**Bowdoin Faculty-Led Trip to Colombia**

**March 12th-19th, 2013**

**Final Report**

**Overview**

During the spring 2013 semester, Professor Nadia Celis taught an upper-level seminar course in Spanish literature entitled, Journey to Macondo: Garcia Márquez and His Contemporaries. Students in this course were able to participate in an optional, faculty-led, one-week field trip to Colombia offered at a sliding fee scale dependent on their Bowdoin financial aid packages. Two-thirds of the students, totaling eight students, chose to participate on the trip during Bowdoin’s March spring break. Students attended academic lectures, engaged with local scholars and participated in academically related cultural activities to connect their readings and theoretical understanding of this influential author. All academic activities were conducted in Spanish further strengthening their language skills.

**Leadership**

Assistant Professor Nadia Celis and Christine Wintersteen, Director of International Programs and Off Campus Study organized the faculty-led trip over a period of 18 months. The trip was made possible through a formal proposal process submitted to CIC, on-site visits to Colombia, email correspondence and collaboration with a host institution, Universidad Tecnológica de Bolívar in Cartagena, and meetings with and support from the Dean’s office and Treasurer’s office at Bowdoin. Professor Celis’s focus was on the academic and co-curricular components of the trip, ensuring the involvement of renowned scholars and had exposure to the diversity and variety of Colombian society through lectures and activities. Ms. Wintersteen’s focus was on the administrative and financial aspects of the trip along with providing on-the-ground assistance to the students and Professor Celis.

**Location**

Students stayed in Cartagena for 6 nights and went on an overnight trip to Barranquilla, Santa Marta and Aracataca, Márquez’s birthplace and childhood home. All of these cities are located on the Caribbean coast of northern Colombia. This region of Colombia has attracted a group of highly specialized researchers on the “universality” of García Márquez, several of whom spoke to our group about their research. Recently, Márquez’s childhood home has been transformed into a museum in Aracataca, several of the places where the author used to work in Cartagena have been renovated for visitors, and the café in Barranquilla where García Márquez and his contemporaries would meet have been also restored. Students had the unique opportunity to visit all of these locations.

**Academic Program Content**

The primary goal of this study trip was to provide an opportunity for students to examine the milieu that gave birth to Macondo, the imaginary town in which his novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* takes place, and to explore the contributions and influences of Colombian author and Nobel Prize winner Gabriel García Márquez, one of the better known Latin American writers and among the most influential authors in contemporary world literature. A second objective was to raise students’ awareness of the key moments, including social conflicts, in the history of Latin America informing the imagination of many Colombian, Caribbean, Latin American and postcolonial writers. A parallel aim of this trip was to provide the students with an opportunity to reflect on their own role as actors that, as in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, shapes the spaces and lives of Latin American people even today. While academic lectures and co-curricular visits focused on the first two goals, the latter component of self-reflection was fostered by exposing them to a range of activities that placed students both as observers and observed participants, followed by both one-on-one and collective conversations.

Academic lectures from local scholars included:

* Gustavo Tatis Guerra: “Cartagena’s significance in the life and work of GGM”. This lecture focused on the childhood, formative years, education, and early professional life of GGM ranging from his being steeped in superstitious stories of death by his grandmother and war stories from his Colonel grandfather to Márquez’s reading of international writers such as Kafka or Faulkner, and their inspiring role in his own writing.
* Joaquín Viloria: “Economic History of La Zona: 1870-1930”. This lecture provided students with the economic history of the Caribbean section of Colombia called “La Zona”, which was deeply impacted by the United Fruit Company during the early 20th-Century. Márquez describes the arrival of UFC in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and the relationship between the owners, originating from the U.S., and the banana plantation workers, ultimately depicting a tragic massacre of workers that was rooted in a true historical event.
* Ariel Castillo: “García Márquez and Popular Culture”. Professor Castillo introduced students to the popular culture and musical influences from Colombia’s Caribbean region on García Márquez’s work. The lecture illustrated Gabo’s interactions and appreciation of popular art forms, with an emphasis in Vallenato, a folk music that shares both narrative strategies and a series of key themes in García Márquez’ work (i.e. the amusement at modernity and the “naturalness” of the supernatural, incest, humor and parody).
* Cristo Rafael Figueroa: “García Márquez and the Caribbean”. This lecture focused on the vast range of Márquez’s work and drew examples from essays, short stories and novels to reflect continued themes and trends that Márquez has returned to throughout his life, while emphasizing the influence that the Caribbean has had on his work as a whole. Prof. Figueroa also illustrated the difference between the fantastic, magic or marvelous, and the imaginary as a creative and knowledge-seeking strategy. He argued that using the imaginary to intervene in reality is a distinctive feature of García Márquez’ writing, who draws from reality but also returns to it, informing the reader’s perception of history and life.
* Eduardo Marceles Daconte: Guided Visits to Santa Marta, Barranquilla and Aracataca. Students benefitted from his guidance during the weekend to Ciénaga, where we visited the monument dedicated to the 1928 massacre of the United Fruit Company’s workers; La Cueva in Barranquilla, where Garcia Márquez and his contemporaries mingled and discussed literature, forming a group of artists and intellectuals in the 1940’s; and to Aracataca, the writer’s hometown and inspiration for “Macondo”.

**Co-Curricular Activities**

In addition to the above academic lectures, students learned about Cartagena and the Caribbean region of Colombia through a variety of co-curricular activities. Cartagena’s important role in colonial Latin America, including its involvement in slavery, the Spanish Inquisition, and its strategic port was revealed through a guided walking tour of colonial Cartagena, a visit to the historical museum of Cartagena and the incredibly well restored Castillo San Felipe, a fort built to protect Cartagena against pirates and other colonial powers. While in Barranquilla, we visited the Museum of the Caribbean, an incredibly well conceived and innovative museum that opened in 2009. Students engaged in a wide range of interactive stations to learn more about mestizaje, indigenous populations, the natural environment, regional Spanish colloquialisms, music and art. In Santa Marta, the group visited the Quinta de San Pedro Alejandrino, where Simón Bolívar, the leader of several Latin American countries’ struggle for independence from Spain, lived his final days.

A visit to a grass-roots organization in a marginalized neighborhood coupled with viewings of short films on political activist art installation projects allowed students to have a more complex view of contemporary Colombian society, the economic inequalities that continue to exist in this society, and the global forces affecting the locals. These activities fostered a more thoughtful reflection on the students’ own role as tourists.

During our free day, the group boarded a boat to an island off the coast of Cartagena. From there, we took smaller canoes to a secluded beach and went snorkeling. Particularly moving was that for some students, this was their first time on a boat and swimming in the ocean and they bravely went snorkeling! Students also enjoyed a few hours of souvenir shopping, listening to live music and trying new foods. They were an incredibly flexible and engaged group that made the most of all the opportunities given to them during the week.

**Outcomes**

We took advantage of our final dinner to have a conversation about and a preliminary assessment of the trip, where students acknowledged their deepened understanding of the cultural and geographical influences, and the major themes in García Márquez’ work; and their expanded capacity to associate literature to the history of Latin America. Moreover, students have openly articulated how this experience has helped them to expand their self-understanding, challenging their expectations on the world outside the US and making them reflect on their own position, and privileges, from a global perspective.