

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Honors Theses, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Honors Program

---

Spring 3-11-2022

## Γλύκοπικρος & Bittersweet: An Autoethnographic Approach to Studying Abroad in Greece

Margaret Rieckman

*University of Nebraska - Lincoln*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/honorstheses>



Part of the [Gifted Education Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), [Nonfiction Commons](#), [Other Education Commons](#), [Other Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#), and the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

---

Rieckman, Margaret, "Γλύκοπικρος & Bittersweet: An Autoethnographic Approach to Studying Abroad in Greece" (2022). *Honors Theses, University of Nebraska-Lincoln*. 434.  
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/honorstheses/434>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors Program at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses, University of Nebraska-Lincoln by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

ΓΛΥΚΟΠΙΚΡΟΣ & BITTERSWEET  
AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH  
TO STUDYING ABROAD IN GREECE

An Undergraduate Honors Thesis  
Submitted in Partial fulfillment of  
University Honors Program Requirements  
and College of Arts and Sciences Distinction  
University of Nebraska—Lincoln

by  
Margaret Rieckman, BA  
English and Anthropology  
College of Arts and Science

11 March 2022

Faculty Mentors:  
Dr. Deborah Minter, English  
Dr. Roberto Abadie, Anthropology

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to answer the question: How can reflection via an autoethnographic approach promote sought-after outcomes of a semester studying abroad? Through an anthropological lens, I completed field work, kept field notes, and wrote a reflexive blog to navigate the social processes of learning to belong in another place within the context of a multicultural environment of study abroad program with Erasmus students. Through autoethnography as a methodology and a text, I utilized linguistic analysis to identify key themes that represent my transformative experience. The personal, emotional, and intellectual growth I experienced was made transformative by double vision and long-term engagement with the autoethnographic text. In Part I, I introduce the research project at the center of this thesis. Following the first section, I include a review of scholarship on autoethnography, affect and reflexivity—three areas of focus that emerged as I aimed to understand my own learning through the study abroad experience. In the third section of my thesis, I summarize the methodology and explain my decisions in conducting the approaches to research and analysis. Following the discussion of my methodology are the findings of my autoethnography (Part IV) in which I identify themes of kinship, place & home, identity, language, and Erasmus culture. I conclude (in Part V) with a discussion of the results, placing my research into dialogue with some of the research on fostering learning through study abroad.

### **Dedication & Appreciation**

I dedicate this thesis to my late, great-aunt JoAnn, who spontaneously left Minnesota at 19 after the worst blizzard of her life. She moved to Los Angeles, pursued a degree, met her life-long lover (my great-uncle Terry), cruised the Caribbean, lived and died by the water, wearing Hawaiian shirts like a uniform. It was Aunt JoAnn's nerve, creative travel writing, and ghostly friend request on Facebook two weeks ago that inspired me to write and "finish" this project.

Some thanks are in order:

Thank you to Mom & Dad, my biggest fans and the people I will always return to

Thank you to Ben, for being a wise older brother who will never read this

Thank you to Giorgia, for being the main character and my beloved sister

Thank you to Barbs and Nora, for the warm welcomes

Thank you to Adrián, my muse

Not to mention...

Thank you to Art Bar for reminding me to work hard and be nice (and for the sweet coffee)

Thank you to Eric Tucker, who showed me early on that I can write my way into the world

Thank you to the UNL Writing Center, for teaching me that writing is revision

Thank you to Nick, for being good at peer review and terrible at cribbage

Thank you to Sarah, Claire, Syd, Kaitlynn, Andy, Eric, & Christopher for the solidarity

Thank you to Dr. Burnett, for four years of faith in me

Thank you to my coordinator Allison Hinesly and mentor Dr. Gwyneth Talley, who got me there

Thank you to my advisors, Dr. Deborah Minter and Dr. Roberto Abadie, who got me here

And thank you to Willa Cather, for leaving Nebraska but never abandoning it

## I: Introduction

*On August 30, my dad took me to the airport in Omaha, and after my connecting flight to Chicago, I flew out of the United States for the first time. Even in the air somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean, it was still unbelievable that this was finally happening. I had been preparing for so long with the typical obstacles of studying abroad along with the compounding issue of COVID-19. Not to mention, I chose one of the most independent options for my global experience: an exchange program through MAUI-Utrecht at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (15 September, p. 265).<sup>1</sup>*

Before studying abroad in Northern Greece, I had specific expectations of personal and professional development, from both my organic experience and this adjacent thesis research. Namely, I envisioned myself at the end of the five months having undergone maturation in cultural competence, language fluency, confidence, and career direction as is often noted in study abroad learning outcomes. Consequently, I implemented a research plan in which I recorded daily ethnographic fieldnotes and translated them into a blog to complement my experience through the recording and reflecting of gained knowledge. The reality of the program, the country, and the other exchange students I encountered were different from what I imagined. Partway through the program<sup>2</sup> and the writing of my blog, my voice, my method, and my purpose, evolved into a form which I eventually categorized as autoethnography. Through my three literature reviews and five months of field work, my project morphed into this sharpened anthropological approach to studying abroad that seeks to understand the self and the self-in-society through reflexive and affective writing. Employing a two-fold way of seeing and knowing—first, autoethnographic observation and writing in the moment and, second, analysis and writing after the fact—fostered ongoing conversations and identifiable insights surrounding

---

<sup>1</sup> An excerpt from the first entry of my autoethnographic blog, which I wrote about my initial arrival in Europe and the two weeks of traveling that followed.

<sup>2</sup> Upon returning to the US, I also had to replace an advisor because she was no longer a university employee. Not to mention, I had only had a month and a half to complete the analysis and write the entirety of the thesis, as the blog served as a main source that informed the final product.

key themes such as kinship, place & home, identity, language, and study abroad culture. The entries pointing toward these themes demonstrate a personal transformation in the process of learning to belong in two places at once.

## **II: Literature Review**

### **STUDY ABROAD**

Studying abroad is considered an immersive experience, a culture within itself, and a model for multi-level growth. Further, it has been pondered, theorized, and evaluated by scholars focusing on specific geographical areas or programs. Intercultural competence (Wong, 2015; Craig et al., 2015), reflexivity (Savicki & Price 2015; Gabaudan, 2016), collective identity (Cairns, 2017; Teichler, 2004), and professional development (Cairns, 2017) are ways in which exchange success has been measured. The existing conversation features studies that are largely qualitative with quantitative characteristics. However, a more dated text, Teichler's (2004) journal article surrounding Erasmus experiences, highlights numerical figures demonstrating what was gained (or what was not gained) among 14 students from their perspectives. Both the program and the scholarship surrounding it has exhibited significant shifts in the past twenty-something years.

Erasmus is a European Union collaborative program formed in 1987 that gives students and professionals within member states and other regional areas opportunities to pursue funded academic and occupational "horizontal mobilities" (Cairns, 2017). The program had the original intent of promoting "European identity," but success has been interpreted more according to language acquisition, intercultural competency, engagement with host country, employment rates, and social cohesion (Cairns, 2017 & 2019; Teichler, 2004). Traditional measurements of successful Erasmus mobilities have also taken negative outcomes into account, the most

common criticisms of the program (and study abroad experiences in general) being disproportionate time spent on leisure and cultural activities versus studying and students of shared identities or shared backgrounds gravitating toward each other as opposed to engaging with those who are culturally different (Teichler, 2004).

Through micro and macro-oriented approaches, stakeholders of study abroad programs consistently question how objectives of global education should be reconsidered, revised, and reinvigorated. The roles of exchange students, sending advisors, receiving advisors, locals, etc. are holistically surveyed with a variety of frameworks and implications included in the scholarly landscape. For example, one of David Wong's (2015) points of discussion are interventionist vs. "laissez faire" advising methods through levels of "...regular, intentional, and structured reflection and mentoring" (p. 128). His study, accompanied by those of Savicki and Price (2015), Gabaudan (2016), and Craig et al. (2015), attempts to quantify the various markers of educational value with qualitative insights through surveys, cultural shock models, and writing style/content (i.e., length, content, depth of analysis, media, language fluency, etc.)(Gabaudan, 2016).

#### REFLEXIVITY and AFFECT in STUDY ABROAD

Within research on study abroad programs (including those mentioned above), methods for measuring educational value include scheduled moments of reflection embedded within activities, assessments, and journal entries taking place before, during, and after the mobility. Cultural, literary, and affective foci unfolded in the analysis. Craig et al. (2015) list overarching reflective journal themes in their study, which employed narrative inquiry as a fluid research method that "...focuses on people, places, and things all of which are in intellectual and moral relationship" (p. 476). These identified themes populate intersections of international,

transhistorical, and transcultural themes within narrative: bearing witness to experience, naming cultural connections, examining value conflicts, developing intercultural empathy, engaging in cultural healing, experiencing identity shifts, and cultivating agentive selves (p. 482). In a way, students become researchers of their own experiences, using introspection to evaluate the ebbs and flows of their personalized study abroad participation, albeit in cultural categories determined by educators.

Affect theories within the scholarship have been less examined, as acculturative stress from disjointed assumptions, values, and expectations between the individual and the local/program itself have been largely boiled down to the vague umbrella feeling of culture shock. As a result, study abroad experiences are inaccurately understood as homogenous, though no one experience is identical to another (Savicki, 2013). Savicki's research on "the effects of affect" within study abroad experiences investigate deeper, personal questions revolving psychological adjustment, behavioral performance, and social identification, branching off into a conversation that broadens categories of value by focusing on emotional trajectories in addition to intercultural competency (Savicki, 2013; Wong, 2015). However, this study does not rely on frequent journal entries but uses a methodology that resembles a checkpoint paradigm throughout the preparation, completion, and conclusion of the experience.

The practice of consistent journal writing during travel study abroad programs, alternatively, illustrates writing as a way of knowing, as the multilayered narrative aspect creates space for students to share "stories lived and told, and relived and retold" (Craig et al., 2015, p. 476). Study abroad programs that required reflection through journals, diaries, essays, or blogs encouraged high school, undergraduate, or graduate students to think introspectively about their external lives abroad (Craig et al., 2015; Gabaudan, 2016; Savicki & Price, 2015). While some



students were highly engaged with this process in these studies, others demonstrated that this incentivized, and arguably forced, mode of reflection was not as productive or helpful as instructors had hoped. For the individuals in the latter pool, reflection became inorganic, and personal experiences were broadcast as writing turned into a chore. However, Craig et al. (2015) found that more collaborative and technological approaches to the reflection with assigned blogs being shared among fellow students further validated experiences as well as fostered inspiration.

The constructive but complicating inclusion of teachers and advisors into the reflective process encourages the utilization of analytical elements to quantify identification: broadening, which situates the experience; burrowing, which homes in on fine-grained details; storying; restorying, which documents the signaling of change; and fictionalization, which protects identity (Craig et al., 2015). Coordinators who facilitate reflection with the goal of encouraging critical thinking, program efficacy, and personal development are able to monitor language learning, technology usage, educational adaptation and cultural immersion as well as provide communication, feedback, and peer support to bolster those learning outcomes (Gabaudan, 2016; Craig, 2015). The existing scholarship, however, does not account for what happens when quantitative methods are abandoned, or used as a simple stepping stone to a more abstract, subjective representation of knowledge production through experiential and transformational learning that takes place with larger cultural contexts, such as the application of autoethnography. What happens when students acquire full narrative agency in their reflective processes?

## AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Autoethnography is a relatively new way of seeing, thinking, writing, and knowing in and outside the broader field of cultural anthropology. Though the term was coined in the mid-20th

century (Reed-Danahay, 1997), this approach did not gain its footing until the 1980's. By the 1990's, the step-sibling of ethnography became a real player in the arenas of communication from personal and cultural contexts. A handful of scholars have attempted to define the genre in the last few decades (Spry, 2001; Ellis, 2009; Anderson, 2006; Holmon Jones 2005; Bochner & Ellis, 2000; etc.). Norman K. Denzin's (2014) work *Interpretive Autoethnography* catalogs a handful of these definitions, concluding the page and a half of various subjective meanings with analogies of apples and oranges and different sides of the same coin (p. 20). Deborah E. Reed-Danahay (1997) has a similar understanding of the dynamic, non-archival scope of autoethnography by clarifying in the introduction of her edited book *Auto/Ethnography*: "This book does not represent a definitive statement of what autoethnography is or can be, nor does it have that task as its ambition" (p. 3). Such a multiplicity implies the same challenge of naming the notion, process, approach, and changing landscape of autoethnography.<sup>3</sup> Reed-Danahay, and various other authors since have instead aimed at intersections that autoethnography lives within, movements and ideologies it represents, and a defense of critiques of the field.

#### REFLEXIVITY and AFFECT in AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Autoethnography is a product of postmodern sensibilities (Anderson, 2006) with the ideological shift toward often metatextual "little narrative(s)" as an imaginative and inventive way to extrapolate and share knowledge (Anderson & Rennie, 2016). Autoethnography garnered more attention starting in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, due to a dramatic shift toward narrative modes of exchanging and evaluating information, a type of approach that marries reflexivity and affect (Bochner, 2012; Anderson & Rennie, 2016). The field was subjected to harsh criticism from the

---

<sup>3</sup> A few more names for the genre/approach, courtesy of Ellis and Bochner (2000): personal narratives, ethnographic short stories, auto-observation, self-ethnography, critical autobiography, reflexive ethnography, evocative narratives, ethnographic memoir, experiential texts, ethnographic poetics, native/indigenous ethnography, or postmodern ethnography, etc.

beginning as an unconventional and radical abandonment of traditional ethnographic and scientific methods (Butz & Besio, 2009). Leaning in toward subjective experience, reflexivity, and affect, autoethnography is associated with the personal, the emotional, the messy, and the artistic as well as constant evolution of meaning, voice, remembering, and performance (Watson, 2012; Kirschner, 2018; Denzin, 2014), branching out from ethnography, which has a traditionally scientific, conservative, and outward-looking nature. The dynamism of the growing field and highly applicable method of narrative-based research has resulted in a variety of goals and deep intersectionality with themes and frameworks relating to creativity, criticism, pedagogy, relationships between self and culture, and social justice/activism (Holman Jones, 2018; Denzin, 2014).

Denzil (2014) explores the “cultural locus” of stories and different ways in which personal reflexivity within a broader culture is communicated, one of which being poetry. This creative form was not necessarily a new research tool in the overlapping territories of theory and personal experience in scholarship<sup>4</sup> but bold in its self-referential quality, with poems that specifically integrate “autoethnography” into their stanzas. The verses he includes in the book are hyper-contemplative, rhythmically metatextual, and indicative of a genre that holds space for endless appeals to reflexivity. Poetic aspects of autoethnography have since demonstrated social processes of inquiry and transformation through navigating personal change and growth as an individual, not in a vacuum but in a specific culture (Maurino 2016). Chang (2008) explicitly states the reflexivity of her fieldwork in her book *Autoethnography as Method*: the text, due to its very direct positionality and non-removable lens, reveals who she is and what she values.

However, autoethnography can simultaneously look outward, as the inclusion of culturally

---

<sup>4</sup> See Ronald J. Pelias’s (2011) *Leaning: A Poetics of Personal Relations*, which surrounds bodily experience within specific personal and cultural contexts.

contextualized vignettes provides insights that a sole focus on “the other” in qualitative research cannot conjure (Humphreys, 2005).

Consequently, due to the dichotomy that autoethnography achieves through looking out by looking in, the researcher adopts a variety of identities in the process: the storyteller and story listener (Bochner, 2012); insider and outsider (Reed-Danahay, 1997); the author and the object (Butz & Besio, 2009); writer and speaker (Denzin, 2014); etc. Denzin distinguishes autoethnography from ethnography by explaining how, despite the seemingly narrowed focus of narrative, the writer is not in any way a gatekeeper to culture or a “window to the world.” Thus, autoethnography is more “auto” than “ethno” (Kirschner, 2018), revealing the bigger picture within the narrower lens (Bochner & Ellis, 2000). The storytelling is a key feature, but autoethnography goes further than equally reflexive or affective diaries and journals due to the aspect of mutual storytelling and the phenomenon of the autoethnography telling stories that contain stories.

Moreover, autoethnography more readily embraces and unpacks emotion compared to its more hesitant, private counterpart of ethnography, especially in the tradition of hoarding field notes (Emerson, 2011). Scholars have attempted to fill the emotional holes in ways of researching and writing, including research diaries (Browne, 2013) and evocative ethnography (Skoggard & Waterson (2015). Emotions inevitably affect what is remembered and reported (Eriksson et al., 2012), and for a long time in the disciplinary history of anthropology, emotions were the elephant in the room (Beatty, 2014). New-age, postmodernist researchers such as Wang (2015) in her innovative “live fieldnotes” have introduced transparency of the researchers’ specific lens and narrative, inching toward affect.<sup>5</sup> Though the effort of uncovering affect has

---

<sup>5</sup> See Behar’s (1996) *The Vulnerable Observer : Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart* for a look into an early, brave study into the emotional “voyage” of anthropologist throughout ethnographic fieldwork and writing.

been applied to ethnography since the rise of autoethnography, this newer, braver, more controversial form of cultural research has made progress toward Beatty's emotional rhetoric that anthropologists should "...restore the heartbeat to ethnography" (2014, p. 546). He suggests that this emotional aspect is fostered through the acceptance of complexity, listing multidisciplinary, rhetorical, representative, (and arguably Westernized) approaches as specific factors. Subtracting the ethnocentricity of the concept and understanding of emotion, autoethnography already contains these complexities, and more, as affect is not necessarily a requirement of the ideology but a common side-effect of narrative. For instance, when narrative is openly followed through field notes, or even emails to an advisor (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007), additional telling themes, implications, and stakes surface, leading to an epistemology of emotion (Purnell, 2017). Namely, Christopher N. Poulos has written an autoethnography which educates through narrative and articulates the self with a metatextual cultural writing. He highlights his purpose in the abstract:

*I write to expose. I write to shine light. I write to open up the world to a new way of seeing, feeling, thinking, reflecting, smelling. I write it into a story of a life, a story of a human working like hell to navigate this choppy, murky, oddly human water we've all been shoved into. I write to build bridges, to probe and make meaning, to start a dialogue, to bring memory to light, to write relationships into being (Poulos, 2017, p. 33).*

Poulos's (2017) writing about his writing exemplifies the far narrative reach of autoethnography surrounding sagas of simply existing within a body and navigating relationships as a being and a body. He highlights the message of both universal and individual emotions entangled in our daily experiences and how this way of seeing, writing, and knowing makes space for more complicated conversations to take place.

#### CRITIQUES and DEFENSES of AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Despite what this knowledge-based mode of mutual storytelling has proven across disciplines and cultures, criticism of autoethnography persists. There is specific skepticism about the adolescent age of autoethnography as well as anxieties pertaining to the common practice of revealing the self and loss of privacy (pointing toward unethical frameworks)—which are translated to discourses against confessional tales—(Pensoneau-Conway et al., 2017; Reed-Danahay, 2017; Butz & Besio, 2009). Not to mention, autoethnography has been accused of being nonanalytic, self-indulgent, narcissist, irreverent, sentimental, romantic, too artful, not scientific enough (i.e., no theories or hypotheses), unreliable, not generalizable, invalid, without verisimilitude, without epiphany, without rigor, without risk, passive in nature (i.e. aligning with ideologies and movements), etc. (Denzin, 2014; Humphreys, 2005); Brigg & Bleiker, 2010; O’Shea, 2019).

The hesitance toward autoethnography seems akin with the clinging to ethnography, another flawed way of knowing. The beginning of ethnographic practice entailed being on the outside looking in, interpreting an “ensemble of texts” that ultimately resulted in writing a culture while still outside of that culture (Geertz, 1973; Clifford & Marcus, 1986). The inclusion of this critique of early ethnography is not to retaliate, but to demonstrate the need and the longing for a new discipline: “Autoethnography inserted itself in the picture when it was understood that all ethnographers reflexively (or reflexively) write themselves into their ethnographies” (Denzin, 2014, p. 26). The genre, then, is a coming-of-age thing, another way of knowing and communicating in a social environment where access to knowledge is paradoxically more accessible but inaccessible as it has ever been.

The authors detailing and defending autoethnography seem unafraid of the wall of criticism between them and the audience, as Reed-Danahay (1997) explains that the genre’s

contributions mirror its potential, the “weakness as strength” rhetoric. For example, O’Shea (2019) in writing about their experience with dysmorphia through autoethnography describes and defends their “bad writing” as inherently valuable to the conversation and adding a new layer to what autoethnography can be and who has access to it. The author’s circular, flawed, monovocal, argumentative way of navigating their transgender identity shares their authentic “little life,” as they phrase it, a unique and inevitably subjective story. Subjectivity, in its proving that objectivity is not real and, therefore, a mythical treasure hunt, is sufficient as a way of gaining and sharing knowledge (Butz & Besio, 2009; Denzin, 2014). According to Denzin (2014), the pursuit of the capital “T” “Truth” is counterproductive to seeking out collective cultural knowledge, and the holding out for a “real person” is similarly silly: “To send readers back to a ‘real’ person is to send them back to another version of the fiction that is in the text” (p. 12). In this view, differently presented cultural research, such as ethnography, is equally fictional and unreliable in its flawed account for realities that are socially constructed and highly individualized in personal and cultural experience.

As for the claim that singular subjectivity is inapplicable to others and unextractable from specific situations in culture (rather than telling of the human condition), an even newer, shinier branch of autoethnography has emerged that encourages more dialogue and inclusiveness of narrative: collaborative autoethnography (Guyotte & Sochacka, 2016). There is something in autoethnography for everyone, even the most cynical and culturally cautious. For example, authors Briggs and Bleiker (2009) apply autoethnography to the field of international relations, thoroughly exploring the limitations and the criticisms, and they find that no matter the discipline, the author can never be erased, and neither can “the other.” The introspection of autoethnography reintroduces the self within knowledge communities, and this contextual value

can be bolstered, just as long as autoethnography is practiced across disciplines and not within a vacuum. This is not a potential problem since the discipline itself is at the crosshairs of multiple anthropologies and connects literary, affective, aesthetic, and activist lenses using quantitative *and* qualitative methods to trace knowledge production (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Further contributing to the validity of the autoethnographic approach, the incorporation of photography, artwork, and even formatted stanzas of poetry lend toward a new genre: visual autoethnography. This branch provides sharpened validity with the inclusion of visual evidence for the author's subjective truth and, therefore, credibility, relating text to visually documented events and objects, which can also serve as artifacts of identity (Hunter, 2020; Rowe, 2017). The rhetorical narrative of visual autoethnography, as a result, is doubly productive with images analyzing text and text analyzing images in a reciprocal ekphrastic process. Autoethnography, in turn, becomes even more like a portrait in an exhibit in a museum with narratives of the self and other constantly juxtaposed in now visible ways (Watson, 2009).

#### THIS STUDY'S CONTRIBUTION

My research occupies the largely unexplored terrain of (visual) autoethnography, affect, reflexivity, and study abroad experience. In particular, I use linguistic analysis to analyze a blog I kept during my study abroad experience in which I drew on field notes and autoethnographic practices from the field of anthropology. By doing this study, I show the possibilities and the limits of study abroad programs when completed with and without autoethnography. This project is a multidisciplinary, broadly informed effort to learn, to belong, to know, and to communicate how it felt, how it feels, and what it means to study abroad through this specific approach of understanding the self and the self-in-society simultaneously. How is personal transformation



and development compounded when the respectively transformative and developmental experiences of “doing autoethnography” and studying abroad are explored in tandem?

### III. Methodology

My research question at the beginning of my thesis trajectory originated as an attempt to combine my major studies of English and anthropology. In preparation for studying abroad, I preemptively decided to utilize anthropological field notes to write through my experience in order to investigate how the ethnographic genre is best suited for navigating such cultural contact experiences. The thesis, then, was always meant to analyze, interpret, and communicate the ethnographic product I would write abroad in Thessaloniki, Greece during my five-month program. The study abroad experience was an exchange program through the MAUI-Utrecht partnership at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUPh). Though my mobility was not technically an Erasmus mobility (since this is an EU program, and I am not an EU citizen), I was enrolled through my Greek university as an Erasmus student. As a result of this arrangement, I was the sole American exchange student in the Erasmus program at AUPh during my stay. What follows is a general timeline of the key checkpoints in my study abroad experience:

- **August 30, 2021:** Departed from Omaha, Nebraska to Munich, Germany
- **August 31-September 14, 2021:** Traveled for two weeks with Czech friends, visiting their hometown, Prague, Budapest, and Vienna
- **September 15, 2021:** Flew from Prague, Czech Republic to Thessaloniki, Greece
- **October 14, 2021:** Courses at AUPh begin
- **December 23, 2021 - January 7, 2022:** Winter break in Austria and Italy with family friend
- **January 10, 2022:** Classes resumed at AUPh
- **January 21, 2022:** Departed Thessaloniki, Greece and returned to Nebraska
- **February 18, 2022:** Semester at AUPh ended

I began my research during the summer of 2021 with a short, preliminary literature review to inform myself of the holistic conversation surrounding the process of keeping anthropological field notes (and constant innovations or insights into this process) as well as reflexivity within study abroad experiences. Before embarking on my trip, I decided on my mode of writing: an ongoing Google document. I decided on this format due to its easy accessibility, little time commitment, and existing familiarity with the application.

Though I had the document ready upon my arrival in Europe for my first tour with friends, I did not begin to write until after settling into Thessaloniki. At this point, I wrote an overview of my “introduction to Europe,” making many technical decisions in these first entries regarding visual material, organization, and voice. From the beginning, I included a representative fraction of the photos I had taken in my travels of various experiences: landscapes, architecture, gastronomy, museums, hellos, goodbyes, transportation, social activities, etc. From the beginning, I was making executive decisions about which photographs were important enough to take, and which were important enough to include, incorporating a visual anthropological element. In addition, I made what I was referring to as my “ethnographic blog” accessible to family and friends through a shareable link. The implications of this seemingly small choice brought in the complicated reality of inevitably considering an audience. Censorship, voice, and performativity became factors of the ongoing writing project. A few times, I even saw another anonymous user in the document as I was writing an entry, causing immediate embarrassment and insecurity about being watched. However, the choice to share the blog was a choice made out of the logic of using Google Docs in the first place: to save time and energy from repeatedly recounting my experiences for friends and family back home, instead granting more time to connecting to people, place, coursework, and self.

My actual writing process remained fairly consistent, apart from blips caused by trips<sup>6</sup> that I had taken. Every day, I recorded largely incomplete, vague field notes in an application on my phone, specifically after conversations or events took place. I would take notes of verbatim or summarized quotes people had said, sequences of events, landmarks/monuments I had seen, new food I had tried, facts from exhibits at museums or outdoor markers, stories (I remarked in one entry how I collected love stories like they were currency), etc. In instances of recording these moments, I was candid and transparent with my company, sharing that I was taking notes for my blog, which a few of my friends in Erasmus read religiously, including my flat mate Pida.<sup>7</sup> I often made sure to document names of establishments, cities, dishes, neighborhoods, etc. I often asked local Greeks “How do you spell that in Greek?” The Greek keyboard on my phone came in handy, and a lot of “Google”ing was involved during the fleshing out of the field notes, especially due to my lack of access to the internet on a daily basis.

At the end of the day, or within 3-5 days in busy bouts or holidays, I would translate these field notes into what I first categorized as long-form field notes, which took the shape of a hybridized method of writing that incorporated features of ethnography, journal/diary writing, travel writing, reflection, etc. The new entries were written in the beginning pages of the document, in a top-down chronological order. For queries and concerns, I included an introductory note, specifically for my audience. The writing most often included more holistic summaries of a day’s events, topics/blurbs of conversations, and in a phenomenon that

---

<sup>6</sup> I was able to recount all of my trips, except for my winter break trip to Austria and Italy, as I was unwilling to bring my computer along in my travels due to intense stress in the month of December. The choice was more for my mental health, especially considering I would be returning to the US soon, and holidays were more for family and friend updates anyway, since they are supplementary to studying abroad. However, for my trip to Crete at the end of October, I wrote from my phone each night in bed. For the Cypriot vacation at the beginning of November, I wrote when I returned to Thessaloniki. However, my less-detailed jottings populated my notes app every day throughout this experience.

<sup>7</sup> Pseudonym chosen by herself.

developed as my experience furthered: reflective and reflexive emotional tangents. Most of the entries are accompanied by photographs taken by me (with a few, indicated exceptions), which are captioned with descriptions of the image and/or more details surrounding the experience that the image portrays or relates to. At times, I would also include more creative content on the blog, such as poems, quotes from literary works, references to artwork, etc.

As I mentioned, my approach to writing changed subconsciously, an evolution that I will address further in the findings and discussion sections. Ultimately, this subtle change of voice and, therefore, educational purpose of the blog resulted in a change of understanding. This change of understanding resulted in a revised research question. The “auto” oriented nature of the blog in its final form led me to explore how autoethnography as a genre can usefully draw focus on self-reflection within a study abroad experience. Though the blog maintained cultural and ethnographic topics, the writing was largely narrative and reflective of the human experience of cultural contact through a personal lens. The nuances of these adjacent genres of anthropological research and writing are highlighted and synthesized in the literature review.

## ANALYSIS

I began my analysis with a simple linguistic analysis by pasting the entirety of the written document into Voyant, a free digital humanities tool that calculates word density, frequency, correlation, and other aspects of the text. After editing the corpus to exclude vehicular vocabularies such as “like,” “left” and “right” (used for the captioning of photos), “said,” pronouns, etc., I used the words with the highest densities as a starting point for deeper analyses of themes. Reading the document through an imperfect, biased, acknowledged researcher’s lens, I used the simple tool of finding through “command F” to navigate the text through the words to which I attached meaning as the subject, the object, anthropologist, and the writer. I let myself

review all that I had written with a semblance of a distance to quantify the language in my qualitative research. The word frequencies informed entries where moves of larger themes were made. Various ideas, entries, and words I focused on informed the larger conversations relating to implications of applying autoethnography to studying abroad.

The blog I kept, which lies at the center of this analysis, is 82,128 words and ~560 images. The body of textual and visual autoethnography contains personal narrative looking inward and outward, commenting on a range of experiences during the subject's (my) semester studying in Thessaloniki (e.g., the mundane daily activity of visiting coffee shops and the spectacular holidays to central Europe, Crete, Cyprus, etc.). Using linguistic analysis to identify frequently recurring terms and ideas, I developed several overlapping ideas from this data that illuminate how engaging in study abroad can provide unique opportunities for reflection on one's own identity and values as a result of cross-cultural contact. The following categories seemed most salient: kinship; questions of place & home; identity; language; study abroad (Erasmus) culture within the context of local culture. For the purpose of this thesis, I focus on these larger notions, retrieving evidence from the text and explaining how each theme emerged from tangible experiences of living in a new city and traveling as well as intangible experiences of constant learning and discovery about the self and the self in-society.

## **IV: Findings**

### **KINSHIP**

My five months in Thessaloniki entailed a constant process of managing complex kinship ties, maintaining familial and friendship bonds that stretched across eight time zones and the Atlantic, the making of new friends and family that loved ones back in the US might never meet,

and greeting or leaving both. I experienced the circular social processes of being remembered by people and remembering people: I was doing what I could while physically in Greece but still half-living in Nebraska to be in the loop of my friend's and family's lives. Traces of this metaphysical multitasking and global kinship can be found throughout the blog in my frequent mention of buying, writing, and receiving postcards, for example. A hobby of mine, sending postcards had become a tether to "my past life, or my paused life," as I named it (30 Oct, p. 158). The emotion of missing people from the paused life is described regularly, and the photo below from a birthday party in a bar with new friends relishes in irony in my second month abroad:



*And thinking about all of this, of course I turn around in the bar and see these words. Life is a lot of things, and as long as it remains funny, I can deal with the rest (19 October, p. 187).*

"Postcard(s)" appeared 77 times in the text, mostly in reference to me sending three or four or five at a time from Thessaloniki or any given holiday location. The autoethnography also follows my enthusiasm about receiving postcards in response to the dozens I had sent out. I wrote about how I hung them on my wall in Thessaloniki—a gallery of all the places attached to the people I was attached to. The postcards became a reminder, an escape, and a symbol. Of the mail I received, I blogged the most about a collection of homemade postcards my immediate

---

<sup>8</sup> A color photograph of a lit, movie theater-style sign on a wall that reads in black and red letters: "There is no distance too far between friends! Missing you." A red heart acts as the period punctuation.

family sent from my hometown since Clay Center, Nebraska is much too small to have a tourism industry. The collage of Clay Center on my wall became especially important around the holiday season, a time when I was feeling alone and missing my family. I captioned a photograph of my hand holding the new postcard from my family up to the old ones:



*I haven't had the time to really sit down lately and miss my family and my typical holiday traditions of being home and just existing together. But when I do, I will remember that I have Clay Center on my wall and my family, who all hate to write, willing to write about their lives for me, even in a few square inches (21 Dec, p. 31).*

In my experience, the mail moving to Greece from the US and vice versa was achingly slow, as it would usually take a month to arrive on both ends. But when the mail finally did manifest in the communal box in the lobby of my flat, there was a stack of it, such as a week or so earlier, in the middle of December:

*I walked quickly to the canteen, my feet barely touching the puddled ground, letters held tightly in my fist, and an umbrella held tightly in the other. Every other student going to and from the canteen was the same, except I'm sure they were not carrying home in their hands like I was. In the canteen line, I read my brother's postcard and let it take me somewhere else (13 Dec, p. 44).*

<sup>9</sup> The color photograph shows my left hand holding a homemade, green-tinted postcard from Clay Center of the old high school brick sign. In the background are 6 other postcards my parents sent from my hometown of the library, tractor museum, the co-op, a church under construction, and an elderly cowboy.

Though I will highlight later how “home” became a “loaded word” for me in the midst of writing this autoethnography, the emotional leaning toward reflecting on family at a time in the year when I would normally be geographically nearer to them indicates how kinship is continually relevant and bolstered during study abroad experiences “away from home.” Kinship, however, was also manufactured in my experience with new, weighty relationships, mostly with students who were going through a similar experience. Though I was the only American, other Erasmus students who I spent time with were experiencing similar emotions in adapting to unfamiliar cultural facets of food, language, lifestyles, politics, and educational systems. Besides English (thanks to globalization, which I confess my guilt about over and over again), we had in common the experience of investing in temporary but fulfilling lives for ourselves. We were building something to eventually abandon, and as we got to know each other, forming our circles and intersecting our circles, we chose to ignore that fact. The endless entries about drinking, partying, and other forms of celebration reveal this truth. However, I only have insider information from the text in front of me, which recalls the conversations between people with whom I spent the most time.

One indication of the role those personal relationships played in my five months abroad is that “Pida,” is one of the words appearing most frequently in my blog, more than 200 times in the text. Pida was my Sicilian flat mate and closest friend in Thessaloniki, and both the number of times she appears in the text as well as the contexts of those times demonstrate the significance of this kinship tie in my experience of seeking out comfort and familiarity in the unfamiliar and sometimes uncomfortable experiences of existing in a different country and culture. What follows are a few entries that illustrate our cross-cultural relationship and how it shaped my experience:



- A. *I already know I would protect Pida<sup>10</sup> from pigeons with my life (30 Sept, p. 235).*
- B. *Somehow, some way, we have endless values, emotions, experiences, struggles, goals, dreams, etc. in common (7 Oct, p. 214).*
- C. *Pida and I spent hours together in Detox<sup>11</sup>, and we overthought in unison, talked circles around each other's circles, parallel monologues of similar sentiments. We often do this after hours of silence, open our mouths and realize that we are very much feeling the same feelings underneath our different ways of disguising those feelings (14 Jan, p. 23).*
- D. *My friendship with Pida reminds me of those I had with high school friends I practically lived with, college roommates I did live with, and a fantasy of having a sister to live with growing up. One of my last days there, I was crying in my room and texted her about being in the dumps of an existential crisis. No questions asked (besides 'Are you okay?'), she made me gnocchi that she had just bought for herself in the event of becoming homesick again. Topped with parmesan fresh from Italy, the potato pasta comforted me that night and Pida continues to comfort me from thousands of kilometers away...(15 Jan, p. 20).*

The above excerpts are taken from the beginning and end of my mobility, the beginning and end of Pida and I's tenure on 23 Papafi street in Thessaloniki, Greece, though I left a month earlier than her. Anxiety, excitement, stress, nostalgia, and dread fill the last week's entries from the blog, and examples (C) and (B) demonstrate how I remembered/interpreted Pida's reactions to my feelings as my study abroad experience ended. In one instance, our emotional landscapes mirror each other, a phenomenon that occurred often in the text with me describing our twin-like coexistence due to our mutual studies within the humanities, our ways of expressing ourselves through writing, our goals to teach our languages abroad, and our social habits of trying to do everything: study in the morning, explore the city in the afternoon, and party in the night. In example (D), when I had less than a week left in Thessaloniki and Pida had more than a month, she became the person I could lean on as I was experiencing what I melodramatically described as an "existential crisis." Her symbolic sharing of gnocchi reveals her selflessness in that

---

<sup>10</sup> Original text altered to include pseudonym.

<sup>11</sup> Our local chain coffee shop we frequented often, always ordering two freddo cappuccinos.

moment, her way of taking care of people brought on by her Italian culture and familiar kinship ties. The immediate comfort I exhibit also demonstrates how my experience of living and learning abroad was made more valuable with someone like her with whom to share a genuine connection rather than a surface-level connection, similar to those I had with most other Erasmus students. Below is a photograph I included in an entry along with the original caption. Not only does the photo and caption pairing demonstrate kinship, but cultural exchange and Pida's sharing of her gastronomic traditions as well as our attempt at Greek cuisine.



12

*Pida and I have been bogged down by studying, so it was a lovely thing when she asked if we wanted to have dinner together: a pizza she made and feta and honey (a popular Taverna dish she made from the surplus of canteen feta we had). It was a great meal and a great break from pressure we had been putting on ourselves. She had told me that Saturday nights at her home in Sicily were marked by a family gathering and pizza feast. We both miss our families and eating with our families, but here and now, Pida is a sister (21 December, p. 49).*

My last week in Thessaloniki was not my only emotionally strenuous week, and countless other descriptions of memories and reflections surrounding my friendship with Pida reveal how my perspective of cultural contact, my experience abroad, and myself was constantly evolving. Juxtaposing my descriptions from the beginning of my blog to the end of it, for example, provides a much different, more condensed approach to writing about our bond. Pida

---

<sup>12</sup> A color photograph of Pida from across the kitchen table, phone in her right hand (I assume before or after she also took a photograph). She smiles at the camera with a homemade pizza, and three fried, honey covered blocks of feta in front of her. A decorated christmas tree stands behind her.

arrived in Thessaloniki on September 28, so (A) is quite early in our time living together, but it is clear that as two people away from home, navigating a separate culture, and learning a difficult language, we clung to each other. Pida has a debilitating phobia of pigeons, and our city was full of a carnivorous, unclean population of them. From the day I learned this about her until the day I left, I walked as a buffer between her and pigeons and shooed them off whenever we were seated in a place. The autoethnography not only captured trends and trajectories; it helped me record and remember seemingly microscopic but telling thoughts and memories. The second entry, from a little over a week later, is one of many sentences like it in the document: a musing on the fortunate feeling of having someone to understand me and someone to understand across the world, despite cultural and linguistic barriers:

*I don't like to think about it, the fastness of everything, but after that, we only have a couple of short weeks together before I leave. How can I remember every single day, full of so many resonate moments, and still feel snuck up on? How have I only known Pida for three months, and how is it I know I will know her for much longer? There is so much waiting for all of us across the world, and we have to get there to find it, to find them, I think (20 December, p. 31).*

My experience of living and studying abroad as well as writing in this autoethnographic form solidified my views on global education, a field of interest I indicated several times in the text. I wrote about how I befriended foreign exchange students early-on in my high school years and how I kept in touch, even visiting a couple of them after arriving in Europe (an experience that is relayed in the first entry of the blog). Consequently, I had believed *a priori* the entirety of my mobility that making connections abroad was inherently valuable, but the life I lived in Thessaloniki, depicted through my writing about it, supports this view, romanticizes it even:

*My last days in Thessaloniki (only 5 left at this point) were accompanied by nostalgia, a Greek word and a feeling Pida could write book after book about. Nostalgia for the past, the present, and even the future. Wanting to live inside yesterday, dreading the moment I*

*don't live in today, and scared to live in tomorrow because of the mere fact that I can't live there forever. The seemingly soft, inconsequential choice of studying abroad in Greece for 5 months is loaded with feelings of attachment, relationships to people and places like pieces of cloth sewed together only to be ripped apart (only stretched if we are lucky) in a period of time much too short. Our love of things living and dead and somewhere in between moves with us, but it's harder than learning Greek to validate and maintain that emotion when I can no longer go knock on Pida's door to tell her every silly thought, drive 15 minutes to the next town to pick up a close friend" (16 January, pp. 19-20).*

I wrote this entry, along with the rest of my reflections on my last week in Thessaloniki, after returning to Nebraska at the end of January. The autoethnographic content often goes on tangents of theorizing “how to live in the moment” through traveling, learning, socializing, saying “yes” to everything etc., at the same time as taking care of oneself and caring for the people who are an ocean away. In the last two weeks of living in Thessaloniki, the blog follows me as I say yes to everything—going out every night, saying my goodbyes, and preparing myself to leave what had become home to return to my other home. Or is Thessaloniki the other home? This is a question I would attempt to answer after each genuine, organic conversation about the experience, including productive conversations with a local Greek woman, Thea,<sup>13</sup> with whom I had bonded during my stay.

Coincidentally, about six months before temporarily moving to Thessaloniki, I met Thea, who had been a Fulbright student at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln. I was working at the writing center at the time, and in the appointment form, I noticed she was from the same Greek city of my future study abroad program. There was a period of about two months that we were both in Thessaloniki in the fall 2021 semester, as she had to return to renew her student visa. We spent some time together within our busy schedules, and I became friends with her as well as a few of her friends. Though I conversed with a handful of local students, the way I wrote about

---

<sup>13</sup> A pseudonym to protect her identity

the time I spent with Thea encapsulates how our shared experiences of living in Lincoln and Thessaloniki helped us relate on a deeper level. An entry from the Thanksgiving season, a time when I felt most homesick, recalls and reflects on how Thea invited me to a family dinner upon our first time of meeting in person without a second thought:

*It's true what they say: Greek people, close friends or casual acquaintances, are the nicest, friendliest, most hospitable people you will ever meet. I hope I can return home with a piece of this brand of kindness; I would love to make someone feel how Thea and her family made me feel that night: welcome and at home in a place so far from home with people I met for the very first time. It's a bit of Greek magic (27 November, p. 86)*

It had not been the first time that a local Greek person showed me kindness through kinship, as I was learning every day about the welcoming and kind culture at the same time as having harmful stereotypes broken down by my authentic experience of learning to belong on practical and emotional levels. One of my flat mates, a local Greek woman named Ereni,<sup>14</sup> also helped me adjust to life in Thessaloniki at the start of my mobility. Among the countless examples from the blog include her drawing a map to the university for me, helping me get a SIM card for my phone, and calling my faculty, who spoke very little English. She and Pida also hosted a vegetarian, multicultural Thanksgiving dinner for the entire apartment, figuring that I might benefit from a home-cooked meal and sitting down with people to enjoy it. I wrote that day, “All in our pajamas, it was a truly comforting night, and comfort is most sustainable at home. At least for two more months, this is home” (25 November, 92).

#### PLACE & HOME

I use the word “Home” in both of the previous excerpts, but I use it differently. In the holistic autoethnographic work, I throw the word around, assigning it with different meanings and contexts depending on the affect I was experiencing. Sometimes home is Nebraska,

---

<sup>14</sup> Her identity is protected by a pseudonym.

generally, with my parents and university; sometimes home is the flat I was living in; sometimes home was the city of Thessaloniki; sometimes home was the Airbnb I was staying in over a holiday; and sometimes home became an entirely metaphysical space that followed me everywhere I went. The following captioned photograph, however, suggests that the more I learned about context of Thessaloniki, the more it resembled a sustainable “home” during my experience:



15

*Thessaloniki is very much a tapestry of a city, but I know the same argument can be made for any city. Here, I see more than anywhere else, such an unapologetic mixing of history,<sup>16</sup> landscape, contemporary art, classical art, languages, vibes, priorities, smells, foods, you name it. Everywhere you go, there is green, graffiti, and a great deal of cats (some of which are currently sounding their mating calls outside the flat) (29 September, p. 238).*

The further the autoethnography progresses, the more my writing becomes less observational and externally focused and more introspective. The entries become long and abstract, taking the form of streams of thought and convoluted contemplations about life. In the early entries, I wrote and included a couple of poems about my experience, and eventually, the entries became poetry. Though I, the subject, still write about what I am eating, seeing, hearing,

<sup>15</sup> A color photograph of two graffitied buildings on a stone street in the Upper city of Thessaloniki. A green bush sits in front of the most proximal building below a cloudy blue sky.

<sup>16</sup> In several other entries, I write about learning about Thessaloniki's evolution as a city and civilization with descriptions of cultural and historical stratigraphy. The blog recounts learning about the context of place through coursework (one of my classes was called “Greece Today”), museums, and locals.

smelling, and (physically) feeling, the writing seems to constantly return to the intangible feelings I am experiencing: asking and answering big questions in bouts of critical thinking. Consequently, questions of home and place were some of the main ideas I consistently returned to in these long-winded entries that seemed to follow no particular structure or style. The writing reflects a struggle to define an indefinable thing. In retrospect, I question why I even tried and troubled myself so much over a four-letter word:

*Sofija<sup>17</sup> talked about how she has never felt truly at home in North Macedonia, and I again thought about the loaded word 'home.' It is a dynamic definition—a feeling, a person, a collection of feelings and people. Home is making my dad laugh and my dad making me laugh, across the world. Home is eating a peanut butter & jelly sandwich with banana slices inside in Pida's company, holding our bloated, fiber-filled bellies after dinner. Home is hearing the voice of someone I miss more than words can say. Home is falling asleep watching a favorite sitcom. Home is a document I return to every day to write and remember everything I have to relish in (2 December, p. 70).*

My fixation on the word and the idea seemed to come about from a constant game of tug-of-war I had played in trying to live two lives at once. The text, in its evolved form of lengthy, philosophical entries, communicates the mental gymnastics I was participating in to try to be here and there all at once, resorting to metatextual descriptions and visceral images to appeal to an audience of myself, even if I knew others were reading along. Though the writing shows a frequent engagement with internalized reflection, there are a handful of instances where I had conversations with others about the same idea, as most every person I connected with had firsthand understanding of what it was like to straddle the line between two places in time. Thea, who had been through an almost-inverse of my situation, deepened my perspective on the matter. I wrote after our conversation:

*Thea and I also talked about, with our strange similar experiences of living in Thessaloniki and Lincoln, about navigating time differences, about living in two places at once. I told her how I struggle to compartmentalize the two places and my two lives, and*

---

<sup>17</sup> Sofija was my fourth flat mate, a Masters student studying architecture at my university. Her identity is protected by a pseudonym.

*Thea talked about how she lets them bleed together, and lets herself answer texts right away from both places, no matter the time. This is how you master time-traveling; this is how you master our similar sentiment that home isn't a place. There is no other way to cope when you make the irreversible decision to connect to people across the globe. Nothing and no one will ever be conveniently within one time zone, one state, one country, one stage of your life. Traveling makes us open-minded because there is no other way to live once you let people in" (p. 62)*

In addition to differentiating home and place, the text also dances around place with frequent, subtle comparisons of Nebraska to Greece (the blog is named "Nebraska to Greece"). Landscapes, monuments, weather climate, and social/political climate are popular topics I had used to contextualize specific events. In the tradition of field notes, I also offered locations I was writing from or writing about, accompanied by the time and the day, which I started writing in Greek about half-way through my mobility in an attempt to practice the language. Place, then, became a motif of sorts in my narrative-based autoethnography, a way to understand the world and a lens through which to view my experience. Studying abroad is a surreal experience, especially for an American in Europe (and an American's first time in Europe on top of that). Living and traveling in countries and cities that are branded in popular media for five months prompted me to write often about what I was seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and hearing in different places. The image and original caption below are typical photos and reflections I included in the autoethnography, commenting and how it feels to be in an unfamiliar physical place & home as well as an intangible cultural one:





*The port after sunset from a table outside a coffee shop. Coffee at 1800 in Greece is totally normal. In fact, it is THE norm. See how the sea almost blends into the sky? If the ships weren't there, you might not be able to tell where the sea ends and the sky begins (13 October, p. 200).*

The autoethnography began to borrow from other genres, one of them being travel writing. In fact, one of the books I brought with me abroad was *Willa Cather in Europe*, a purchase I had made in the summer while interning at the National Willa Cather Center in Red Cloud, Nebraska. As a Nebraskan, as a writer, and as student/researcher involved with Cather studies, my readings of this book along with her short stories inspired several references of her in my own autoethnographic writing. For instance, one day in December, I was taking a break from studying and reading with Pida in our favorite neighborhood coffee shop:

*I remembered how lucky I am to see places I've always read about, romanticized, and even better, having the opportunity to create memories that are even better than romantic visions, because they are real and flawed and sometimes not at all poetic. However, nothing can stop Cather and I from seeing the beauty (and ugly) in everything, the bittersweet, creating poetry from an afternoon in a crowded Greek, commercialized coffee shop. She writes, "Whoever is a reasonable being must believe it, and whoever believes it must regret it. A life so picturesque, and art so rich and so divine, an intelligence so keen and flexible—and yet one knows that these people face toward the setting, not the rising, sun." I took her out of context, but she's dead, and I am very alive, so it goes<sup>19</sup> (10 December, p. 50).*

<sup>18</sup> A color photograph of the seaside from across a street. A blurry motorcyclist drives by as a handful of pedestrians walk in front of the water in the background. The sky is a dark and cloudy blue.

<sup>19</sup> The text is often referential, and the "so it goes" motif both describes moments of acceptance in situations that are less than lighthearted or ideal. More importantly, it nods toward Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, an American household cultural artifact and a personal favorite, hence my use of the phrase. Utilizations of popular culture understandings in the text also signal a transfer of knowledge and alternative way of knowing.

Willa Cather became a character in my study abroad reflections, a totem I utilized to expound upon certain happenings and feelings. Her unique experience as a Nebraskan abroad validated and challenged my own experience as a Nebraskan abroad (as well as my writing). The autoethnography, in its almost desperate attempt to understand everything at once, is a record of my attempt to use the transfer of knowledge in order to gain or uncover more knowledge. I compared unfamiliar places and people to those familiar to me with the aim to better comprehend the place I was in and my place within it. The product often results in a metaphor or simile<sup>20</sup> with a shocking incongruence:

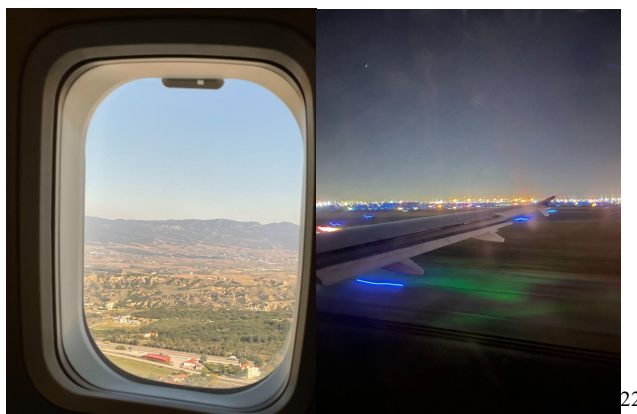
*I picture Alexander the Great on his high horse and Willa Cather sitting on a bench. I wonder how they would get along, given the opportunity to meet and talk about their lives, their literal and literary conquests. I think about moving from Red Cloud, NE, to Thessaloniki, Greece. I think about something I told a friend: about spending the right amount of time in a place but also returning to that place often in spirit, never letting a place or a person go, holding on to so many things at once, clinging to what we know and what we want to know. I think about all that one finds and picks up and sets down on their way to the Ultimate, a metaphorical fantasy destination, make-believe to even an idealist like me (29 November, p. 78).*

The sometimes poetic nature of the autoethnography indicates an inability to concretely describe the incredible experience of moving from one distinct place to another, complete with their own cultural contexts and separate lives within those contexts. The initial purpose of the blog was to help me adapt to a new place, and given the breadth and depth of the document, it went much further than that, towering over solely anthropological uses, such as recording observations on how Greek Orthodox Church members make the sign of the cross one, two, or three times while passing a church or how olives are considered the tears of the gods. Instead, the blog went further by capturing the vivid feeling of existing in a new place, learning to adapt to a

---

<sup>20</sup> “Like,” as a matter of fact, was one of the most frequent words in the document.

new place, existing in the old place, and learning to adapt back to the old place<sup>21</sup> (I am still learning the latter). The following captioned photos from the middle and end of my mobility highlights the strange feeling of missing a home away from home, even while returning to the original home, and the growing pangs of constant adaptation:



(LEFT) - *Holidays are great, but there's nothing like seeing home out the window, even if it is a temporary home. I missed Thessaloniki (29 October, p. 159).* (RIGHT) - *From the first moments in the US. Not one tiny part of me wanted to kiss the ground (21 January, p. 5).*

The entries, as they near the end of my mobility, apprehensively pre-reflect on what it would be like to return to Nebraska. This form of interpreting and elevating experience had its advantages of deeper thinking and its disadvantages of too-deep thinking that brought me away from Thessaloniki at times, even before Lufthansa did:

*It is a bit of a given that if one is in the city center in the afternoon, one must go to the water and enjoy the sunset for at least a few minutes. It won't be long until I am landlocked again (18 December, p. 41).*

<sup>21</sup> In the last entry where I write about the 20-hour trip back to Clay Center, Nebraska, I relate just what can be done in the scope of five months: "Five months is enough time to establish a temporary life: identifying the local haunts, understanding the bus system, picking up on the language, becoming addicted to feta, etc. But five months is not enough time to be unable to go back to a past life, to press play when the pause button still seems warm from my touch at the end of August. Five months is a short enough time to try to play both at once, at least a bit" (21 Jan, p. 2).

<sup>22</sup> Left: A color photo of an oval plane window looking out on the rural area surrounding the northern Greek city of Thessaloniki. The sky is blue, and green vegetation surrounds the urban patches. Right: A photo taken from a window of a plane at night upon landing. A lit, flat city is seen in the background.

Already nostalgic for the Aegean Sea and beautiful, reflective sunsets every day with Mt. Olympus in the background, I began the bad habit of counting the days I had left in Thessaloniki while at the same time as counting down the days I had until seeing my loved ones in the US again. It was a dichotomy I held as a student, traveler, and writer—the themes of complexity, multiplicity, and discomfort of both come up countless times in my descriptions of my physical and emotional landscape. The autoethnography, in its flawed, bloated form offered a holistic painting of my experience. It is not trying to communicate the cultural realities of Thessaloniki or any other place I write about; it is trying to communicate and contextualize *my* Thessaloniki. Ultimately, I attempt to describe the phenomenon of belonging in two places at once: being from Nebraska and living in Greece. This ambiguous relationship between myself and place was nearly impossible to articulate, and as a result, I often returned to abstract ways of expressing my thoughts and feelings. The following entry is a reflection on my last night in Thessaloniki, struggling with the reality of flying back to Nebraska the next day and surrounded by the people who had shaped my experience in that past five months:

*...I hugged everyone a warm 'see you later.' I cried the rest of the night, even though I told someone hours before that apathy and numbness were setting in. Who was I kidding? Even when we have felt more than we think we can handle, we feel some more. That's how it ought to be. We ought to feel until we can't take it, feel some more, go places and feel things there, go back home and feel there again—where is home? What is feeling? Do we ever stop looking? Do we ever stop feeling? We ask the silliest questions when we can't make sense of anything. I look for the answers like I look for the phone in my hand. I'll do it again and again but the answer is always apparent, in my hand, my connection to all those I will see again, someday, somewhere (20 January, p. 15).*

This entry demonstrates the growing pains I experienced in a new place with new people within the context of returning to a previous place. Namely, it was a discomfort of having two distinct kinship webs, as the people important to me in Nebraska did not know the people who were important to me in Thessaloniki. The people and place I was returning to had not directly

witnessed the time and emotional labor that went into learning to belong in another place. The blog, however, gave readers a vague and minimal understanding of the mental gymnastics I performed in adapting to a new way of living and learning. The following excerpt, pulled from my last entry I had written after my return to Nebraska, encapsulates the sensation of feeling split between two lives after studying abroad and how the blog served as an outlet for that complicated existence:

*I will never stop trying to write about overwhelming, never-ending nostalgia and my bittersweet mantra, the way of living that makes me miss, adore, and avoid everything, every place, and everyone, even the people sitting right next to me, even the city I became myself in, even the coffee in my hand, even the three pistachio shells I've dropped onto the floor and that I will remember to pick up (21 January, p. 6)*

This passage is indicative of how studying abroad was transformative of my understanding of being attached to people and places across the world, compounding the “normal” amount of intellectual and emotional labor that would go into studying abroad. The word and the “mantra” of bittersweet appears several times in the text within contexts of digesting the multiplicity of studying, living, learning, and reflecting in a new place. As a matter of fact, the word became one of the most-used words in my English and Greek vocabularies: γλυκόπικρος<sup>23</sup> is permanently tattooed on my left rib cage, which I bought for around 12.5 euros in Thessaloniki. Thinking about this embrace of duality, the autoethnography clearly prompted conversations about the potential of reflexive writings to help secure knowledge and (re)create ourselves in new spaces.

## IDENTITY

The descriptions of these interactions between people as well as people and places are often representative of how the encounter of identities of people from various backgrounds and

---

<sup>23</sup> (Gleeko-peekros)

countries is dependent upon culturally constructed social realities. Cultural contact, therefore, holds within it subtextual communication that translates experience. Aptly put, the final sentence, following an entry that reflects on the experience overall as well as reflects on the reflection of the reflection (the autoethnography), reads: “Our identities are collages of all the places we have been and all the people we have met. I know that now” (21 Jan, p. 10). As the only American in the program (and seemingly one of the only Americans in the city), I often wrote about my national identity, the anxiety and shame surrounding it. I attributed certain embarrassing habits or ways of thinking to being American, often making myself the butt of the joke, even when writing the autoethnography. When it came to popular culture, education, and especially politics, I recounted several instances of times I apologized for this part of my identity and other times I tried to carry it correctly:

*It’s about accepting where you are from, with all of its baggage, feeling the weight of that layer of my identity without allowing that weight to become a shameful thing. You won’t see me wearing red, white, and blue and unironically yelling “Murica!” anytime soon, but you might see me quietly weep when the plane touches the ground<sup>24</sup> in Chicago at the end of January. I can find this complexity anywhere, I have never experienced anything as profound and nuanced and gradual as coming to terms with where I am from when I am no longer in that place (25 Nov, p. 89)*



<sup>24</sup> Though an above passage accounts my resistance to returning to the US.

<sup>25</sup> A color photograph of myself on a sidewalk in front of water, reflected with the setting sun. I am wearing overalls, a bright green shirt, a bucket hat, sandals, and a fanny pack, looking at the camera with my hands in my pockets. My mouth seems to be in mid-phrase.

*Our day of exploration ended with a beautiful sunset on the waterfront. In the background to the right, you can see the port. The sky is so vivid and vibrant here, it almost looks like I am in front of a green screen. Especially with the outfit, this image could be a tourist advertisement to Thessaloniki: "Experience a breathtaking sunset and fresh, salty air on the waterfront of Thessaloniki. This is where history is made!" (3 October, p. 230).*

This particular passage had a profound ring to it with the sentiment of radically accepting a part of an identity when away from the geographical space that determines that identity, and the photograph caption openly "others" myself in a lighthearted, satirical way. I was still an American outside of America, a tourist in the city I called home for five months. My writing about honest conversations I had with others about guns and Donald Trump, for example, demonstrated patience and open-mindedness, as they were often with other students with similar ideologies regarding the good, the bad, and the grey of their own countries. I was surrounded by students with Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, German, French, Belgian, Romanian, Norwegian, Greek, Czech, Slovakian, etc. identities, and I hardly wrote about a sour encounter with one who judged me for where I am from. On the contrary, students were often hyper-interested in my accent, my "American" high school experience from the movies, my proximity (or lack thereof) to New York and LA, and so on. A few entries in particular reveal much about my experiences shopping in Thessaloniki and how merchandise with random US cities, states, national parks, or sports teams filled the racks. I write often about romanticization and the realization that it is reciprocal: Americans romanticize Europe and vice versa. Consequently, interactions with other students were often commentaries on each other's culture through praise and curiosity. We all had our national baggage, and we all talked about it through dark histories (and present issues) of our countries relating to fascism, colonialism, anti semitism, etc.

Each Erasmus student seemed to be carrying the weight of their countries on their shoulders, and while I had no other American to share that weight with, I tried to reflect on how I felt about being American at various points in my mobility. On December 2, for example, I saw

American headlines about the school shooting in Michigan, and, as a result, my entry for that day became a lengthy rant about the discomfort of an identity I wanted to disassociate with at times. I wrote about the universal issues that plague the world (pun intended), but I tried to emphasize how it hits harder when it is home, whatever that means:

*New presidents, pandemics, people dying, people speaking up, people marching against what they think and know isn't right—these things alone cannot bring about real, sustainable change, cannot reroute repeating history, in a series of connected, broken systems. Greece is by no means free of violence and corruption, but the violence and corruption from your home country and culture is what most follows you, what keeps you up at night. (2 Dec, p. 70).*

Being the only American in the program, I wrote in a way that seems to communicate a sense of responsibility to represent that facet of my identity well. With “American culture” being broadcast and spread worldwide through globalization, the weight on my shoulders seems almost arbitrary. Further reading suggests it was a naive attempt to debunk stereotypes and to subvert expectations. While most of the encounters were diplomatic and I felt welcome and understood, even as an American, some encounters brought about a defensive voice uncommon in the rest of the content of the autoethnography. The most prominent example is an experience Pida and I had before she left Thessaloniki before winter break from the entry on December 20, which I named in the blog: “A Saga of Stereotypes.” To summarize, we had been in the city center for her COVID-19 test, and a Greek man approached us, asking if I was American. We, then, all had a conversation that he steered toward loud, obnoxious Americans and violent, armed Sicilians. Fuming, Pida and I found a way out of the conversation, which never seemed to end despite our clear social cues of annoyance and discomfort. I wrote about how I was angry the entire bus ride home and how I felt more American than ever. I wrote about this emotional hurdle and the lessons it brought on:



*While we were both venting later, walking fast in the cold, Pida said something like, 'I am Italian, and I am not only spaghetti, pizza, and mafia.' We talked about how pride is fueled by judgment, by people who think they know us because of their assumption-filled understanding of only one of our identities (20 December, p. 31).*

Part of accepting my American identity entailed confronting the privilege of benefiting from globalization without taking pride in it. For one, English is my mother tongue, and various reflections in the autoethnography document moments of realization that as an English-speaking American, I can confidently navigate a majority of environments abroad (at least in Europe), confident that the languages spoken by people, signage, announcements, etc. will be in the official language(s) of the country *and* English. I learned how lucky I was to have my privilege follow me due to my American identity and English proficiency.

#### LANGUAGE

Though a majority of Greek people know English, or at least useful English phrases, I began a Greek A1 course through Erasmus even before arriving in Thessaloniki. My very first entries from traveling with my friend in Czech Republic, Austria, and Hungary in September mention how I struggled to complete my Greek homework on the train. On the other hand, entries from my experience in the online Greek A2 while in Thessaloniki demonstrate a more involved approach to learning the language by studying with other students outside of class, practicing within the city, talking to Pida about Ancient Greek,<sup>26</sup> which she had been studying for over eight years. For example, almost every week on Tuesday, I wrote about studying with my German friends, Mia and Emilia,<sup>27</sup> in various coffee shops around the city. There is also a recurring moment after the study sessions where we voice our annoyance of the three-hour long Zoom class every Tuesday night. Below is a captioned photograph of Mia in one of the many

---

<sup>26</sup> The Ancient Greek is grammatically different from Modern Greek. Greek students study the Ancient language in elementary school, but many do not know it.

<sup>27</sup> Their identities are protected by pseudonyms.

cafés we studied in. I joked several times in the blog that our weekly Tuesday meetings were one of the only routines in my “Greek life.”



*We were capable of concentrating harder on ordering our drinks than studying Greek. Mia is pictured, deciding which bitter coffee she would drink that day (23 November, p. 95).*

However, there are also entries that show how we candidly talked about our tiny victories with the Greek language. For example, there are many instances of me successfully ordering a freddo cappuccino in Greek, asking for it to be “πολύ γλυκό” (very sweet). The writing that highlights these ecstatic moments of progress in language learning often include the Greek words themselves with explanations:

*Since that class, I can't stop thinking about how the Greek name for cereal is δημητριακό. The word is quite lovely, when broken down, as its origin is the Greek goddess Demeter, otherwise known as Mother Earth. Therefore, cereals are both a grain and a gift from the gods, in Greek. That night, I said “cereal” to myself several times, emphasizing the “r” and the “l,” a little disappointed at how English sounds painfully mediocre to Greek (7 December, p. 56)*

This entry shares the rare moment of something clicking in my A2 Greek language class, and it encapsulates a feeling of appreciation of a language that I was beginning to understand on small levels. Though my Greek skills were steadily improving during my time in Thessaloniki with learning how to introduce myself, ask general questions to others, and report the time, date, and weather, my conversational skills were largely lacking. Many older Greek people spoke

much less English than young people, especially if they did not have a job in a public space. Almost every Wednesday, I visited the street market near my flat, the only other routine in my life. There, I would practice my Greek language skills in greeting, asking simple and kind questions, answering simple and kind questions, saying which produce I wanted, asking the price, understanding the price, saying please and thank you, and saying goodbye. I wrote about how vendors could always tell I was “foreign” and how they asked questions out of curiosity, (Where are you from? What are you doing in Thessaloniki?, etc.). Below is a captioned photo from the market:



*The Wednesday farmers market has a lot of grandmas and grandpas. I like to think about all the traditional dishes they will cook with the fresh produce and how they will share it with a big family on a Sunday afternoon (3 November, p. 152).*

The markets were often populated by these older Greek citizens who did not speak much English—farmers, sellers, and customers. I wrote about two encounters with an older Greek woman who lived in my flat, in which I helped her carry her street market groceries to the elevator. The second time, she must have remembered me:

*She called me “αγάπη μου” (my love) and said thank you in English, Greek endlessly. She asked my name on the elevator, and I introduced myself: Είμαι η Μαργαρίτα. She proceeded to put her hand on my arm and sing a song I had heard in my first weeks here, a song about a woman named Margarita, sung by a man in love with her. Though I couldn’t understand, the woman sang it with heart and though I’ve met her only twice, she and I are kindred spirits, I’ve decided (18 December, p. 36).*

This entry demonstrates that even with the possible language barrier between myself and local people, there is still space for valuable cultural exchange, whether that is learning more Greek or learning a classic Greek song. However, there is also space for consequences of not being able to climb over a language barrier. Quite late in my mobility, Pida and I had a distressing experience with taking a taxi back to our flat late at night after a party. Up until this point, we had always been able to communicate our address in Greek, ask the price in Greek, and say thank you and good night in Greek. Nevertheless, our interaction particular driver on this particular night forced Pida and I to come face-to-face with our vulnerabilities as foreigners:

*This drive might have been one of the only moments I felt unsafe abroad: stuck in a car, a long walk from home, with an angry man yelling in a language of which I only had minimal understanding. When we finally got back to the flat and paid the man (a higher amount than we would have if he went straight there), Pida and I started to leave the car flustered. He asked her in Greek where she was from; she said Sicily, and she asked why he wanted to know.<sup>28</sup> Some Greek students outside our apartment seconds later told me I dropped my keys, and not yet recovered from that ride, we vented very quickly about it. They said it was typical for Greek taxi drivers to not know English and to not know Papafi. I dropped my keys again. “Be careful,” one said (17 Jan, p. 19).*

This entry depicts a rude awakening—a conflict in which my limited facility with Greek and my identity as an American do me no favors. In short, this blog entry details an experience with being negatively marked as “foreign.” I learned the limits of my rudimentary Greek, and I endured panic of my safety being compromised due to my inability to communicate with others. Entries like this about experiences that left a bad taste in my mouth are rare, as most of my conversational interactions were with Erasmus students or Greek ESN (Erasmus Student

---

<sup>28</sup> Note the intersections with identity and pride associated with place & home.

Network) volunteers. While all of the Erasmus/ESN students were skilled in English, I wrote often about how students apologized for their “bad English,” complimented my “perfect accent,” and how I asked them to teach me phrases and vocabulary in their mother tongues. For example, there are various mentions of learning how to say the seemingly universal idiom of “hitting two birds with one stone” in multiple languages. Saying “cheers” in every language possible was another trend.

Though I personally hesitate to include English as a facet of my identity, Pida’s passion for ancient Greek and Latin as well as her Italian mother tongue were very much part of her identity. As an outsider to the experience of communicating largely in a second, third, or fourth language (though some students stuck to their isolated linguistic/ethnic groups), I was able to be an insider to conversations about that experience. What follows is an account of a conversation I had with Thea and her friends:

*Hearing the three of them talk about language was especially interesting for me, as I had learned about code-switching working at the writing center and having lots of friends with English as their second or third language but hadn’t understood the phenomenon as well as I did hearing their thoughts on it. Χρόνης<sup>29</sup> said something that will stick with me: that he doesn’t feel like he can be his true self speaking English, feeling like he doesn’t have the vocabulary to employ the sense of humor he carries speaking Greek. Σίσσυ said that people often have different personalities in each language they speak. Though I don’t feel I even have a personality in the Greek language yet, I could picture how lost I might feel being in an environment where I couldn’t speak English at all, couldn’t make puns, couldn’t think out loud, couldn’t talk about my feelings 24/7 (5 December, p. 61-62)*

This reflection shows an inkling of an understanding of what it might be like to have a conversation where the nuances of my identity could not be communicated. Language as a common theme holds all of the other themes, tying together the educational value of my Erasmus study abroad experience and the ethnographic translation of that experience. To name a few realities that the autoethnography holds at once: the dumb luck of having English as a mother

---

<sup>29</sup> I have left these names as their true names since they are written in Greek.

tongue, the shame of only being fluent in one language, the metatextual ability of language to reflect upon existing in tangible and intangible spaces, the different ways of speaking to different people, choosing words carefully, writing every word that comes to mind, etc. Language in the form of audible conversation with others and silent, written conversations with myself shaped and immortalized what it felt like to study abroad, capturing my view of the constant cultural interactions that took place.

### COVID & FALL 2020 ERASMUS CULTURE

Erasmus culture is impossible to condense into a few words, but the linguistic analysis I carried out is fairly representative of what it was like to live in Thessaloniki as a foreign exchange student: study(ing) (95), party (57), drink(ing) (57), university (49), holiday (37), dance (32), taverna (28), library (38), books (32), beer (26), tourist (24), campus (29), COVID (32), music (55), bus (84), walk(ing) (128), shop (45), port<sup>30</sup> (34), Kamara<sup>31</sup> (24), etc. The words and their contexts display the multifaceted nature of the Erasmus experience. As an American, I had little to no prior knowledge of Erasmus, and my early days of blogging show my constant surprise at the enthusiastic, restless lifestyle of going out every night of the week, exploring the city every day, traveling every weekend, and studying when we feel like it. Due to the high density of school-oriented words, studying became more prevalent as the semester progressed, but in the beginning, every week was a cyclical experience of meeting people (Where are you from? Where are you going?) and sharing memories with them (depending on how much alcohol

---

<sup>30</sup> For some context, the Port was an area of Thessaloniki, by the water as the name implies, where we hung out and drank on warm September nights during the first curfew due to COVID-19 restrictions.

<sup>31</sup> Kamara is another name for one of the main historical features of the city: the Arch of Galerius, which is an archaeological remnant of the Roman empire in Thessaloniki and also “a place where people meet, greet, gather, protest, express, the ancients behind them” (6 Dec, p. 56).

was involved). The following photos and original caption demonstrate the multiplicity of Erasmus, compounded by writing and analyzing autoethnography:



*A really nice student from Italy, Arianna, captured my two moods over the weekend. On the left I am dancing like nobody and everybody is watching and on the right, I am silently and swiftly writing a postcard to a loved one (13 November, p. 124).*

The photos are from the Erasmus Student Network trip to Meteora, a unique rock formation and UNESCO site in central Greece. We had visited ancient monasteries and stayed in a nearby village, where we ate dinner and danced. This trip alone represents in a condensed weekend the variety of cultural and social activities that fill and define an Erasmus exchange, even during a pandemic.

Further, I will not fully explore the implications of studying abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the constraints of this thesis, but I will say that restrictions in educational, city, and travel policies also shaped the experience. The comparatively low frequency of the mention of the pandemic (compared to partying, for example) demonstrates how I adapted to the specific COVID-19 climate in Greece, which varies greatly to that in the US, early on in my mobility. Filling out travel documents, showing my vaccination at every establishment, and getting tested

<sup>32</sup> The photos are both candid, taken by another student while I was “in the field.” In the first (color) photo, my back faces the camera, and a crowd of dancing students fill the background behind a table with a candle and a collection of cups. My right hand is in the air, stuck in a movement. The second (color) photo features just me, kneeling at the edge of a coffee table, bags packed to my side, writing on a postcard. The hotel lobby is in the background.

frequently became the new cultural norm. The only instance where COVID-19 inhibited my experience greatly was near the end of December when I was obtaining my booster vaccination shot. Several entries communicate my frustration during the process, especially an entry that is named: “The never-ending story II: An American navigating bureaucracy in Greece.” There was an underlying anxiety at the thought of not being able to travel to Austria to be with my friend’s family over the Christmas holiday, to feel again the loneliness I felt at Thanksgiving. With the help of Thea and the US Embassy in Greece, I received my third shot in time. Struggling with bureaucracy within the educational system was also common among Erasmus students, as several conversations reiterated in the blog point to the seemingly universal experience among us of finding ourselves in classes taught entirely in Greek, in a radio silent email thread in which our faculty does not reply, and the constant revision of our learning agreements, months into the semester.

Additionally, myself and students from Norway, France, and Italy (to an extent) had the experience of overlapping semesters. The mood surrounding schoolwork drastically changed in December and January, still with undertones of wanting to be elsewhere—in a club (which were closed for the most of January) or on a warm beach in Cyprus (one of the places I traveled to in the fall).

*We are in the midst of the “study” part in study abroad. I need to remind myself of the “abroad” part (13 December, p. 44)*

*We talked about finals so we didn’t have to study for finals (17 January, p. 18)*

Due to overall dissatisfaction with the Greek university’s handling of Erasmus students, the “studying” in “studying abroad” became less and less valuable in the descriptions of classes in the text. In my personal accounts, engaging with local cultures in Thessaloniki and destinations of trips seemed to offer more of an educational experience than sitting in a cold



classroom with no heat for three hours, listening to a lecture about European Union politics. For example, I learned much more from my visits to archaeological museums and sites with Pida, a scholar of Ancient Greece, than from my actual archaeology class. What follows are excerpts from my reflections over our visits to the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, Greece (A) along with a captioned photograph from the same entry and the “Palace of Minos” at the Knossos site in Crete (B):

- A) *We walked around each exhibit independently, reading about tombs, death masks, poetry, language, gold, sculpture, art, entertainment, mythology, war, peace, power shifts, money, etc. Every once in a while, we would cross paths and she would tell me some facts about etymology. She was crying because she realized she was living inside her dream, to be in one of the cities where the culture she loves and studies was born and sustained. And though I didn't cry next to her, I understand her feeling of being in the physical and metaphysical place you have dreamed of. I am in a constant cultural exchange, a place where cultural exchange is the culture. That's the dream (3 October, p. 225)*



*Pida walking among the gods, where she belongs.*

- B) *It was impossible for me to imagine what it was like to exist here centuries before with each story being intact and filled with pottery, food, wine, art, and other artifacts when they were not yet artifacts but everyday objects. But that opens the Pandora's box of a question: when does an artifact become an artifact? The tourists especially make it difficult to picture, and as one of them, I observed that we, walking around and photographing an ongoing archaeological site, become part of the culture and landscape. What's the point of jumping through hoops to get a nice trophy photo without other people when being near other people from*

<sup>33</sup> A color photograph of Pida walking through an archaeological exhibit filled with busts as well as headless sculptures at the Archaeological Museum in Thessaloniki. The caption is original to the entry.

*all over, who traveled great distances to see the same thing, are a good chunk of the experience? And frankly, it was enough for me to witness Pida with her more capable imagination, entering her 8th year in her love affair with this culture, as she so eloquently puts it. At one point, she cried and a little boy gawked at her like he had never seen someone cry out of passion and happiness. She later said, "I still can't believe I am walking in the same place the Ancient Greeks walked...I am with them now; we are together (26 October, p. 167).*



*Pida organically touching historical walls, ancient stones or concrete (26 October, p. 168).*

Both educational experiences have empathetic aspects with the human emotions of Pida in the center of the narrative. The facts she taught me about history, language, and culture relating to ancient Greece inspired me to write my final essay for the archaeology class (a class in which the professor did not teach me anything) about colonial influence on the interpretation of the Knossos site, a research process I write about in the autoethnography. Therefore, much studying takes place during an Erasmus mobility, just not in the expected or traditional sense,<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> A color photograph of Pida walking along and touching the concrete “reconstructions” of British archaeologist Arthur Evans at the Cretan site. She wears a large black backpack with her Modern Greek language book poking out. The caption is original to the entry. The blog ascends into larger conversations of colonial archaeology after the visitation of this site as well as my subsequent research project surrounding the site and the imagined “Minoan” culture. This excursion was a springboard for extracting value from my Greek academic experience.

<sup>35</sup> Art museums were another environment that inspired deep thinking and led to the exchange of cultural knowledge during my mobility, as I visited several during my mobility and travels. The following excerpt was a caption of one of my favorite artworks at an art festival in Thessaloniki, which was a chimp on the top of a skyscraper, looking out over a city during golden hour: “...The chimp, my contemplating cousin, on the left reminds me of the blurry complexity of the evolutionary tree and how much I miss studying biological anthropology. It also reminds me of the feeling of being above the cities of Lincoln, Chicago, Prague, Budapest, Vienna, Thessaloniki, all of the places tattooed in my brain, all of the views I will never forget. I remember feeling alone and on a precipice (the literal balcony and my figurative future) as people at the party got high inside, I remember telling the truth and regretting

as a university like AUTH does not have the infrastructure to support the education of hundreds of students from different backgrounds, though they advertise this capability.

Another documented way myself and other Erasmus students were left in the dark was obliviousness concerning the political climate in Greece, namely: the protests. There are a couple of major entries that describe the confusion, fear, and disbelief I experienced at being near violent protests (the causes of which I knew very little, even after asking locals in the coffee shop, as I was in a coffee shop near Kamara both times violence broke out). “Protest(s),” which shows up 29 times in the text, also contributed to the overall mood of my experience, as our Erasmus culture existed within the local and national culture. We were fish in a fishbowl in a large pond.

The city was full of Erasmus students, and I was meeting new people each week with constant comments in the blog questioning how our huge population was even possible. I reflected after seeing other students in a random coffeeshop on a Tuesday with Mia: “Erasmus is everywhere in Thessaloniki. We can’t escape even ourselves” (23 Nov, p. 93). I often write about surprise interactions and reunions I have with other students in the canteen, on the sidewalk, in a coffee shop, at the sea, at a party, etc. While Erasmus is ultimately an experience of intense education about the host country, the world, and oneself, socialization is an ornament, coming back to the theme of forming relationships and building lives together. Erasmus, leaning into the clichéd way of describing phenomena, which I call myself out for a couple of times in the autoethnography, Erasmus is a large family, and each night is a family reunion. What follows

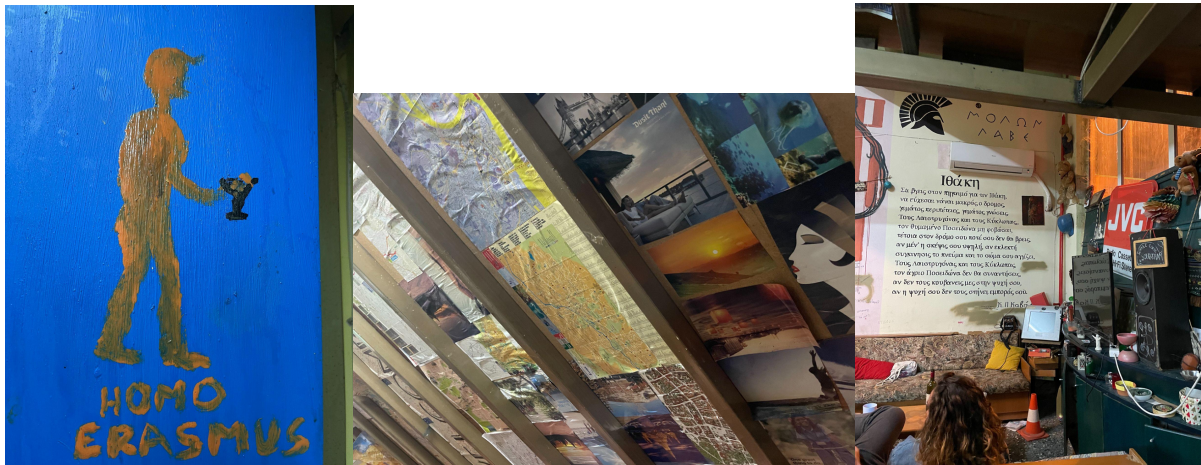
---

it, I remember the feeling of new cities and old friends, I remember feeling so painfully, exquisitely small but somehow feeling like that smallness made my life and everyone’s lives even more significant, I remember feeling stupid and misunderstood, I remember not recognizing the city I call home, I remember having my hand on my chin, crouched over, overthinking, thinking the right amount, thinking about nothing at all, my thinking amounting to nothing at all” (28 November, p. 81).

is an excerpt from my last Friday night, which I called “The night of three parties,” in Thessaloniki at around 4:30 am, when Pida and I were heading home:

*Under a Kamara lit by orange lamps, we saw a couple of Spanish students who were heading to the party we had just left. All of us were in the humanities, so we talked about travel, language, studying, partying, etc. in our city, beneath a Roman antiquity. When I picture Thessaloniki, I picture that moment of talking in the streets about culture, surrounded history and friendly stray dogs who want more than anything to be loved. That night, when struggling to remove my mascara, side-by-side with Pida in front of the bathroom mirror, whispering about all that happened, I wasn't thinking at all about how it would be the last time (for now) (15 January, p. 22).*

This summary of conversation between Erasmus students, among countless other examples in the text, proves the presence of cultural exchange and, therefore, education through the sharing of knowledge, within Erasmus, even on a night dedicated to messy, booze-filled nights of dancing. The culture of Erasmus can be summarized visually as a space dedicated to existing together: The Basement. A three-minute walk from my flat, this common area of an apartment building, which the owner rented to Erasmus students specifically, is a place students gather, talk, hang out, play games, eat, drink, party, and leave their mark. The following photographs and original caption highlight some of the many artifacts that fill this space and represents the culturally sustainability of an Erasmus exchange when one observes, records, and contemplates their environment instead of simply sitting in it:



*A few corners of the Basement. On the left is my favorite wall marking. No one told me about Erasmus culture before I came, but as an aspiring anthropologist, Erasmus participant, and Erasmus observer, this golden drawing is also metaphorically golden. The photo in the middle shows the ceiling above the kitchen and entrance, which seems to be dedicated to two-dimensional travel souvenirs from all over Europe. I have already started brainstorming which postcard I will leave here. On the right is another wall that features the Cavafy poem "Ithaka" in modern Greek, which is one of Pida's favorites (11 November, p. 127).*

The nature of (Homo) Erasmus boils down to the nature of every extroverted, open-minded individual featured in the autoethnography, and beyond the lens I adopted. In my writing, the community of students is depicted as a dynamic, diverse population, prone to engaging in deep, intellectual and emotional conversations; at the same time as drinking too much wine; at the same time as being curious and asking questions, at the same time as dancing until 7am; at the same time as reading Greek translated literature from a local bookstore; at the same time as nursing a hangover with some feta; at the same time as learning how to say good morning, good afternoon, good evening, and good night in Greek. Every spectacular or seemingly ordinary day presents the life of an Erasmus student that cannot be categorized by only a few words, especially when those few words are plucked from 8,181 unique word forms.

## **V: Discussion and Conclusion**

Autoethnography is "...a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context" (Reed-Danahay, 1997). It is doubly a method and text well-suited for the cultural contact associated with studying abroad as a way of learning, experiencing, and transforming. Much like the endless and overlapping list of categories associated with autoethnography in the scholarship, my main source for this project goes by a handful of names in addition to the most representative "autoethnography": blog, ethnographic field notes, travel writing, study abroad journal/diary, to list a few. The nature of my writing and the nature of my anthropological perspective encouraged frequent and active reflection, a process in which I directed my attention as a learner to my environment and my place within it during the experience

and after the fact. Thus, reflexivity took place (and is taking place) through two lenses, or a double vision: ethnographic effort in the moment and post-study engagement (i.e., this ongoing research project).

Evidence of ethnographic effort in the moment fills the pages of the blog through cultural observations relating to language learning (or lack thereof), engagement with local communities, kinship during study abroad, etc. The original purpose of the blog was to create a tool that supported my immersion within Greek culture, as I figured that observing a culture would result in better knowing that culture. I wanted to “enter the field,” so to speak, completing participant observation for those five months. My goal was not to understand local culture in Thessaloniki alone, but to explore the encounter between the local and the students temporarily studying there. However, I did not realize how my role as a member of the studied community would become integral and even central to the shape of the blog. I realized the introspective essence of my writing only during my second literature review in December 2021. I came across autoethnography tangentially in my reading of a journal article about affect in ethnography (Beatty, 2014). The way the authors Ellis and Bochner (2000) described autoethnography in their study “Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject” was extremely familiar and holistically representative of what I had been writing every day, a genre for which I did not yet have a name.

My premeditated research process involved keeping ethnographic field notes in order to gain intercultural competency through the study of the “other”<sup>36</sup> in tandem with personal growth through the experience of learning to belong with the “other.” However, the document I wrote in every day quickly became wrapped up in adjacent but deeper conversations brought on by articulating affective experience and critical thinking about experience. The autoethnography, then, evolved into a highly reflexive and motivating outlet. Through it, I have completed intellectual and emotional work otherwise not typically completed, though ideally completed, for a study abroad semester. This is to say, studying abroad has the potential to be transformative, but the culture of Erasmus, for example, within the host country culture

---

<sup>36</sup> The intended subject of ethnography.

often clashes, and students are not entirely subject to the same kind of growth that constant cultural and personal reflection makes space for.

Additionally, by engaging with my autoethnography after the fact through soft linguistic analysis, I was able to map personal development or more accurately, personal transformation. I identified key themes in a metaphorical venn diagram of experiences: kinship, place & home, language, identity, and Erasmus culture that hovered over the entirety of my ~300-page blog. In examining evidence of kinship, I entered into conversations surrounding the social process of maintaining and forming relationships when geography changes and time passes. The overlapping themes of identity and place & home prompted insights into how to locate oneself in relation to an evolving notion of “home.” Exploring my descriptions of language, I was able to follow the cultural process of learning Greek and my growing understanding of how language shapes identity. Lastly, Erasmus culture in the fall of 2021 enveloped intersecting lines of navigating a multifaceted study abroad experience in the company of others in a local context during a pandemic. While there have been studies following exchange students who complete reflections before, during, and after their trip, (Craig et al., 2015; Gabaudan, 2016; Savicki & Price, 2015) no research models have been as involved, independent, and thorough as mine. Aside from the reflections in the moment from keeping field notes, writing daily, and including/captioning visual elements, the meaning-making is ongoing, even after I finish writing these words. My choice to continue to interact with the blog over a longer period of time from a slight retrospective distance demonstrates a more profound and disciplined way of looking at material.

The breadth of understanding that autoethnography granted and grants my experience is immeasurable but recognizable from personal, local, and global epiphanies I felt and communicated within the text. While arguably counterproductive in the distraction from the so-called moment, my dealings with affect through bouts of overthinking assist in navigating complex feelings of dislocation from home, kinship stretched across the world, and the heaviness of national identities. The existing research of study abroad experiences and some observations of other students (or the Erasmus culture as a whole) in my autoethnography suggest more irresponsible, detached attitudes to studying abroad. Though

my blog is proof of the dichotomy of studying abroad—the space for cultural exchange, socialization, traveling, and intoxication to occur all in one semester (or one week, day, or night)—I am confident, based on my general observations and the literature, that my experience was (is) not typical. While the aims of autoethnography and studying abroad are overwhelmingly compatible, the initiative to devote the time, the energy, and the heart to describing one's external and internal contexts every day is not common practice, nor do I imagine it will ever become common practice (though I wish and hope and suggest it does).

The value of my autoethnographic blog is entirely subjective but inherent simultaneously. As I reread my blog entries now, I recall the critiques I have read of autoethnography—that it is self-indulgent, romanticized, unscientific. My blog (and perhaps even this thesis, in some places) may seem overwrought to others. I will leave it to anthropologists to work out the value of autoethnography to the field of anthropology. I will close by trying to offer an account of what autoethnography made possible for me as a student of anthropology and English who was deeply invested in understanding how to do more than travel through or to a place. I wanted to encounter Thessaloniki and engage with the people I met there as deeply and openly as I could. I wanted to embrace the process of learning whatever that place and the people I met there might have to teach me.

Ultimately, applying autoethnography to studying abroad and approaching my self-created evidence through an anthropological lens has been a discovery in meaning-making for a potentially vulnerable population. For those students or scholars committed to abundant and productive cultural contact but subject to discomfort and isolation, fieldwork and autoethnography *practiced organically and with agency* engender sought-after and advertised learning outcomes associated with studying abroad regarding culture, language, place, and personal development. Autoethnography has been a way of not only knowing myself and the place of Thessaloniki or the places I visited or returned to, but myself within that place(s). My autoethnographic methods and the subsequent analysis of the autoethnographic text elevated an expected outcome of “personal development” to the unexpected outcome of a transformative experience. This double vision allowed me to adopt the roles of the observer, the observed, the researcher,



the researched, the writer, the written, the analyst, and the analysis. Engaging with the text during the processes of writing and analysis, then, allowed me to communicate how it felt and how it feels to inhabit multiple intellectual and emotional spaces, both in abstract and concrete terms. Through autoethnography, I created a bittersweet home in a metaphysical place between Nebraska and Greece with enough rooms, shelves, nooks, and crannies to hold all of the complexities at once.

### References

- Anderson, I. & Rennie, T. (2016). Thoughts in the Field: ‘Self-Reflexive Narrative’ in Field Recording. *Organised Sound: An International Journal of Music and Technology*, 21(3), 222-232. doi: 10.1017/S1355771816000194
- Anderson, L. (2006). Analytic Autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35(4), 373–395. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241605280449>
- Beatty, A. (2014). Anthropology and Emotion.” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Brunel University, 20, 545-563.
- Behar, R. (1996). *The vulnerable observer : anthropology that breaks your heart*. Beacon Press.
- Bochner. (2012). On first-person narrative scholarship: Autoethnography as acts of meaning. *Narrative Inquiry : NI*, 22(1), 155–164. <https://doi.org/10.1075/ni.22.1.10boc>
- Brigg, M., & Bleiker, R. (2010). Autoethnographic International Relations: Exploring the self as a source of knowledge. *Review of International Studies*, 36(3), 779-798. doi:10.1017/S0260210510000689
- Browne, B. (2013). Recording the Personal: The Benefits in Maintaining Research Diaries for Documenting the Emotional and Practical Challenges of Fieldwork in Unfamiliar Settings. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 12, 420-435.
- Butz, D. & Besio, K. (2009). Autoethnography. *Geography Compass*, 3(5), 1660-1674. 10.1111/j.1749-8198.2009.00279.x
- Cairns, D. (2019). Researching social inclusion in student mobility: methodological strategies in studying the Erasmus programme. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 42(2), 137-147, DOI: 10.1080/1743727X.2018.1446928
- Cairns, D. (2017). The Erasmus undergraduate exchange programme: a highly qualified success story? *Children’s Geographies*, 15(6), 728–740. <https://doi-org.libproxy.unl.edu/10.1080/14733285.2017.1328485>
- Cerwonka, A. (2007). Nervous conditions: the stakes in interdisciplinary research. *Improvising Theory: Process and Temporality in Ethnographic Fieldwork*, edited by Allaine Cerwonka and Lisa Malkki, University of Chicago Press, 1-41.
- Chang, H. (2008) *Autoethnography as method*. Left Coast Press.
- Clifford, J. & Marcus, G. (Eds.). (1986). *Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Craig, Cheryl J., Zou, Yali, & Poimbeauf, Rita. (2015) Journal Writing as a Way to Know Culture: Insights From a Travel Study Abroad Program. *Teachers and Teaching*, 21(4), 472-489, DOI: 10.1080/13540602.2014.968894
- Denzin, N. (2014). *Interpretive autoethnography* (Second Edition ed.). SAGE Publications, Ltd <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781506374697>
- Ellis, C. (2000). Creating criteria: An autoethnographic story. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 5, 273-277.
- Ellis, C. & Bochner, A. (2000). Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject. *Handbook of Qualitative Research, Second Edition*, edited by Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln. Thousand Oaks, California Sage Publishers, 733-768.

- Emerson, R., Emerson, R. I., & Fretz, L. (2011). *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, Second Edition, University of Chicago Press.
- Eriksson, P., Henttonen, E., & Meriläinen, S.. (2012). Ethnographic Field Notes and Ethnography. In *An Ethnography of Global Landscapes and Corridors*, edited by Loshini Naidoo, 9-22.
- Gabaudan, O. (2016). Too soon to fly the coop? Online journaling to support students' learning during their Erasmus study visit. *European Association for Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 28(2), 123-146. doi:10.1017/S0958344015000270
- Geertz, C. (1973). *Interpreting cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Guyotte, K. & Sochacka, N. W. (2016). Is This Research? Productive Tensions in Living the (Collaborative) Autoethnographic Process. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 15(1), 160940691663175-. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406916631758>
- Holman Jones, S. (2018) Creative Selves/Creative Cultures: Critical Autoethnography, Performance, and Pedagogy. In: Holman Jones S., Pruyn M. (eds) *Creative Selves / Creative Cultures. Creativity, Education and the Arts*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. [https://doi-org.libproxy.unl.edu/10.1007/978-3-319-47527-1\\_1](https://doi-org.libproxy.unl.edu/10.1007/978-3-319-47527-1_1)
- Humphreys, M. (2005). Getting Personal: Reflexivity and Autoethnographic Vignettes. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 11(6), 840–860. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800404269425>
- Hunter, A. (2020). Snapshots of selfhood: curating academic identity through visual autoethnography. *The International Journal for Academic Development*, 25(4), 310–323. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2020.1755865>
- Kirschner J. (2018) Mind and Matter: (Re)membering, Performing, and Being. In: Holman Jones S., Pruyn M. (eds) *Creative Selves / Creative Cultures. Creativity, Education and the Arts*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. [https://doi-org.libproxy.unl.edu/10.1007/978-3-319-47527-1\\_6](https://doi-org.libproxy.unl.edu/10.1007/978-3-319-47527-1_6)
- Maurino, J. (2016). Transformations of the self: a narrative and poetic based autoethnography. *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, 29(4), 207–221. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08893675.2016.1215376>
- O'Shea, S. (2019). My dysphoria blues: Or why I cannot write an autoethnography. *Management Learning*, 50(1), 38–49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507618791115>
- Pelias, R. (2011). *Leaning: A Poetics of Personal Relations*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Poulos, C. N. (2017). Autoethnography: A Manifestory. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 10(1), 33–38. <https://doi.org/10.1525/irqr.2017.10.1.33>
- Purnell D. (2017) There is No Home Like Place. In: Pensoneau-Conway S.L., Adams T.E., Bolen D.M. (eds) *Doing Autoethnography*. SensePublishers, Rotterdam. [https://doi-org.libproxy.unl.edu/10.1007/978-94-6351-158-2\\_16](https://doi-org.libproxy.unl.edu/10.1007/978-94-6351-158-2_16)
- Reed-Danahy, D. (1997). *Auto/Ethnography*. Oxford, UK: Berg.

- Reed-Danahay, D. (2019). Autoethnography. In P. Atkinson, S. Delamont, A. Cernat, J.W. Sakshaug, & R.A. Williams (Eds.), *SAGE Research Methods Foundations*.  
<https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781526421036815143>
- Rieckman, M. (2022). Nebraska to Greece, etc.  
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1vR1jZkk662JAWsvd0cx6IUsGNeaEdVF5Wq4Obu8Mj4g/edit?usp=sharing>
- Rowe D.D. (2017) Autoethnography as Object-Oriented Method. In: Pensoneau-Conway S.L., Adams T.E., Bolen D.M. (eds) *Doing Autoethnography*. SensePublishers, Rotterdam.  
[https://doi-org.libproxy.unl.edu/10.1007/978-94-6351-158-2\\_23](https://doi-org.libproxy.unl.edu/10.1007/978-94-6351-158-2_23)
- Savicki, V.. (year). The Effects of Affect on Study Abroad on Study Abroad Students.”  
*Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 131-147.
- Savicki, V. & Price, M. (2015). Student Reflective Writing: Cognition and Affect Before, During, and After Study Abroad. *Journal of College Student Development*, 56(6), 587-601.
- Skoggard, I. & Waterston, A. (2015). Toward an Anthropology of Affect and Evocative Ethnography. *Anthropology of Consciousness*, 26(2), 109-120,  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/anoc.12041>
- Spry, T. (2001). Performing autoethnography: An embodied methodological praxis, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 7, 706-732.
- Teichler, U. (2004). Temporary Study Abroad: the life of ERASMUS students. *European Journal of Education*, 39(4), 395–408. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1465-3435.2004.00193.x>
- Wang, T. (2012). Writing Live Fieldnotes: Towards a More Open Ethnography. *Ethnography Matters*, UC Berkeley School of Information,  
<http://ethnographymatters.net/blog/2012/08/02/writing-live-fieldnotes-towards-a-more-open-ethnography/>. Accessed 27 Nov. 2021.
- Watson, C. (2012). Picturing Validity: Autoethnography and the Representation of Self? *SAGE Visual Methods*, 15(3), v2–163–544. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800408318426>
- Wong, D. (2015). Beyond ‘It was Great’? Not so Fast!” *The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, Michigan State University, XXVI, 121-135.