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Travels Through History

South Africa: A Study Abroad Experience

by Blanca Garcia-Barron

In the summer of 2014, I took the opportunity to study and travel in South Africa. I studied at the University of Cape Town for two weeks and had the chance to explore the city and hike its famous landmark, Table Mountain. While in Cape Town, I had a diverse experience that reflected much of the spirit and vibe of the city. The metropolitan city of Cape Town has as much history as its rich cultural contemporary life. These two components make the city an incredible place to live, to explore, and to learn. The second half of my study abroad experience took me to Johannesburg. Although I did not have the opportunity to explore the downtown area or its cultural life on my own, I did spend a week on excursions. The most significant part of my Johannesburg experience was visiting the township of Soweto. Visiting Soweto challenged my views. It is still an experience that I find difficult to explain because of the complexity of issues, both personal and political, that are often an opposing introspective struggle. Despite that, leaving South Africa was difficult. I did not want my studies or travels to come to an end. I missed my family and friends, but I wanted them to be with me to experience the South Africa that I came to appreciate and ultimately miss.

Cape Town

Initially, I decided to study abroad in South Africa because I wanted to experience something completely new. As a history
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student, studying abroad was a great opportunity to combine both
my academic goals and the impulsive tendencies of my
personality. Being impulsive often bleeds into my studies, and I
frequently find myself struggling to find time to fit in all the
history, theory, and ideas that I come across. As a public history
major, studying in South Africa was the perfect opportunity to
explore how national institutions and citizens deal with a difficult
past that is very much contemporary and fresh in memory.
Museums, art, dance, food, monuments, languages, communities,
and public spaces all compete to become part of the national
identity. In Cape Town, these subtle competitions over national
identity were very much prominent. The culture clash that I
expected as a Westerner took on a different dimension.

University of Cape Town. Photo by Author.

It was not that I was any different from most people that I came to
meet in Cape Town. The city itself was very much like Southern
California in winter. I did not feel like I was in “Africa.” That thought made me realize that I had assumptions that I did not want to admit to myself. Like the U.S, South Africa is a country that is incredibly diverse from its western points to its eastern points. A barista at a coffee shop asked me where I was from, and I said California. He replied “Ah, the Cape Town of the West.” This seemingly insignificant exchange is one that I often relate to friends. It took a very small moment like that to make me realize that the culture clash I was preparing myself for was non-existent. Instead, the culture clash that does exist is an intimate one that the city, its communities, and its people struggle with. It is a culture clash of old identities and emerging identities. It is a struggle to reconcile a painful history with a new history that tries to exemplify forgiveness.

Being in Cape Town, there are reminders of the old histories and identities all over the city. From the Rhodes Memorial above the
University of Cape Town, to another Rhodes monument in the city’s central park, Green Point, Cecil B. Rhodes is an emblematic figure of colonialism and imperialism, a disputed honorary figure. These colonial memories serve as an extension of the oppression and injustice of the apartheid government that took power in 1948. These national monuments share spaces with figures like Nelson Mandela, whose image is prominent all over South Africa, and Steve Biko, leader of the black consciousness movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. These peculiarities prompted me to ask questions about the validity of having physical representations of colonial memory. I simply asked, “Why don’t they just take it down?”

It is not so simple to just take things down. I started to realize that it in the U.S it is not simple to take down statues of Confederate generals or demolish antebellum houses with slave quarters. These physical memories are difficult to justify for some, but for others, they are representative of national history. The history they represent is not always the best, but it represents the existence of a history that is important to discuss and analyze. This parallel made me realize that South Africans deal with similar issues that we in the U.S also deal with. Race relations and ethnic/national identity are prominent issues of both countries. Both countries deal with a violent colonial past that influenced their institutionalized and legal racism of the twentieth century. It is these parallels that started to really break down any stark cultural hindrances that I thought would exist between South Africans and myself.
One monument that cannot be disputed is the majestic Table Mountain. Table Mountain exists beyond colonialism and is part of the identity of Cape Town. Whatever part of the city I was in, Table Mountain was there in every direction. From the colorful Muslim community of Bo-Kaap, to the trendy shopping V&A Waterfront, and even in the distant former prison exile of Robben Island, I could not escape the presence of Table Mountain. I also had a wonderful view of one of its peaks from my dorm room. I had the chance to hike one of its trails and it became a very transformative experience for me. It was a difficult hike as I was not in the greatest of shape, but I was determined to make it to the top. On a personal level, it was as transformative as it was spiritual. Halfway into the hike, I stopped and I absorbed the beauty of the moment and the city below me. This solitary reflection was something that I needed, not just on this trip, but in my life. It instilled a new sense of passion and a reformed drive. Traveling is a very distinctive passion that I never thought I would have the opportunity to experience. Hiking Table Mountain reinvigorated my academic drive. Any insecurities that I had as a
student or writer slowly started to fade away. The hike served as the push I needed to fully embrace my work and goals.

Other significant places that I visited while in Cape Town were the District Six Museum and Robben Island. The District Six Museum is small and located near the downtown area, parallel to the street vendors of Green Market Street. The museum is situated in the physical space of where the district existed once. District Six was one of the many communities that were demolished, and its residents were forced to relocate as mandated by the apartheid government. The area of District Six was deemed as a white area, and thus had to be demolished to make room for the new white residents. This painful history was retold to my group and me during our visit by a former resident named Noor Ebrahim. The museum houses remnants of the old community, including the street signs that were made into a memorial. It has interesting
information about the culture and diversity that once existed within the district. It is certainly one of the most worthwhile museums in Cape Town.

Robben Island is probably the most popular destination in Cape Town. It exists right outside of the city, about a 30-minute ferry ride, and has an amazing landscape. Its physical beauty does not match the historical significance of it. Robben Island is the infamous prison where Nelson Mandela served most of his jail sentence. His prison cell is on display and draws most of the tourists. However, the prison also held other resistance members and criminals alike. Today, some tour guides are actual former political prisoners.
There were many memorable moments in Cape Town, but it is incredibly difficult to pick and choose. My two weeks in Cape Town certainly exposed me to radically different histories. I always assumed that I was going to pursue European studies. I loved studying the French Revolution, the Enlightenment, western modernity, and philosophy, but studying South African history at Cape Town through its communities, spaces, museums, its archives, and streets showed me a different direction. It served as an informal introduction to public history.

**Soweto, Johannesburg**

After staying in Cape Town for two weeks, I flew to Johannesburg for a week. My group and I did not stay at the university this time. The ambiance was certainly different staying at a hotel. Johannesburg was much more different and inland. It did not have the same southern California feel to it. Johannesburg is notorious for its crime and I did not have the same luxury of exploring the city as I did in Cape Town. However, my week in Johannesburg consisted of many excursions to museums like the Apartheid Museum, the Hector Pietersen Museum, the Cradle of Humanity, and trips to a lion preserve, culminating in a safari. The most significant part of my Johannesburg experience was traveling to the township of Soweto.
Soweto is infamous for the student protests of June 16, 1976. This date is commemorated every year in South Africa. In June of 1976, students took to the streets to protest the imposition of the Afrikaans language as one of the official languages of instruction at schools, the other being English. Students organized a demonstration against this new law, but it grew out of control as police instigated the violence that ensued. Hector Pieterson, a 13-year old student, was one of the first victims of the police. The museum in Soweto is dedicated in his name, and is a repository that houses the memory of resistance during the apartheid years.

Today, Soweto is a diverse community. Like many cities, it has the prominent expensive parts to the poor working class parts, which are evidenced by the types of houses and cars within each sector of the city. I was surprised to find that Soweto had all these different areas. I always thought of Soweto as a blanket of poverty. However, even those who are not considered to live in poverty,
still deal with difficult conditions. Those who do live in poverty, live in the areas of the township that we most associate with township poverty. The image of the overcrowded slum that lacks running water and electricity is very real. It is an image I had never been face to face with.

Walking throughout the Soweto township arose conflicting feelings. In one sense, I became aware of the status of my own privilege. Within that awareness, I also realized that I was not a traveler here, but a tourist. It felt somewhat exploitive to walk around a neighborhood just so that I could see the conditions they live in. It felt exploitative because simply becoming aware to these conditions is not enough to change them. I can feel guilty and sad all day, but not being active in any small way cannot justify those feelings. It is something that I still grapple with because I knew, just as I knew inside the shack of one of the residents, that I would probably not do much activism in the name of this kind of poverty. Being aware is important, and this experience is important, but as a Westerner it felt as though I was part of a complicated system of tourism. The benefit of this kind of tour is that some of the money does go into helping the community. The negative aspect is that not every “tourist” will fully understand the level of aid that is needed, nor the complexity of the politics behind these issues of poverty. I still do not fully understand.

Despite those internal feelings, it was still an educational and important part of my experience. I may not be a committed activist of the township’s particular cause, but it did serve as a way to start thinking about issues in the United States. I may not be fully aware of the same level of poverty that may exist in here in the U.S., but it does not mean they do not exist. Soweto left me with conflicting feelings, as it should have, that are also indicative of the new and emerging identities that are in constant struggle with one another in South Africa.
South Africa

When I got on the first plane en route to Cape Town, I was terrified. I was alone and I had never traveled that far in my life. I did not know what to expect. I had assumptions that I did not even realize I had. Taking this trip was one of the best decisions I made. Apart from the academics, I met great friends. I bonded with people I would have never met in another setting. I got to experience dorm life for the first time ever. I had never shared a room in my entire life. At the University of Cape Town I chose to dorm with another student who became a source of stability when I was feeling overwhelmed by the experience.

The people I met in Cape Town were truly inspiring. From scholars to tour guides, they all have had an immense impact on my life. The sights, the smells, the foods, and the fun are things I miss very much. I would absolutely relive this experience. All the
good and all the bad were experiences that made me stronger. What's more, the spirit of forgiveness and the will to move on of South Africa made an impact on my own personal philosophy. Forgiveness is a very strong and difficult trait to maintain, especially coming out of such harsh experiences as the injustices of apartheid. The will of the South African people, and the hospitality of the people of Cape Town impressed me. It has instilled new passions and directions into my evolving public history studies. My only lament was that three weeks was not enough to fully immerse oneself into the history and culture of South Africa, or any place for that matter.

Cape of Good Hope. Photo by Author.