance to talk with those who lived through these wars, and to discuss the way these wars have been continued through other means in civil society and local politics to the current day. Finally, the program engages the following cluster of questions:

- **What role has the media played in thinking about identity, belonging, and difference in the region? And how have institutions helped to shape social memory? What narratives about these memories are on display, and which are “hushed”?**

In looking at culture through its products and their social circulation, the program foregrounds the way media practices and institutions can give these objects and their associated narratives pride of place, or hide them from view, by turns. This cluster of questions will thus be addressed in a sustained way throughout the course, and can be seen, in fact, to run through all of the other guiding questions.

It is my hope, first of all, that this program will come to fruition this summer. This will allow me to move beyond speculation about whether the theoretical grounding and curricular choices I have identified will have their desired outcomes. Which is to say: can students, through the process of investigating how longstanding historical narratives about identity can be traced through these spaces and narratives in the former-Yugoslav countries they visit can actually succeed in relating to these places not as “scenery,” but as an “environment.” Here I borrow the contrastive terms “scenery” and “environment” from Engle and Engle. Ideally, thinking deeply about how cultural memory shapes identity in their new location will allow students to have the kind of “unsettling but rich” interactions with this environment that Engle and Engle identify as potentially leading students to a “rare and valuable emotional space with its potential for reflective growth” (6). If students can develop a kind of sensitive but critical reflex to identify the function of cultural objects in claims about identity, perhaps this is precisely the kind of awareness that can lead to – or even in fact be called – intercultural. If they can turn to this reflex to parsing the logic undergirding the seemingly inviolable relationship between memories and identity discourses – both abroad and at home – then perhaps they can be said to have a type of rigorous and historically-informed – and rigorous *because* historically-informed – intercultural competence.

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