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The Social Identity of Wales in Question: An Analysis of Culture, Language, and Identity in Cardiff, Bangor, and Aberystwyth

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Fulbright Summer Institute: Wales 2012

The Social Identity of Wales in Question:
An Analysis of Culture, Language, and Identity in Cardiff, Bangor, and Aberystwyth

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Reflective Journal Portfolio

Fulbright Wales Summer Institute Professors

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Table of Contents

Introduction	
Exploring the Question of Cultural Identity	page 3
<i>Cardiff University</i>	
Place Identity and Coal Mining in Cardiff	page 6
The Phenomenon of Wenglish in Cardiff.....	page 9
The Bilingual Identity of Wales	page 12
<i>Bangor University</i>	
The Social and Cultural Life of Slate Mining in Bangor	page 16
Tourism and Identity in Bangor.....	page 19
Museums Viewed through the Lens of Culture and Identity.....	page 22
<i>Aberystwyth University</i>	
The Culture of Higher Education in Contemporary Wales	page 25
The Royal Welsh Show and Aberystwythian Identity	page 28
Landscape Archaeology and Culture in Aberystwyth.....	page 31
Conclusion	
Wales: A Journey in Search of an Identity	page 34
Works Cited	page 37

Exploring the Question of Cultural Identity

Wales has a unique and renewed sense of national pride and identity that make it stand out from other countries in the United Kingdom. However, Welsh national pride may be composed of various community identities. The towns in Wales such as Cardiff, Bangor, and Aberystwyth are cultural gems with their own unique cultural and linguistic methods of communication. Wales has a relatively small population with approximately three million inhabitants. This small population enables towns to strengthen community identities within the greater framework of Welsh national identity.

In order to understand Welsh social identity, one must understand how cultural identities are formed, preserved, and valued in small communities. A human being finds his or her source of cultural identity first and foremost through language. The purpose of my research is to explore what cultural identity means. Thus, my analysis will investigate the relationship between cultural identity and language. Welsh is spoken and used differently throughout Southeast, Mid, and Northwest Wales. Perhaps, these differences are linked to the diversity within perceptions of “Welshness” or Welsh cultural identity.

According to anthropologist Carol Trosset, “No one speaks a language in isolation from other people; to learn a language is to enter a community of people who speak it” (165). In other words, culture depends upon language, and without language there can be no culture. The concept of entering a community of people through a language is multi-dimensional and complex. Culture can best be understood as the *whole way of life* of a people. Given the circumstances, can an individual be capable of *partially* entering a community of people, and have a partial understanding of a culture and language? How can an individual entirely, or partially, belong to a community of people?

To explore the topic further, I will introduce my personal connection to the subject matter. Until my parents immigrated to the United States, my father was a farmer in a pueblo called San Juan del Rio, a pastoral village on the outskirts of Mexico City. My mother taught Catholic school for children at a small church. Throughout my childhood, I acted as a bridge between two very distinct worlds—the American world in which I was raised, and my parents’ native country. However, over the years, crossing that bridge has become more and more difficult. In fact, I question whether or not I have ever really crossed that bridge and stood on the other side.

Since immigrating to the U.S., my parents have learned basic reading and writing skills in English, but English is their second language. My parents left behind a culture and identity defined by poverty and hopelessness. For this reason, they tried to fully assimilate into American culture and teach me to be a fluent English speaker. I was born a U.S. citizen and raised to be a part of the American culture—raised to be proud of my American identity.

However, the native Mexican roots of my identity are contradictory to my learned American identity. Issues surrounding the question of identity are complex. Tensions between two forces are at work, having an innate identity versus a learned identity. My learned cultural identity is American, and my innate cultural identity is Mexican. What that means in terms of my social identity, I do not know. I believe that understanding the concept(s) of “Welshness,” and learning more about the Welsh language, can provide me with a solid foundation to explore questions related to identity.

Nonetheless, I am missing some aspect of my social identity. Growing up, I learned to speak informal Spanish from my parents, but I can barely read or write in Spanish. My parents have neither encouraged nor discouraged me from learning to read and write Spanish fluently.

Honestly, I have my own doubts, maybe even a reluctance to become a fluent Spanish speaker. On the one hand, my reluctance may stem from the fact that I have ties to a Mexican culture that I will never fully know. On the other hand, I do feel compelled to better understand a language that is an aspect of my innate identity.

What is the social relationship between cultural identity and language? Is the presence of identity stronger with fluent speakers of a native language? The tension between learning a modern and influential language, such as English, at the cost of an indigenous one, such as Welsh, is difficult to reconcile. This is true of my experience with learning half of one language. I learned the English language at the cost of fully learning my parents' native language.

Wales has much to offer in terms of understanding the discourse surrounding difficult and complex questions of identity. I have much to learn about my own identity, and gaining in-depth knowledge of Welsh culture and the Welsh language can assist me in my journey of self-discovery. What then happens when an individual understands half of one language or culture? My aim is not necessarily to find a definitive answer, but rather to explore the possibilities by understanding how a small country in the United Kingdom has managed to unearth and sustain its cultural roots and how language has played a role in that process.

Place Identity and Coal Mining in Cardiff

Place is a process, and it is human experience and struggle that give meaning to place. Place identity is a cultural value shared by the community, a collective understanding about social identity. Coal mines, specifically in Cardiff, created a unique sense of place identity within mining communities. According to historian Jaclyn Gier, the “South Wales coalfield society might best be described as highly localized, producing a rich ‘vernacular’ culture that was steeped in rural tradition, yet structured by the process of industrialization” (7). Therefore, rural tradition coupled with the fast pace of industrialization created communities with strong links to culture, identity, and a sense of place.

Welsh coal communities fostered this sense of place identity in the household. Coal mining skills were often acquired traditionally through the family unit. According to Bill Williamson, there was “no formal training [for pit work]; essential skills were picked up, often being passed on by fathers to their sons” (84). The learned identity of the Welsh coal mining society helped shape the psyche of the mining community.

The discourse of Welsh nationalism works within a greater framework of identity, tracing its origins to locate identity within the coal mines. In the historical context of the South Wales mining valleys, the “working-class gender identification, represented by the ‘Miner’ and his ‘Mam’ was vital to the creation of a Welsh national discourse” (Gier 10). For this reason, it is vital to note that women were not included in the coal mining narrative. In fact, the literature surrounding the historical nature of coal mining fails to “consider the role of gender in shaping the dynamics of community life [in the coal mines]” (Gier 4).

Gier further explains that as an ideal the “Welsh Mam is one of many cultural motifs in Wales, what distinguishes her from other images of Welsh women is that she is the product of an

industrialized society” (12). South Wales’s progression towards an industrialized society may have fuelled and later dismantled the communal sense of place identity within the coal mines.

Moreover, “coalfield society was a culture on display, actively engaged in the process of creating symbols that presented a working-class vision of Welsh nationhood; a shared experience, a common language, and community values” (Gier 7). As a result, Welsh nationalism can be traced back to a tight-knit community that originated in the coal mines. The question of whether or not Welsh nationalism is representative of the *whole* of Wales must be assessed and determined carefully, with special attention to small diverse community identities.

Coal miners had special tasks and skills required for their performance. Working in the coal mines demanded intense labour from miners, both men and women. “Pit work is a strenuous art requiring not so much that a man [or woman] should be physically well built but that he [or she] should be sinewy and capable of sustained effort over long periods” (Williamson 85). The coal mines became familiar to the miners because it took time to know their way underground. “The first thing a miner had to learn was the geography of the pit. Miners were never too sure exactly where they were underground in relation to the surface” (Williamson 84). Time and distance were distorted by darkness; therefore, a miner’s familiarity with the pits fostered an identity and sense of place.

The Fulbright cohort’s visit to Big Pit: National Coal Museum provided me with unparalleled insights into the coal mining communities of South Wales. Our tour guide at Big Pit explained that although laws were introduced that banned women and children from working in the coal mines, women still worked in the mines for several years. The tour guide, a retired coal miner, told us stories related to the women and children. The stories the tour guide shared

embodied a much darker history surrounding the production of coal before the laws banning women and children were introduced.

Big Pit provided me with unique and profound insights into the Welsh coal communities. The visit to the museum sparked my interest in the social relationship between the mining village and the family. Coal mining starkly symbolized the collective interests of the whole community and its dependence on the pit. The South Wales mining valleys truly provided Cardiff with a place identity particular to the members of those communities. Big Pit is a powerful reminder of the historic importance of the coal industry in Wales. The museum preserves, and retells, the stories of the people, and a culture, that during the Industrial Revolution created a home for the largest coal exporting port in the world.

The Phenomenon of Wenglish in Cardiff

The world of human communication, mainly language, depends upon the meaning humans place on symbols. However, symbols are abstract and often ambiguous. The meanings of words are never self-evident or absolute. Therefore, the process of constructing meaning is itself symbolic because individuals rely on words to think about what words mean. Language is arbitrary, and the meaning of words can change over time. Words stand for ideas, people, events, objects, feelings, and so forth, but they are not the things they represent. This means that language is dynamic. As such, language introduces a complex dimension to questions that explore the meaning of cultural identity.

The dynamic nature of language enables hybrid languages to have relevance within specific cultural realms of communication. For example, linguistic variations exist within the Welsh language, such as Wenglish, the cultural hybrid of Welsh and English. John Edwards coined the term Wenglish, which he introduced in his publication *Talk Tidy* in 1985. Wenglish is spoken by well “over a million people—about double the number of Welsh speakers in Wales” (Lewis 9). The development of Wenglish is closely associated with industrial and social development in South Wales.

Wenglish “originated and developed in the ‘melting pot’ of the Valleys during the nineteenth century as workers flocked to the area from other parts of Wales, other parts of the British Isles, and indeed further afield, in search of employment in the rapidly expanding industries, especially coal mining” (Lewis 9). For this reason, the coal mining industry not only fostered a sense of place identity, it also created a social environment that produced and fueled a unique linguistic identity. Wenglish possesses a grammar and vocabulary of its own. As such, it

has a “distinctive value and identity; [Wenglish has its own] . . . warmth of expression, vitality and force [which deviates from Standard English]” (Lewis 9).

Wenglish combines “the intonation and accent of the Welsh language with the speech rhythms of spoken English” (Lewis 9). Wenglish is not attempting to be Welsh or English, rather its own independent language. Not only does Wenglish contain obscure grammar, it even contains some completely new words. There are even Wenglish dictionaries.

In Cardiff, I encountered an interesting phrase in Wenglish, “Pobeth yn all right?” (“Is everything all right?”) The phrase had an interesting and witty cadence. Also, I have noticed Wenglish phrases on postcards inside some tourist shops. The phenomenon of Wenglish speaks volumes of the shared languages and cultures in Wales. Thus, Wenglish exposes the duality in world perspectives that Wenglish speakers share. Individuals blend the two languages to create a new linguistic identity.

Furthermore, my bilingual background empathizes with the phenomenon of Wenglish. I communicate with my parents in Spanglish, a cultural hybrid of Spanish and English. Although Spanglish has not become a fully developed written language, it does appear on television and in print media. In the United States, Spanglish is spoken on the streets of Miami, Los Angeles, New York, and various other cities where Spanish and English seem to blend and bend into a mind-boggling, very funny hybrid of two different languages.

Spanglish vocabulary, like Wenglish, can also vary from community to community. For example, the Spanglish spoken by Mexican Americans in L.A. is different from the Spanglish spoken by Cuban Americans in Miami, or the Spanglish spoken by Puerto Ricans in New York. Each of these Spanglish dialects has its own communication patterns and idiosyncrasies.

In the United States, political and social controversies surround the Spanglish “language,” stemming from both the Spanish-speaking and English-speaking communities. Critics see Spanglish as a danger to Hispanic culture and advancement. But Spanglish speakers say it is an expression of ethnic pride. This hybrid language creates a bridge between two cultures—Latino and American. Spanglish is its own unique point of view, a middle ground. Likewise, Wenglish is its own unique point of view, with its own cultural and linguistic middle ground.

Moreover, scholars of language and culture maintain that language shapes how we categorize the world, and even how we perceive and think about the world. More importantly, language is a primary tool that social movements use to change cultural life and meaning. The differences that exist between English and Welsh, which contributed to the development of Wenglish, are not only interesting and often humorous but also something to be celebrated.

Wenglish is not a preference or substitute for Welsh or English; rather, it is a language with its own unique identity, and it gives new symbolic meaning to Welsh and English words. Wenglish is the way people communicate as they try to understand the differences, and commonalities, between two cultures. The result is a hybrid middle ground that is really a new cultural and linguistic way of being.

The Bilingual Identity of Wales

The Welsh language marks an important distinction between Wales and the rest of the United Kingdom, and it is a powerful link between Welsh people living in Wales and across the globe. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, awareness of the educational, cultural, and social benefits of bilingualism is growing. Bilingualism carries concrete advantages and broadens opportunities for children who grow up speaking a second language. Learning another language is a step towards joining the global community.

However, to maintain ethnic identity, boundaries are needed to remain a distinct group. Wales has succeeded in maintaining its identity. Everyone in and from Wales can be proud of the language, even if they don't speak it. The language belongs to the country. One of the advantages of being bilingual is having access to two cultures—two different worlds of experience. With a language come idioms and sayings, folk stories and magnificent history, literature and music, both traditional and contemporary. Thus, bilingualism provides individuals with a wider cultural experience.

Bilingualism continues to be a contested subject matter in Wales. Currently, negative attitudes towards bilingualism are shifting, yet somewhat still at odds. But through practice and policy the Welsh language is undergoing the process of revitalization. The Welsh language had previously been suppressed deliberately. According to the BBC, in an effort to improve a child's knowledge of the English language, the "Welsh education system of the late 19th century employed the 'Welsh Not' or 'Welsh Stick' as a method of discouraging children from speaking in their native tongue" ("History").

The Welsh Not "consisted of a small piece of wood or slate inscribed with the letters 'W.N' . . . [which was] hung around the neck of a child" ("Welsh Not"). At the end of the school

day, the child wearing the Welsh Not would be punished by the schoolteacher. Modern Welsh education systems have moved far away from such horrific practices, but the historical precedent of the Welsh Not is not forgotten. In Wales, both Welsh and English can flourish and be treated equally. A bilingual Wales is a country where people can choose to live their lives using either, both, or a hybrid of the languages.

Wales is a country where the presence of two national languages creates a source of individuality and unity. The Welsh Assembly Government is committed to revitalizing the Welsh language and creating a bilingual Wales. The plenary session at the Senedd attended by the Fulbright cohort provided me with a firsthand account of bilingualism in Wales. Bilingualism is used and enforced by the Welsh government, which speaks to the power of bilingualism in Cardiff, and the country of Wales.

The power of bilingualism in Cardiff became self-evident to me when, during the plenary session, the First Minister Carwyn Jones responded to Assembly Members in Welsh or English. Of course, the First Minister's responses were respectively aligned with the language in which the question was asked. A beautiful and powerful linguistic exchange took place during the plenary session. Although I was using headphones that provided an English translation, the power and status of the language were made very clear.

The lecture about contemporary Welsh language policy given by Professor Colin Williams was truly an enriching learning experience. The maintenance and growth of the Welsh language hinges on education. The Education Reform Act 1988 acts as a pillar for bilingualism in Wales. Williams explained that the language was given official status because of its inclusion, as a core curriculum, in the National Curriculum. The Welsh language is now taught in every school in Wales. More recent legislation, such as the Welsh Language Act 1993, established the

Welsh Language Board, which “placed a duty on [the] public sector to treat Welsh and English on an equal basis” (Williams). The Welsh Language Board currently works toward “encouraging private companies and voluntary organisations to use more Welsh, giving grants to promote and facilitate the use of Welsh, [and] marketing the use of Welsh” (Williams). Thus, contemporary language policy continues to provide a statutory basis for bilingualism in many aspects of socio-economic life.

According to Richard Daugherty, “Bilingual education in Wales is essential in Welsh-language maintenance because language reproduction in the family is occurring at too low a level” (Daugherty, Phillips, and Rees 103). That is not to say that the Welsh language is not used in the home, but rather that it is occurring at a slower rate than would be preferred. My conversations with Welsh parents lead me to believe (at least with the parents I spoke with) that they are very proud and supportive of a bilingual education for their children.

Active steps toward bilingualism have been taken in the United States. In my home state, department stores use bilingual signs in Spanish and English. Currently, in the United States there is an ongoing debate about bilingual education, particularly surrounding the teaching of Chinese (Mandarin) and Spanish in public schools. But, legislation and social attitudes (which vary from state to state) are shifting towards a positive reinforcement of bilingualism in public schools and for the nation as a whole.

Bilingual education is essential to maintaining the Welsh language. That is, “for a language to survive . . . [and be revived], it has to be lived and loved” (Daugherty, Phillips, and Rees 104). More steps can be taken by the government, the community, and individuals to strengthen Welsh as a community language. This can be achieved through more detailed pursuits of bilingualism; one example is bilingual food packaging labels. Although fully integrating

bilingualism into the social-economic fabric of Wales would be expensive, the maintenance of a culture and language is worth the investment. There is a positive future for the Welsh language, but first individuals and the society as a whole must embrace the benefits of bilingualism and help in the creation of a truly bilingual Wales.

The Social and Cultural Life of Slate Mining in Bangor

Wales is world-famous for its slate products. The Llechwedd Slate Caverns provide visitors with a special interpretation of the slate mining industry in Wales. Slate is still produced in the once world-famous Llechwedd Slate Caverns, but the caverns now cater to visitors as a tourist attraction. These caverns tell a story about the cultural and social life of slate mining in Bangor. The slate mining story embedded in Bangor's social and cultural life has both similarities and differences in relation to the coal mining industry in Cardiff.

By the 1870's slate mining had become the most important industry in North Wales. Dinorwig was the second largest slate quarry in the world. At its peak, the "Dinorwig slate quarry employed about 3,000 men" ("History and Archeology (sic)"). However, about 350 people are currently employed in slate quarries ("Welsh Slate" 46). According to Ivor Wynne Jones, the "quarryman's skill is demonstrated in the final splitting of the rock [which creates] . . . a thin but robust finished product required for the world's best roofs" (Jones 21). As such, slate splitting has helped shape the social life of communities.

Moreover, "for many [quarrymen], life outside working hours, especially in the years up to the Second World War, revolved to a great extent around the chapel" ("Welsh Slate" 22). Therefore, "the chapel had its own rich cultural life, with prayer meetings and all kinds of societies" ("Welsh Slate" 22). During their free hours, "quarrymen were proud of their ability to work slate, fashioning it into beautiful, useful objects as well as roofing slates" ("Welsh Slate" 34). Although the "quarry owners and stewards spoke English, the quarrymen and other workers spoke Welsh, a Welsh unique to their particular area. The very specialised craft of slate quarrying, and the close-knit nature of the community, meant that the quarry had a wealth of unique terms which gave the language of the quarrying areas its own very special, very colorful

character” (“Welsh Slate” 46). This slate mining “language” embodies the strong and unique sense of identity the quarrymen had in the Bangor area.

The collective identity of Bangor is partially rooted in the social life of slate mining. Collective identity can be defined as “a condensation, a shorthand statement of an immensely complex ideology which informs every aspect of social life” (Cohen 199). The traditional slate industries created communities of people who made their livelihood from the mines.

A collective identity relates to community. But, collective identity suffers from a dual tension between a differentiation within a community and its interaction with the wider society. For example, the industrial identity of Wales translates into two different spheres in Bangor and Cardiff. In Bangor, slate mines shaped the society and culture, whereas the coal mines in Cardiff shaped the social and cultural identity of that area. Both the coal and slate mining industries fostered a sense of identity and community, but in different ways. These industries added new dimensions to a community’s sense of “Welshness,” and both industries contributed to an individual’s sense of belonging within Wales.

The questions surrounding “Welshness,” relating to slate and coal mining in Bangor and Cardiff, “shows how a consciousness of national, cultural, and local identity can be observed not only in great symbolic manifestation—such as language and religion—but as permeating all aspects of social life” (Cohen 200). For this reason, the slate mining industry, like the coal mining industry in Cardiff, is part of a particular Welsh narrative. That is, in order for someone to feel a sense of “Welshness” through the coal or slate mining industries, that sense of identity is lived through a unique community.

The Fulbright cohort’s visit to the Llechwedd Slate Caverns provided me with unparalleled insights into the social and cultural life of the slate mining industry in Bangor. The

tour in the Miners' Underground Tramway took us through a network of enormous caverns. I was able to experience the working conditions of the Victorian miner. The tour guide explained how millions of tons of rock were moved using simple tools, dynamite, and strenuous labor. In the Deep Mine, we walked in the caverns and heard the words of a Victorian miner explaining the social life of the slate mining community.

Overall, the trip to the Llechwedd Slate Caverns was a wonderful learning experience. I truly enjoyed partaking in the unique opportunity of experiencing some sense of life in a quarry. Coal and slate mining identities are rooted in a specific combination of social and economic conditions. The coal and slate mining communities belong to the whole of Wales, and collective identities throughout the country will continue to evolve. The Llechwedd Slate Caverns provide visitors, like me, with an opportunity to gain an appreciation for the social and cultural identity that slate mines created in the Bangor area.

Tourism and Identity in Bangor

By viewing tourist destinations through the lens of cultural identity, the tourist or visitor can develop a deeper appreciation of the destination. Tourism and travel continues to be one of the world's largest industries. There are advantages and disadvantages to the tourism market pursuits in Wales. One of the strengths of tourism is that it conveys a message to a broad audience, and it can present that message in a vivid and lively manner.

However, tourism can also potentially degenerate messages into trivializing history, culture, and politics, which means that any meaningful message can be lost. As cultural boundaries continue to be blurred through the process of globalization, questions of national identity and development are challenged. How is a national identity maintained and reproduced, especially under conditions of ongoing social and economic change?

Identity tourism is a medium that can be used to tell the national story of a country. For this reason, nation branding is an interesting phenomenon. The nation's branding says a great deal about the state's vision of the nation—who it is or hopes to be—and also speaks to its own community. Identity tourism incorporates “both ethnic and heritage tourism, [which] includes museums, heritage centers, performances, and other attractions in which collective identities are represented, interpreted, and potentially constructed through the use of history and culture” (Pitchford 1). The question of nationalism and national identity is ongoing and will continue to be affected by the social, economic, and political changes associated with development.

Heritage tourism is an influential business in economic and entrepreneurial terms. Heritage tourism can be defined “broadly to include both the culture and the land on which people live as well as their history” (Pitchford 4). To a certain extent, heritage tourism undermines the integrity of Welsh heritage that can better be discovered without overzealous

tourism market agendas. Tourism is an important medium that communicates the basic framework of a nation's story, but it should not aim to define or stereotype the cultural and social identity of a nation.

The Fulbright program in Bangor enabled me to identify and recognize the use and practice of identity tourism in Wales. Three locations focused my attention on identity tourism in Bangor: the Smallest House in Britain in Conwy, St. Winefride's Well in Holywell, and the village of Portmeirion. Visiting these locations in Bangor provided me with the opportunity to critically analyze the aim of tourism at the three respective locations.

For instance, the Smallest House in Britain expresses no real sense of Welsh heritage or relevance to cultural identity and "Welshness." The house, merely 6 feet wide and 10 feet high, was built as a fisherman's cottage. According to local story, the last family to live in the cottage was Robert Jones, his wife, and their thirteen children. The site continues to draw tourists to the house because visitors are fascinated with the local story. Tourist attractions such as the Smallest House in Britain do little to teach visitors about Welsh culture and heritage.

The healing waters at St. Winefride's Well have been said to cause miraculous cures. The legend of St. Winefride tells how the son of a local prince severed the head of the young Winefride after she rejected his advances. A spring rose from the ground at the spot where her head fell, and she was later restored to life by her uncle, St. Beuno. These stories attract tourists to the site, and the shop and museum there are tailored to the curiosity and interests of tourists.

Portmeirion is an Italian village more or less designed to be a popular tourist village. When I first heard about the Mediterranean-inspired village in Gwynedd, I thought it was unrelated to the cultural heritage of Wales; however, this is not entirely true. The connection the village has to Wales is not necessarily explicit, which is why the video I watched about Clough

Williams-Elis was an important educational resource. Although it serves mainly as a tourist attraction, Williams-Elis wanted to prove that architects could build villages without damaging or hurting the landscape. In an interview with the *Daily Post* about Portmeirion, Welsh Business Minister Edwina Hart said, “Tourism is one of our key economic sectors, worth £4.2 billion to the Welsh economy each year, and visitor attractions are an important component of the industry” (Hughes).

I believe traveling to Wales is about gaining insights into a culture—a way of life—that can influence one’s own cultural experiences. Wales has a rich and diverse range of attractions, many of which reflect its unique culture, history, heritage, and environment. Tourism is a powerful economic development tool. When cultural heritage tourism development is done right, it can protect a nation’s natural and cultural treasures and improve the quality of life for residents and visitors alike.

Museums Viewed through the Lens of Culture and Identity

Museums are usually seen as valuable means to attain and reinforce cultural identities. Museums, in this sense, are social metaphors because societies represent their relationship to their own history and to that of other cultures. My analysis of culture and identity, as represented at the St. Fagans National History Museum and the National Welsh Slate Museum, explores Welsh identity through the medium of museology. Museums shed light on socio-cultural processes and put cultures on display.

Museology focuses on the collections, educational pursuits, and management of museums and their roles in society. “Museums . . . map out geographies of taste and values, which is an especially difficult and controversial task when it is necessary radically to redraw the maps in response to major social change” (Lumley 2). St. Fagans narrates the historical lifestyle, culture, and architecture of the Welsh people.

In a similar fashion, the Welsh Slate Museum workshops tell a very special story, the story of the Welsh slate industry. The Welsh Slate Museum provides visitors with a unique interpretation of the slate industry in Wales. The vision of the museum is constantly changing and working to enhance its interpretation in the cultural meaning of the industry. The museum tour guides emphasize the threats that endangered the quarrymen’s health, which at the time included tuberculosis and silicosis. The Welsh Slate Museum displays its own rich contribution to Welsh cultural life.

Cultures and identities, local or national, are constantly woven and re-woven. Objects, tangible as well as intangible ones, express the memories and processes of a culture. Museum artifacts of all kind crystallize culture and identity by preserving cultural memory. Collectible

items, when classified and catalogued in museums or private collections, are relevant materials to understand the narrative and the construction of local and national culture.

Museum artifacts, collections, and displays play a major role in feeding collective memory and trans-generational cultural identity. For this reason, “collecting seems to be instinctive for many human beings. It may be based upon the desire for physical security . . . , social distinction . . . , the pursuit of knowledge and connoisseurship . . . , and a wish to achieve a kind of immortality [through the preservation of heritage and culture]” (Alexander and Alexander 8). Collectors are able to build an identity through the collecting process and contribute to the construction of national culture.

St. Fagans explores all aspects of how people in Wales have lived. This museum is a unique representation of Welsh history and heritage, and it celebrates Welsh traditions and lifestyles. During my visit, traditional crafts and activities brought St. Fagans artifacts to life. The cottages were also a wonderful opportunity to take a step back into the past, and craftsmen demonstrated traditional skills in their workshops. I walked into a clog-making workshop, and it was quite interesting.

The Curator of Costume and Textiles at St. Fagans, Elen Phillips, guided the Fulbright cohort into storage rooms that held the museum’s treasures and hidden cultural gems. Phillips explained that each item has a record or story that details the origins and source of the artifact. She also mentioned that early in St. Fagans’ development the goal was simply to collect as many objects as possible, but such practices are no longer encouraged or acceptable. Instead, the goal of collecting artifacts has embodied a more purposeful objective—donated artifacts require a brief description—and as such it attaches an individual’s story with the artifact, which makes it more meaningful.

Furthermore, there are cultural boundaries that are crossed in the process of putting a culture on display. Museum objects, and cultural groups, are expected to “perform” their meaning for tourists by way of being collected and exhibited. For example, in the 1987 *Artifact Piece* at the San Diego Museum of Man, James Luna wore a loincloth and lay motionless on a bed of sand in a glass museum exhibition case. The display had labels describing the artifacts and his scars. James Luna used his body as a means to critique the objectification of Native American cultures in Western museums and cultural displays. He dramatically called attention to the exhibition of Native American peoples and cultural objects. James Luna brought new meaning to the term “artifact” for the museums and displays in the United States.

Museums were originally established as temples of high culture, with the intention of preserving the culture and identity of a society. In this sense, objects and artifacts convey and symbolize national and local culture or identity. The National Welsh Slate Museum and St. Fagans exhibit Welsh culture in their own way and serve their communities. Re-discovered and newly formed identities and cultures regularly surface in our world spurred by political, economic, or social change. As such, socio-political economic forces drive the evolution of cultural identities upon which they build new meaning and interpretation.

The Culture of Higher Education in Contemporary Wales

With its rich cultural heritage, Wales has maintained a strong tradition of, and high standard for, quality education at all levels. Cardiff University, Bangor University, and Aberystwyth University all contribute to the culture of learning in Wales. These institutions of higher education instigated a ‘cultural renaissance’ throughout European academia. As such, these universities assisted with the renewed interest in Welsh history, culture, art, literature, and the language at an academic and popular level.

The University of Wales was founded in Wales in 1893 as a national university with three foundation colleges (W. Jones). Today, the three foundation universities are known as Aberystwyth University, Bangor University, and Cardiff University (“Cardiff”). These three universities are the pillars of higher education in Wales. Two national institutions with equal importance are the National Library of Wales and the National Museum of Wales, which were both created in 1907 (W. Jones). The formation of these national institutions has preserved Welsh heritage, history, and culture, while simultaneously providing visitors with the opportunity to peer into the academic culture of Wales.

Wales in the 1880s experienced a ‘renaissance,’ “a self-confidence and passion for popular education and improvement” (Morgan 18). Education itself guided the way forward in the late nineteenth century. “The Aberdare Committee, a body appointed by . . . Welsh MPs in the House of Commons . . . , called for dramatic changes” (Morgan 24). “It urged, above all, two new institutions of higher education of university calibre, one in north Wales, one in the south. The old vision of a ‘University of Wales’, actively promoted by Welsh patriots in London and elsewhere since the sixties, was now attaining tangible form” (Morgan 24). Therefore, the

Aberdare Committee began the discourse that encouraged the development of creative and cultural industries in higher education.

However, it is important to note that “long before 1880 the passion of poor Welsh country families for education was most marked” (Morgan 22). The communities composed of miners, farmers, and quarry workers contributed to the idea of creating the “University of the People.” These communities were forward in their thinking because they understood the value of higher education. Today, that forward thinking has provided the groundwork for the strongest research-focused universities in Wales. The centrality of higher education in Wales has shaped the future economic and social well-being of communities, in the midst of the changing structure of the economy.

The world of academia in contemporary Wales has created its own culture; a student’s most important community membership resides in academic institutions. The atmosphere of academic life relentlessly fosters innovation and creativity. An institution of higher learning begs an exposure to diverse minds—diverse ways of thinking in order to discover new mediums of creativity and innovation. The host universities of the Wales Fulbright Summer Institute have thrived in the learning societies they have created over the years.

My learning experiences at the host universities have enabled me to develop a deep appreciation for Welsh academic culture. I have gleaned an understanding of Welsh academic culture through my interactions with the program course directors, professors, summer students, and university staff. The time I have spent at the libraries of the universities has given me a taste of the academic life students experience in Wales.

Moreover, at Cardiff University the Fulbright cohort was introduced to the University Library’s Special Collections and Archives (SCOLAR) in the Arts and Social Studies Library.

Our guide provided us with a sneak peek into some of the rare collections and books held in the library. The behind-the-scenes tour of SCOLAR enabled me to develop a better understanding of the research reputation of Cardiff University within Wales and worldwide.

Furthermore, at Bangor University the focus was more on experiential learning. The Outdoor Pursuits sessions, for example, provided me an opportunity to develop a special connection to the landscape in Wales. The academic culture of Bangor University is unique in its own way. Our course director, Tecwyn Jones, explained that the population in Bangor is heavily influenced by the student population. The student-to-local population disproportion in Bangor speaks to the academic culture that exists within, and outside, the University.

The Aberystwyth University program has also provided me with an enriching learning experience. The National Library of Wales also shapes the academic culture in Aberystwyth. The Library houses the greatest literary treasures of Wales and the other Celtic countries. As such, the University relays and promotes knowledge, not only with students but also with the wider Aberystwyth community.

Overall, I have enjoyed the wonderfully exciting academic programs at these three internationally renowned Welsh universities. The learning societies and academic cultures at the Cardiff, Bangor, and Aberystwyth universities are tailored and unique to a Welsh experience. Contemporary Wales is not only shaped by its culture, politics, and economy, it also involves a profound passion, hope, and admiration for higher education in Wales.

The Royal Welsh Show and Aberystwythian Identity

The Royal Welsh Showground is located in one of the most picturesque areas of Wales. Unlike Cardiff and Bangor, Aberystwyth has characteristics that are particular to a rural personality. My observations have led me to conclude that Cardiff, Bangor, and Aberystwyth have unique personalities. For instance, Cardiff has a metropolitan personality, whereas Bangor has more of a touristy personality. The Royal Welsh Show speaks to Aberystwyth's unique personality; it is at the heart of the Mid Wales Countryside.

The Royal Welsh Agricultural Society was “formed in 1904, and the first show was held in Aberystwyth in the same year” (“Royal Welsh”). Farming communities are the very heartland of Aberystwyth, where traditions live on and the Welsh language is an aspect of everyday life. The Royal Welsh Agricultural Society has been at the center of agricultural creativity, innovation, and progress in Mid Wales. There is a great emphasis on organizing local support for farmers in the surrounding communities.

The Royal Welsh Show showcased community efforts that promoted sustainability and homegrown businesses through foods, crafts, and various other trade stands. What is more, the local food, remoteness of the area, and the landscape all somewhat relate to the fairgrounds in my hometown. For example, the Puyallup Fair is the largest attraction held annually in the state of Washington. At the Puyallup Fair, there is free entertainment, a rodeo, concerts, animal exhibits, car shows, and races.

Another example is the Evergreen State Fairgrounds in Monroe, Washington. The Evergreen State Fairgrounds showcase and promote Snohomish County agriculture, commerce, and culture. The fairgrounds in Washington aim to enrich the area's quality of life by providing educational, entertainment, agricultural, and social activities for the benefit of the residents and

businesses of surrounding communities. The Royal Welsh Show is both similar to and different in many ways from the state fairgrounds in Washington.

At the Royal Welsh Show, I enjoyed watching the judged events of sheep, horses, pigs, and various other domestic animals. The sheep shearing competitions were particularly telling of Aberystwythian identity and the connection to a rural environment. Observing the horse-riding competitions, carriage driving displays, and arts and crafts shows all enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of Aberystwyth's unique personality in relation to Bangor and Cardiff.

Moreover, I was able to watch the Welsh Cob Senior Stallion class, which is traditionally held on Wednesday afternoon, and also known as the "Welsh Cob Wednesday" show. The entire main arena was used for the show, and the grandstand and surrounding areas were covered by a sea of people. Over fifty stallions were paraded in front of the grandstand. The audience gave thunderous roars and applause for the stallions that performed the best.

One of the most surprising things I encountered at the Royal Welsh Show was the facility dedicated exclusively to Aberystwyth University. In the United States, fairgrounds do not affiliate with a college or university; it is simply not a social norm. However, at the Royal Welsh Show, Aberystwyth University demonstrated it had a strong presence within the agricultural and farming community. Thus, it proves that Aberystwyth University actively pursues outreach projects with local farming communities.

The Fulbright cohort's visit to the internationally renowned Institute of Biological, Environmental and Rural Sciences (IBERS) enabled me to gain a clearer understanding of the connection between the Royal Welsh Show and Aberystwyth University. The cohort's visit to IBERS, and the session on organic, conventional, and high-technological farming detailed the testimony of an institution that is committed to improving, sustaining, and aiding in the

development of the agricultural industry in Aberystwyth. As an institute farm, the aim is to “provide the best possible resources for research and teaching that will benefit the agricultural industry as a whole, while developing a sustainable model of milk and meat production that will allow... [the farms to profit] (“IBERS”). The university’s mission statement overlaps perfectly with the goals of the Royal Welsh Agricultural Society. Their underlying partnership brings together two important elements of Aberystwythian identity: rural life and agricultural excellence.

Mid Wales can make a contribution to the green economy and sustain its economy in a way that does not hurt the environment yet still preserves the beautiful landscape of the country. My experience at the Royal Welsh Show was one of a kind. The showcasing of Welsh livestock and the amazing quality of food produced in Wales is truly magnificent. But, the Royal Welsh Show also encompassed a wider spectrum of farming and rural life. Aberystwyth University and the Royal Welsh Show successfully bridge a gap between town and country, research and agriculture, and most importantly, identity and culture.

Landscape Archaeology and Culture in Aberystwyth

Peirce Lewis, an American geographer, is quoted as saying, “Our human landscape is our witting autobiography, reflecting our tastes, our values, our aspirations . . . in tangible, visible form. . . . [It is] the cultural record we have ‘written’ in the landscape” (Yamin and Metheny xiii). Interpreting historical landscapes involves understanding people and places and, most importantly, the interaction between humans and the landscape. Wales has a heritage hidden within the landscape, and its colorful heritage is waiting to be discovered and understood.

The Fulbright cohort’s archaeological tour with the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (RCAHMW) provided me with a unique lens with which to view Welsh culture. The Royal Commission has an important national role in developing and promoting a broader understanding of the landscape and built heritage of Wales. Thus, landscape archaeologists begin the process of analyzing the symbolic significance of a historical landscape. Historical landscapes evoke a shared sense of place and identity by remembering Wales as it used to be years ago.

Landscape archaeology studies the way the people consciously or unconsciously shaped the land around them. These archaeologists interpret the cultural, social, and historical meaning embedded in the landscape. Therefore, “the landscape is the stage for human action, it both reflects past activities and encodes the cultural landscape in which people’s view of the world are formed” (Yamin and Metheny xv). The landscapes of Wales change and, with it, so do the worldviews of the inhabitants in the region.

Moreover, “the landscapes of Wales have been moulded by millennia of human activity: by people who have farmed, provided shelter for their families, hunted, worshipped, fought, dug away the earth in mines and quarries, organised, played, travelled, [and] traded” (Wakelin and

Griffiths 11). As such, this human activity left behind cultural footprints, which capture the stories of people who inhabited the area in the past. That is, “landscape . . . [is a] cultural artifact—the cultural landscape—is a vital link with the past as well as an important subject of study for a variety of disciplines that fall loosely under the rubric of American [or Welsh] studies” (Yamin and Metheny 3). The landscape in Aberystwyth has been historically and culturally shaped by the lead mining industry.

For instance, “each generation has lived in ways that differed subtly – sometimes significantly – from those of the generation before. All have left their marks, still there to be detected in the fabric of . . . [a nation’s] surroundings” (Wakelin and Griffiths 11). These marks are detected, preserved, and decoded by landscape archaeologists. The Royal Commission and the National Monuments Record of Wales (NMRW) provide the best resources for exploring and understanding the heritage of Wales.

Furthermore, at the headquarters of the archaeological tour our guides explained the aims of the NMRW. The NMRW holds the national collection of information about the archaeological, architectural, and historical heritage of Wales. I benefited a great deal from gaining specialist advice from RCAHMW staff and viewing the magnificent collections. We received first-hand exposure to map collections, personal journals and diaries, photographs, and collections of aerial photographs. Personally interacting with the collections enabled me to gain a deep appreciation of landscape archaeological fieldwork.

The staff guided our tours to various historically significant areas. We visited fascinating historic lead mining areas, Ysbyty Cynfyn (the small rural church with mining connections), and the Hafod Church. These sites were the most interesting aspects of the tour. Ysbyty Cynfyn, was like a “community center,” and the story of the community unraveled itself within the walls of

church. We learned that it is used as more than a church in order to serve the needs of the tightly-knit community.

The Hafod Church was located in a beautiful landscape, which preserves a fascinating history. There were some unique features to the beautiful Gothic church. In fact, it was surprising to find a beautiful marble memorial—the Johnes family—displayed inside the church, even though the damage from a fire left the memorial beyond repair. The sculpture spoke to the importance of preservation and honoring previous styles, instead of tailoring to conventional aesthetic appeals. Throughout the tour we gained a sense of familiarity with a wide range of locations, and for that reason the boundaries of my archaeological knowledge were expanded.

Overall, the archaeological tour provided me with a wealth of information about the artifacts relating to local history and heritage that can be preserved. We were able to journey into the heart of history. The tour was led by a visionary staff, and our excursion presented us with an adventure, insightful information, and a new understanding of the Welsh culture, both past and present. Most importantly, I learned that the raw material connecting the past and present of Wales is culture.

Wales: A Journey in Search of an Identity

Red dragons, daffodils, and leeks, these national icons—on the surface—characterize contemporary Wales. However, Wales is so much more than the national icons it represents. Wales is an ancient land of castles, with a legacy of colorful folklore, and a rich cultural heritage. Wales has its own beautiful, creative, and ancient language. The nation is on a journey, in search of an identity, and I am on a similar journey.

As one author explains, “Wales is a country, it is not a State. It has a capital city, but not a Government; its own postage stamps, but not its own currency; a flag, but no embassies; an indigenous language, but not indigenous laws” (Morris 1). In this sense, Wales has always struggled with the process of defining, understanding, and maintaining its cultural identity or “Welshness.” Wales has a mutually dependent relationship with England and therefore struggles to find its own sense of cultural, social, and political independence—its own identity. This nation has survived dramatic periods of oppression and uncertainty, but contemporary Wales is stronger, wiser, and more confident of its own rightful place on the world stage.

Throughout the duration of this program, I have found it extremely fascinating to study Wales and Welsh culture in depth. I have gained unparalleled insights into Welsh culture, its relationship with England, Scotland, and Ireland, and how the country has maintained its native language. In the process of studying questions surrounding the idea of “Welshness,” I have broadened my own worldview. Wales has endured hardships, characterized by cultural assimilation, oppression, and economic stagnation. These factors, among many others, contribute to the nation’s drive and passion toward cultural survival.

Wales has taught me that one does not need to travel to faraway places to find out more about one’s self—the journey begins close to home. My journey in search of an identity begins with understanding my parents and their story, in the same manner that Wales began its journey

by discovering and understanding its own heritage, its own people. I discovered that Wales, through my experiences in Cardiff, Bangor, and Aberystwyth, is in the process of creating a mosaic of its people, and each colorful piece of glass tells a story about diversity, cultural identity, language, heritage, and the beautiful landscape that exists within the borders of the country. However, the mosaic is not yet complete—perhaps with time we will be able to see what larger image the small pieces of glass create.

On a personal level, I have fallen in love with the country. More specifically, I fell in love with its struggle and passion for native Welsh cultural and linguistic maintenance and survival. Because my parents tried to fully assimilate into American culture, they, in a way, renounced allegiance to their native culture and language. As a result, my immersion in Welsh culture, and learning about the struggle for a cultural identity in Wales, has enabled me to gain a better appreciation for my parents' cultural struggle in the United States.

Wales has inspired me to pursue a better understanding of my own heritage, cultural background, and the Spanish language. I hope to embrace the duality inherent in my identity—an innate identity and learned identity. The Fulbright Summer Institute has provided me with the opportunity to reassess my own world space. As a result, I have realized that my world space co-exists between two cultures. My challenge will be to walk on a path that lies in between two diverging roads—creating a path for my own story—and embrace all the complexities that it implies.

My own background and struggle with cultural identity has allowed me to empathize with the Welsh world experience. That is to say, my experiences have enabled me to relate with the people of a nation and appreciate the difficulty in understanding what cultural identity means. After living in the country for a month and a half, I learned more about myself by understanding

the complex and open-ended nature of Welsh culture. But, I still have much more to learn about Wales, and about myself—as a person, as a member of two cultures, and as a global citizen.

Overall, participating in the Fulbright Wales Summer Institute has enabled me to become an ambassador for studying in Wales. I gained a wealth of knowledge through an exciting academic program at three internationally renowned Welsh universities. Exploring the geography, culture, heritage, and history of Wales provided me with the opportunity to appreciate another strand of the global human experience. Wales is a country small enough to hold out the promise of being understood, and yet large enough to always offer more to discover around every corner.

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