

## Presentation Paper

### **Foreign No More: A Community College Group's Voyage of Discovery of Citizenship in a Global Village**

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*[Note: This paper is based upon a creative video presentation and includes some portions of the video narrative incorporated into the expanded content.]*

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*Travelling is more than the act of going from Point A to Point B...*

*Just travel. And you'll see... a mental, emotional, physical journey utilizing all of the senses. Overload? Numbness? A hyper acute sensitivity to...differences, similarities, contrasts... and harmony.*

The purpose of this paper is to highlight an overseas experience by a group of travelers who “Traveled” with a capital T to a place far away from their familiarity, their families, and their entire sphere of understanding and comfort. And yet they all returned with a renewed understanding of their place in the world... and who the “I” really is, in their world.

The participants were mostly from Michigan, and mostly art and design students at C.S. Mott Community College in Flint, Michigan. Their two-week program in July 2001 included activities revolving around Pacific Island culture, history, arts and crafts, as well as a meeting with Pacific Island journalism students from The University of the South Pacific, a regional institution serving the Pacific Basin. It was also my former place of work, having previously served there as Art Director for the University Media Center and adjunct professor in Journalism. I had lived and

worked in Fiji for six years with my husband and two daughters, prior to moving to Flint to create the Graphic Design degree program at Mott.

During my time based in Fiji, I had to re-learn my field of visual communications within the new cultural context of the Pacific Islands. My visual language, as well as my “American” way of thinking, derived from the northeastern U.S. and were no longer applicable to the projects being created for a Pacific Island audience. Later, my experience in having to adapt to new cultural situations was repeated again when I moved to the Flint area in 1997 where I took a similar approach to adapting to the “local” culture, heavily based in the automotive industry. Flint prides itself in being the birthplace of the United Auto Workers with the historic sitdown strike having occurred there. It was also the home of General Motors auto factories and the thousands who worked in them. The city is now in a deep state of decline since the closing of many of these factories, as well as the recall of the city’s mayor and state takeover of city management. All of this is in spite of the general success of three major educational institutions located within the city limits, including Mott Community College, the University of Michigan/Flint, and Kettering University (formerly GMI).

More and more, however, I began to see that my students in Flint had a lot in common with their counterparts who I had known in Fiji. But I also learned that they lacked the confidence to appreciate what resources they had. Rather, many would blame a lack of success or general dissatisfaction in their lives on what they missed in material possessions and the departure of General Motors as a major employer in the area. In the process of planning this trip, I learned that although many of them had experiences far beyond their years, they had rarely, if ever, traveled beyond mid-Michigan. Detroit, dotted with its chic suburbs and only an hour south, seemed and was as foreign to many of them as much as Fiji would be.

I felt that they could learn from the Fijian and Pacific Island people who I had grown to deeply appreciate. I felt my Flint students could also learn an appreciation for Pacific Island resourcefulness as well as a greater appreciation for what they had, rather than what they did not

have. In the process, I also hoped that they would develop a greater empathy for other cultures and citizens in the global community.

The political unrest in Fiji, with its recent overthrow of the elected government, along with issues perceived to be tied to racial tensions, all lent a greater educational value to my Mott students' experiences. This was especially pertinent to the students who came from the city of Flint which was often divided from the surrounding communities along lines of race and urban violence.

Participants included 17 students and one part-time art faculty and I was also joined by my husband and oldest daughter and a kiln-glass artist from New York City who had made her own arrangements to join us. In addition, a former Fiji colleague who was now based at the University of Massachusetts/Amherst joined the group as chaperone and videographer. The group was incredibly diverse, ranging in age from 14 to 78 (the oldest was one of my students), from a variety of racial and social backgrounds and experiences. Although the majority of participants did not know each other at all before the trip, they became close friends, forming a family bond and identifying themselves as the "Mott" family group, with me as their matriarchal leader.

I designed the Fiji Study Tour to build upon curriculum for graphics majors in a required course that I had created called Art 243: Communication Design Across Cultures. In Art 243, students create educational campaigns on social awareness issues that would be targeted to different audiences in the United States and then abroad. This course, as of September 2002, is now designated to meet General Education requirements in: Computing Across Curriculum, Writing and Speaking Across Curriculum, Multi-Ethnic Studies, as well as a Scientific Methods Course. However, for the purposes of participating in this Fiji Study Tour, students who received funding assistance from college sources registered instead for Art 295: Supervised Art Projects in order to receive college credit. The trip was funded with assistance from the Campus Life Enrichment Fund, the Foundation for Mott Community College, Studio 205 Graphic Design Club, and the Mott Art Department.

As the students took in all the Fiji experiences, we used the Beachouse as our home base. It is a backpacker's resort owned by some family friends. Like most of Fiji's economy, their

business had suffered terribly during the coup and months that followed. When I arrived with a group totaling 23 people, their business had doubled. And, with few exceptions, the students were made to feel welcome at nearly every turn. Although there were the occasional clashes among themselves or other backpacker guests at the Beachouse, at one point, a volleyball game ensued. And the chalkboard in the cafe read: "America vs. The Rest of the World" ... as they played this beachside game with other travelers from places such as Germany, Belgium, Australia, New Zealand, Israel, Denmark and England.

Since the aim of this overseas study tour was to provide some kind of educational experience that related to art and design, I arranged for a variety of cultural experiences and activities. These included an art exhibit, traditional Fijian arts/crafts workshops, a guided tour of the Fiji Museum, and a guided tour of the Sigatoka Sand Dunes, an archaeologically important site thought to be the landing place of the original Lapita peoples 3000 years ago and still scattered with pottery and bone fragments. In addition, we visited with the U.S. Ambassador to Fiji at the American Embassy in Suva, Fiji's capital city, to get the official American Government perspective on Fiji/US relations, especially in light of the recent overthrow of Fiji's elected government.

There was also a roundtable discussion with The University of the South Pacific Journalism students who had been involved in important first-hand coverage of the coup and unrest that followed. From their Pacific Island peers, the Mott group learned about the challenges of life and studies in the third world, as well as issues of safety and stability in the region. They learned about how many of these same Pacific Island students, in the course of their studies, had their journalistic skills tested with firsthand experience covering the coup in Fiji on May 19<sup>th</sup> 2000 and during the violence that followed.

It was a visit to the highland village of NaMuaMua in the Viti Levu interior (main island of Fiji) that may have had the greatest impact. It was here that the students came face to face with the true richness of Fijian life and the villagers' utter lack of material possessions. Sony playstations and Nike sneakers were no where to be found. But neither was starvation.

Regardless of their prior artistic experience, and as part of the educational objectives of this program, their participation also involved the creation of two pieces of artwork, both meant to be “conceptual” self-portraits and accompanied by an artist’s written statement. The first was created before the trip and put on display in a special one-week exhibition at the Fiji Museum. It was to serve as a means of introduction to the people of Fiji (and as it turns out to each other). That exhibition was titled “Faces of Flint: Art & Design of an American Community College” and was on display from July 17-24<sup>th</sup> 2001 while the students were visiting Fiji. The exhibit was launched with a reception hosted by the Friends Society of the Fiji Museum who I had worked with during my time living there. I still work with the museum on intermittent projects including their website. The opening was a great success and many of the students (both male and female) told me they had been visibly touched by the depth of personal expression by their fellow travelers, as well as the warmth and hospitality of their hosts and exhibit visitors.

Another important activity that took place after the students’ return from Fiji was the completion of the second piece of artwork, meant to be their response to their cross-cultural experiences overseas. The art exhibit was titled “From Flint to Fiji and Return: Art & Design Response to a Cross Cultural Experience”, and was finally held in late August 2002 in the Mott Art Gallery. It displayed both the “pre” and “post” Fiji pieces side by side along with their statements before and after their experiences. The purpose of the second piece was to encourage participants to think about the experience and how it may have changed how they felt about themselves and their place in the world. The second exhibit included translucent photos of the trip that were suspended with monofilament line from the ceiling, designed to enhance visitor understanding of the students’ experiences.

Upon their return to the USA, the Mott students’ newfound sense of American and global citizenship was tested with the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. Just over a month later, the suicide of one of the participants lead to an emotional reunion and inspired an advocacy role for many of the participants in building awareness of mental health issues and the need for peer support services on campus. Many chose to re-do their artwork in light of these two events. As one student would tell

me shortly after September 11<sup>th</sup>, she felt the need to start over again since she could no longer claim to feel the superior sense of safety in her own country as compared to the earlier internal terrorism that the Pacific Island students had felt in Fiji. Many also chose to dedicate their artwork to their classmate.

As an epilogue to that event, many of the students followed through in their advocacy role through their graphic design club, Studio 205, and have since put together a proposal which is currently seeking funding in order to create a peer mentoring program called "Art to Heart". In addition, one of the participants chose to create a "Teen Suicide Prevention" campaign in Art 243: Communication Design Across Cultures which she registered for the following winter. Her campaign, titled "Risk A Friendship - Save A Friend," won a gold award in the student art show, and was a semi-finalist in a national competition "The Artists Call for Justice". She had to withdraw from that contest, however, in order to accept a request from the Mott Children's Health Center in Flint to actually implement the campaign, beginning this Fall.

By far, the greatest beneficiaries of the overseas study tour have been the students themselves, who have displayed a sense of pride in their role as artist ambassadors. Interest in future study tours has gone beyond the desire to travel to an exotic location. The experience enabled participants to understand themselves and each other at a deeper level. Beyond the "tourist" experiences, students were compelled to depend upon each other during times of adversity, challenging their comfort levels on many fronts. The students' journey generally seemed to increase their feelings of confidence, trust, and responsibility for their fellow citizens of this world. That impact, judging from responses on surveys a year later, seems to be deepening with time. It is those surveys, as well as the artists statements, that really reveal the depth of impact these experiences have had on the participants. I believe one student summed it up best when describing why she would urge anyone to take on the challenge of such an experience:

*"I would tell them that being somewhere in the world that is totally unlike your own is where you find who you really are."*

*~ Jessica Martin, August 2002*

We can each consider ourselves fortunate to have made such a journey together. And by sharing it with our own community in Flint and beyond, we hope the journey will continue...

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Further details on this study tour are being made available in an extensive online project and can currently be viewed as a work-in-progress website at [www.fijistudytour.com](http://www.fijistudytour.com) including a large chronological photo gallery, a video gallery, trip details, an academic study on group formation, and the artwork and artists' statements from both exhibits. Due to limited server space, the video portion of the website is not yet completely online but will continue to be updated as space becomes available. Funding has also been requested in order to adapt this material for classroom use as a CD-ROM so that it may be more easily shared with future students and other faculty as a class discussion topic on multi-ethnic studies and cross-cultural education.

The accompanying video, created for the AIS 2002 Conference, is meant to provide viewers with a visual impression of the Fiji Study Tour group, their activities, artwork and comments on their experiences. VHS copies of the video presentation are available upon request. A quicktime video version is planned for inclusion on the website project at [www.fijistudytour.com](http://www.fijistudytour.com) as space becomes available.

Short Biography:

Mara Jevera Fulmer is Assistant Professor and Program Coordinator in Graphic Design at Mott Community College in Flint, Michigan. She came to Flint in July 1997 to develop the Graphic Design degree program after working in Fiji from 1991-1997 as Art Director and later Adjunct Journalism Professor at The University of the South Pacific in Fiji's capital of Suva. Prior to Fiji, Mrs. Fulmer served as Art Director for the University at Albany, SUNY from 1987-91, and in various positions in publishing and design before that. She holds a B.A. in Fine Art (Photography) & Journalism from the University at Albany, SUNY, and an M.A. in Advertising Design from Syracuse University. She has recently returned to graduate school to pursue the terminal degree of MFA in studio art/graphic design at Michigan State University in East Lansing, Michigan. Mrs. Fulmer has written on the subject of art and design, had her work shown in art exhibits, and has won awards for her design work. She has designed projects for the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF), UN/ILO, the Fiji Museum, and many others. She continues to work with clients from the South Pacific and around the USA, specializing in cross-cultural design projects. Her website which highlights her artwork, design, and study interests is [www.lookingglassdesign.com](http://www.lookingglassdesign.com) (note only 1 "g").

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