

**Historisches Institut an der Universität zu Köln
Abteilung für Nordamerikanische Geschichte**



Study Abroad Report

Report on Study Abroad at the
University of Mississippi

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College selection, application and expectations

As a student of North American Studies, I have always been slightly ashamed of the fact that I had never been to the United States. As my interests lie primarily in literary studies, I had initially applied to the one-year master of comparative literary studies at the University of Rochester, New York. However, after my application was narrowly rejected, I began to look at other options. I immediately excluded Berkeley, since I would not have been able to afford it. I was not particularly interested in other universities, but then the University of Mississippi (UM) caught my eye. While the American South is not the focus of my studies, I have always been curious about it, but never managed to take classes that focus specifically on it. However, I had not finalized my decision to apply to UM, yet, and was still browsing through the course offerings of other universities, as well. None of them seemed to offer courses that drew me in as much as UM's offerings did, and the course descriptions were very sparse. The South in general and Mississippi in particular are of course associated with political backwardness, racism and economic decline. These were also my assumptions, until I began to read up on the existent heroic history of anti-racist and labor organizing efforts¹. This finalized my decision to apply to the University of Mississippi.

Besides the interesting curriculum, I hoped I would be able to meet people involved in social movements in the South and find out more about efforts to reckon with the history of the Confederacy. All in all, my goal was to broaden my horizons and preconceptions of what is important in American history, to shift my focus from the literature and history of urban metropolises in the North to the rural South.

I had talked to other students who had studied in the US and all of them mentioned that the workload was a lot higher than in Germany. Especially the frequency of written work was a constant refrain. Nevertheless, I planned to take a plethora of courses, and once I was accepted, I enthusiastically emailed the Study Abroad Office in Mississippi with a list

1 Kali Akuno and Ajamu Nangwaya, *Jackson Rising: The Struggle for Economic Democracy and Black Self-Determination in Jackson, Mississippi* (Daraja Press, 2017); Elizabeth Catte, *What You Are Getting Wrong about Appalachia* (Belt Publishing, 2018); Neal Shirley and Saralee Stafford, *Dixie Be Damned: 300 Years of Insurrection in the American South* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2015).

of the courses I would like to take. They happily forwarded them and checked with the professors whether I would be able to take them.

Throughout the process I was encouraged by my former Professor Isabel Heineman. The people working at the International Office and the Study Abroad Office in Mississippi were of great assistance in helping me through the paperwork, too.

Preparing for my trip abroad

The American South was basically unknown to me (outside of the history of the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement), so I started reading up on it and searched for online resources which provide a view of the South that went beyond simplistic declarations of backwardness. I posted in a Facebook group for leftist activists in the Deep South and announced my plans to study at the University of Mississippi. I received a lot of replies with tips and suggestions – a foreshadowing of the famed Southern hospitality I would soon come to enjoy. One of the people replying was [name removed] who forwarded my message to his contacts in Oxford, Mississippi. Through these I managed to find cheap housing in a residential area which I was very happy about as most of the apartments I had looked up previously were in gated communities. I was also able to exchange some emails with students at UM who were happy to answer my questions.

Orientation and the University of Mississippi

The Study Abroad Staff organized a mandatory orientation day for international students. The first half was specific to visiting students and dealt with issues such as health care or how to register for courses. After a lunch break in the cafeteria we met in a lecture hall with all international students and were introduced to academic standards in the US, the university's sexual harassment policies and the police department.

In the following days I also got to meet my advisor, Dr. Katie McKee, who is also the head of the Southern Studies department. She advised me on the courses I would take and strongly suggested I cut down my course selection to three. Dr. McKee took a lot of

time to get to know me and my interests, showed me around campus and made me feel very welcome. The final courses I decided on were:

- Historiography - African American History
- Readings: US Women's and Gender History
- Anthropological Films

I was a little bit disappointed I would not be able to take all the courses I deemed interesting, but as it would turn out later, taking only the required amount was a wise choice.

I had one week free to my disposal before classes would begin and I spent most of the time with becoming familiar with the campus and the town. The campus is incredibly huge compared to the University of Cologne's and feels like its own environment, it is almost its own city, independent of Oxford. Most of the buildings were built in neoclassical style with faux-greek columns. The campus's greens are meticulously kept and according to USA Today it is the most beautiful campus in the United States². Some buildings on campus date back to the antebellum period, e.g. the Lyceum, which houses the university administration, and the Banard Observatory, where the Center for the Study of Southern Culture is located. Historical markers which contextualize buildings and monuments can be found all over the campus. One such monument commemorates James Meredith who integrated the school in 1962. In the racist riots following his acceptance two people were killed and hundreds were injured. A controversial monument at the center of the campus memorializes confederate soldiers who gave their life in the Civil War. While I attended UM, the monument was subject of protests by anti-racist students who felt it was a monument to slavery. Other structures on campus were also criticized for being named after controversial figures, such as Lamar Hall, named after Supreme Court justice Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus Lamar II, who was a slave owner.

Courses and academic life

Studying in the USA comes with a much higher workload than comparable courses would have back in Cologne. Courses are longer (2.5 hours instead of 1.5 hours) and require a lot

² Michael Newsom, "UM, Oxford Again Ranked Among Nation's Best and Most Beautiful," Ole Miss News, October 6, 2016, <https://news.olemiss.edu/um-oxford-ranked-among-nations-best-beautiful/>.

more reading and writing. When I received the reading list for *Historiography - African American History* I was convinced Dr. Shanette Garrett-Scott had made a mistake: We were expected to read 17 historical monographs. Her course proved to be the most challenging but also one of the most interesting courses I took. The goal of the course was to familiarize students with the complexities of African American Historiography and the various debates surrounding the historiography. Garrett-Scott put a special emphasis on female historians and has herself recently published a monograph on Black women in banking. The other course participants, twelve in total, were either graduate or PhD students and the general level of discourse was incredibly high. In the first weeks I felt like an imposter, especially since the PhD students were familiar with a lot of the authors we read, while to me most of them were unknown. It was also the first time for me in a classroom, where the majority of students were Black. I am not sure how this changed the atmosphere, but I feel that some basic premises, such as the continuing legacy of slavery, were more widely accepted.

What I appreciated most were our discussions of archival violence, that is the complicity of the written record in sustaining white supremacy. Moral questions of how to write history when the only sources we have come from slave owners and their accomplices were on the forefront of our discussions. This was especially pertinent when we discussed Marisa J. Fuentes' *Dispossessed Lives*, which deals with the lives of enslaved women on Barbados in the 17th century. Fuentes creatively breathes life into the lives of these women and while she never contradicts her sources, she does graze the line separating history and literature. The class discussion thus centered around what historians are allowed to do and how much creative freedom there is in writing history. This session was very interesting to me, as one of Fuentes' inspirations comes from Saidiya Hartman, who is one of my academic heroes. To me the moral imperative of reading against the bias of the archive and trying to name those who are consigned to the margins of history is greater than any allegiance to a "just the facts" approach to history, though a lot of class participants disagreed.

The large number of PhD students also resulted in discussions of teaching methods which I found interesting. We talked about which of the books would be appropriate for undergraduates and reflected on how the works we read changed how we, for example,

would approach teaching slavery. I was the only international student in class and occasionally had to draw comparisons to education in Germany and how students here discuss the legacy of German colonialism for example.

The written work for the class was just as intense as the readings. We had to post comments on the week's readings to an online platform before class, compose Precis binders and present our thesis papers. Some of this work was more helpful than others; I appreciated being able to post comments before class, as they helped me focus my ideas, and the freeform approach to it made it less constrictive than e. g. writing a book review. As I do not primarily think of myself as a historian, it also made it simpler to relate the class to my (literary) interests. Other students similarly related the readings to their own research interests, and I enjoyed reading their comments. The Precis binders on the other hand felt very tedious and I felt like I was wasting my time excerpting and organizing books I might never use again. Along with making us familiar with the historiography, Dr. Garrett-Scott was very keen on making sure we succeed professionally. We had to write Op-Eds, Blog posts, CVs and research proposals, and she offered numerous advice on how to approach academic conferences or the job market. Sadly, the course's workload occasionally seemed to be too large for her as well, and we did not always receive feedback on the work we handed in. This made some exercises less useful than they could have been. I had trouble keeping up with the reading. Therefore, other students suggested only skimming the reading, relying on reviews or only reading the introductions. I tried all of these techniques, but I was not able to participate in class unless I had read all of the material carefully. Absorbing literature faster is a skill I definitely have to improve.

My class with Dr. Jessica Wilkerson, *Readings: US Women's and Gender History* was similar to Dr. Garrett-Scott's class, in that it consisted largely of historiographical debates, this time of women historians. This was by far my favorite class. I had read about Dr. Wilkerson's work before³ and besides being an incredible labor historian, she is also an active union member, organizing her colleagues at the UM, and an outspoken activist and supporter of LGBTQ rights in Mississippi. Before I came to Oxford, [name removed] had

3 Jessica Wilkerson, "Living with Dolly Parton," *Longreads* (blog), October 16, 2018, <https://longreads.com/2018/10/16/living-with-dolly-parton/>.

already put me in touch with her, and I was very eager to meet her in person and be in her class.

We read approximately one monograph and one accompanying theoretical paper per week, with one person being in charge of compiling an annotated bibliography for the monograph and another student guiding the discussion of the paper. While we read historians from all over the US, the focus was definitely on the South. We read both classical scholars (Jeanne Boydston, Jennifer Morgan, Tera Hunter), and very recent work, such as Laura Briggs' *How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics* and Elizabeth McRae's *Mothers of Massive Resistance*. I found the combination of older texts, new publications and the theoretical papers very productive. It allowed us to see where theoretical interventions were picked up by historians, and where historians in turn inspired deeper theoretical reflections on the historiography. The class was composed of a similar mixture as Garrett-Scott's class, but the students had a more diverse academic background. Besides the historians, who were the majority, there were literature, philosophy and gender studies students, whose contributions made discussion far more wide-ranging than if it had just been historians. While I was able to contribute more to this class, I still had a variety of humbling experiences. The class really made me rethink what I thought I knew about the South compared to the rest of the US, and several times students insisted on talking about a Jim Crow nation versus the Jim Crow South. I especially enjoyed our discussion of the welfare rights movement and how it differed from region to region. The other students were adamant in noting the complexity of life in the South to a degree I had not expected and challenged the prejudices I held over the region. Discussions in this class often branched off into current US politics, and again it was great to have such a diverse crowd ranging from Southern liberals to Pulitzer Prize winning journalists to Marxist-Feminists, who of course were very opinionated.

While less explicit about it than Dr. Garrett-Scott, Dr. Wilkerson shared some of her professional experiences she had made at conferences or what the process of getting a book published was like. She encouraged us to submit to conferences and journals and seemed to spend a lot of her time on mentoring students.

Anthropological Films with Dr. Simone Delerme was very different from the two history courses. I would describe it as something between an introduction to anthropology and film studies. Dr. Delerme is an anthropologist by trade, but very interested in critical film studies, so the course provided a nice bridge between something I know quite well and something entirely new to me. Most films dealt with the South, with some classics of anthropological film thrown in. We learned about anthropological methods, discussed issues such as ethnocentrism vs. cultural relativism, and read a variety of accompanying theory, ranging from anthropological handbooks to critical theory. Her class was split into two sessions per week, with a majority of the time spent on watching documentaries. I especially enjoyed our sessions on Appalachia, which also seemed to spark the best discussions with students from the region talking about how they felt misrepresented by mainstream media and the recurring theme of “Trump Country”⁴. The class made me realize the compromises inherent in documentary film, and the limits of the camera to capture reality.

This class was also different from the others in terms of its composition: I was the only graduate student in the class and a lot of the students seemed to be taking the class as an elective. There was also a big divide in the quality of discussion, as most undergrads did not seem to do the reading and only participated in class discussion when they could relate the films to their own experience. The class was also a bit larger, there were approximately 25 students, which might have also influenced people’s willingness to contribute.

Dr. Delerme’s course was a far more practical experience than the history classes. We spent a session in the town square taking ethnographic notes, another in the computer lab, researching interactions on social media. I really enjoyed this aspect, as it made nice change of pace to the at times overwhelming amount of reading. In addition to our writing assignments, such as film reviews, ethnographic notes, or field reports, we also engaged in more creative projects. For our final project we had to create a photoethnography which illuminated an aspect of Northern Mississippi anthropologically. While I do not plan to

4 For a critical discussion of the term see Regan Penaluna, “Elizabeth Catte: Appalachia Isn’t Trump Country,” *Guernica*, March 7, 2018, <https://www.guernicamag.com/elizabeth-catte-appalachia-isnt-trump-country/>.

switch my major to anthropology anytime soon, I really enjoyed this glance at a different subject and I will try to incorporate an ethnographic view into my future academic projects.

At UM (and as far as I know American universities in general) papers are not written in the semester break, but during the last week, the so called finals week. Coming from a system where, depending on a professor's leniency, one might have a month or more to write a paper, to a fixed deadline and about a week of time, was hard. I tried to prepare as much as possible during the semester (e. g. by taking the photos for my photoethnography), I still ended up spending the entire day and a good part of the nights of the week working on my papers. I was not happy with any of the papers I handed in, but I received As from Dr. Delorme and Dr. Wilkerson. Unfortunately, my grades were not as good in Dr. Garrett-Scott's class. She made us hand in a final draft beforehand and sent it back with comments. I had anticipated only making a few minor changes, but I received a vast amount of criticism which was impossible to incorporate due to a lack of time.

Academic life at UM was not only limited to classes. The Center for the Study of Southern Culture, for example, hosted a weekly Brown Bag lecture, where scholars gave short presentations over lunch. I attended nearly every one of these and enjoyed hearing about various aspects of Southern culture and history, ranging from Queer literature to Christian anti-racism. The lectures were not limited to academia in the limited sense: e.g. one of the first talks I heard was by *Mississippi Today* journalists on their election coverage.

Talks were not only organized by the Center, but also by some of my professors. Dr. Wilkerson invited Anne Balay to talk about her new book on Queer truckers⁵, a chapter of which we also discussed in class, and when we read Fuentes for Dr. Garrett-Scott's class she invited her over to give a presentation on her upcoming book on the disposability of Black life. My stay luckily coincided with the Southeastern Women's Studies Association's annual conference which took place at UM. The Center paid for my attendance and I had the privilege of listening to a variety of great lectures, such as those by Minnie Bruce Pratt or E. Patrick Johnson. I also had the chance to attend the Oxford Conference For The Book which featured a variety of authors. My personal highlight was a panel with four

5 Anne Balay, *Semi Queer: Inside the World of Gay, Trans, and Black Truck Drivers* (University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

Appalachian scholars: Jessica Wilkerson, Karida Brown, Elizabeth Catte, and Meredith McCarroll. I found their insights deeply inspiring and I especially liked Catte's approach which is informed by environmental justice and compassion for the lives of working class men and women. I had the chance to talk to her after the panel, and we shared stories about anti-extractivist activism in Hambach and Western Kentucky.

Extra-curricular

In my attempt to learn more about current social movements in the South, I had the contacts [name removed] set me up with, one of whom, [name and details removed]. They proved to not only be a great friend, but also the perfect guide to Southern activism. They gave me an improvised tour of the Mississippi Delta during which we visited the grave of Fannie Lou Hamer, whose activism is deeply inspiring to me. They are primarily a labor organizer at the Nissan auto plant near Jackson, Mississippi. However, they also volunteer as a clinic escort at Mississippi's only abortion provider in Jackson. I joined them for a Wednesday double shift, and it was by far the most harrowing experience I had in the state. While I read a lot about anti-choice activists in Prof. Heineman's class on *The Politics of Reproduction*, reality was worse than I had imagined: There were children who, I was told, were being homeschooled so they could protest the clinic in the morning, harassing patients. Although seeing the anti-choice activists, who at times numbered more than 20 people, was shocking, it was also nice to see the people volunteering their time to ensure access to safe abortions. After my stay in Mississippi was over, I met them again for Memorial Day in Washington, D.C., and we drove to Harper's Ferry, West Virginia to commemorate John Brown's raid on the federal armory.

There was also some activism on campus; a group called Students Against Social Injustice (SASI) had been campaigning for the removal of the statue memorializing Confederate soldiers from the campus. I became involved with the group whose members were great guides to Mississippi and campus politics. SASI organized a demonstration for the removal of the statue which was attended by approximately 200 people. In response, Neo-Confederate groups marched on campus, to protest what they felt was a demonization of the Southern way of life. Some members of the university's Basketball team were

appalled at the administrations lack of action in taking down the statue and knelt during a match, which was even reported in the *New York Times*⁶. I found it great to see these conflicts around interpreting the past taking place at UM. There were frequent articles in the university newspaper written by students and professors like Dr. Wilkerson, arguing the various aspects of dealing with the legacies of slavery. The University of Mississippi can feel very sterile at times - campus life is dominated by fraternities and sororities, and politics can be hard to find - so it was great to see such an invigorating discussion of history and its effects on the present.

Looking back

Summarizing my stay in Mississippi is hard. I feel I learned so much that is not tangible in an academic sense and nevertheless, it will influence every future work I do. Hearing the variety of English vernaculars which are spoken in Mississippi, or experiencing entire neighborhoods of cookie-cutter houses will be on my mind for a long time. Traveling through Mississippi was a constant negotiation of reinforcing and dismantling the prejudices I had.

The courses I took were all brilliant in their own ways. I was not prepared for the amount of work I had to do, despite my fellow students' warnings. I hope I will be able to maintain the work ethic I acquired there. I am not sure about my feelings towards the workload. While I envy the amazing knowledge students at UM have, I wonder how they balance waged work and university. If I had to work 20 hours a week, as I do in Germany, I never would have been able to keep up. I feel the amount of work makes it very hard, if not impossible, to pass with good grades, unless one has a scholarship (or rich parents) that makes waged work superfluous.

My main goal of broadening my horizons and learning more about the South has definitely been achieved. But as is usually the case, learning more about a topic goes hand in hand with discovering more complexities. Interacting with Southern studies students was very humbling. They made me question a lot of my assumptions and inadvertently pointed

6 Billy Witz, "Kneeling During the Anthem at Ole Miss: 'I Needed to Stand Up for My Rights,'" *The New York Times*, February 27, 2019, sec. Sports, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/27/sports/ole-miss-kneeling.html>.

out glaring gaps in my knowledge. In general, class discussions in the two history courses were very intense and on a far higher academic level than I am used to. I learned a lot, especially from the PhD students who frequently shared their own research and offered insights as relative newcomers to academic life.

The anthropology class allowed me to venture out of history/literary studies and to learn about a discipline I had never really considered to be of much importance to me. Now the relationship to critical theory or postcolonial studies seem very obvious. The disciplines of careful methodology and frequent questioning of how one's own standpoint affects the data one captures (or the sources one evaluates), is very helpful and I hope I will become even more aware of my own biases in the future.

My extra-curricular interest in Southern social movements has definitely been satisfied. The people I met were involved in challenges both daunting and exhilarating. They gladly shared their stories with me and welcomed me into their spaces and organizations. Their mere existence is proof that change is coming to Mississippi and the South, and I definitely returned with a more optimistic outlook on the country's future.