Scholarship Report

Thanks to the generosity of both the University of Leicester and Ede and Ravenscroft, I was able to spend three and a half weeks of summer in the USA. This was particularly important to me, because despite being an undergraduate in American Studies, I had never actually visited America, and unlike many of my classmates, I was remaining in Britain for my third year. With my dissertation looming, it was particularly important that I travel out to the States so that I could get a feel of the culture that I had been studying for the past two years, and hopefully, find some things that could help me get a basis for my dissertation.

Having chosen to study how ideals of masculinity in contemporary American cinema had drawn its roots from the old west, I decided that the best places to travel to were California and Arizona. I had previously considered Wyoming, as the town of Cody is known for its Buffalo Bill Centre of the West, but due to my inability to drive and the sparse nature of Greyhound buses moving through the area, I was forced to cut it from my trip.

Altogether, I was awarded £600; £400 from the University of Leicester, and £200 from the Ede and Ravenscroft fund. I put this money towards purchasing a return ticket that would allow me to fly from Manchester to Oakland, and then from Flagstaff back to Manchester. The total cost of this return ticket was £647, and for the rest of my trip, I used money I had saved from my student loan, earned, or been gifted by family members.

I planned to travel within the United States by Greyhound, in the hopes that it would again cut the cost (each ride cost me £15-£30, which I believe was very reasonable, considering my shortest bus ride was three hours long) and give me a chance to see the scenery between each of my destinations close up.

San Francisco, California

Despite the fact that Los Angeles was intended to be my first proper study destination, I took a detour to Oakland to visit a friend of the family and acclimatise to the USA, rather than heading alone to a place almost entirely unknown to me. For the first few days, I was gifted his BART card, allowing me to travel from Oakland into San Francisco on a daily basis, expenses paid.

My first day out by myself taught me an important lesson about distances in America, as it quickly became clear to me why pretty much everyone learns to drive as soon as they can. Trekking from the city centre down to the coast, across the Golden Gate Bridge and back again was a tiring but enjoyable experience, and truly enlightened me as to why I should take public transport from there on out.
Over the next few days, I spent my time exploring the rest of the city, as well as being shown various parts of Oakland and being educated on some of the area’s history by my host. One morning, he took me up to San Francisco’s Twin Peaks at the back of the city. That, coupled with my journey to Coit Tower near China Town left me confident that I had experienced some of the best views of San Francisco.

But the vastness of America was not the only thing I learnt from my time in San Francisco, the way people behaved in American culture was also a very interesting thing to experience, and something I would only gain more of an understanding of as time went on.

Los Angeles, California

After leaving the Bay Area, I was fortunate enough to be greeted by another acquaintance in Los Angeles, who let me stay at their home in Long Beach, again saving me funds that I would have otherwise had to spend on hostels.

I was shown L.A.’s China Town, the Orange County and Olvera Street, a hub of Mexican culture in the city, which gave me an insight into the basics of immigration and the whole ‘melting pot’ aspect of Los Angeles.

After a couple of days, I met up with someone I had previously met in Oakland, who promised to take me out and give me his views on America and how they took in other cultures, reworked them, and presented them in a new light. He highlighted this by giving me a quick driving tour around Los Angeles, before taking me to an Americanized version of an Irish Pub Restaurant, which had taken different aspects from around Britain, but as you can imagine, was nothing like British pubs whatsoever.

From here, I travelled off on my own, using ‘AirBnB’ to cut costs and find an apartment to ‘couch surf’ at for about £15 a night, two blocks from Hollywood Boulevard. Although up to this point, everything had been somewhat educational, it was here that I truly got down to the
purpose of my visit. From the apartment, I was able to explore Hollywood Boulevard, and take a closer look at how American’s viewed the cinematic side of the culture.

I found Hollywood to be rather tacky, and preferred my day spent at the Autry National Centre, which ran a special exhibition on Route 66. But whilst the Route 66 exhibit was very interesting, it was obviously the rest of the museum that I had come for. The various exhibits on ‘Cowboys’ and Native Americans were useful in getting some ideas flowing on how I would start my dissertation; even the rooms devoted solely to guns or horse saddles were able to give me a better understanding of what I would soon be researching.

Phoenix, Arizona

Next, I moved on to Phoenix, Arizona, where I would now be staying in a hostel. Despite being a comfortable and homely establishment, the hostel still only cost me £20 per night. Here, I was able to branch out a bit, as I met people a bit closer to my own age. On my first day there, I joined some of the other travellers in a hike up the nearby Camelback Mountain. Not only did I learn a valuable lesson about my overconfidence and sunscreen, but I was also able to experience the rugged terrain that many ‘cowboys’ would have experienced first-hand, when travelling from town to town in desert-like conditions, day or night.
Staying with a large group of people was beneficial, as with everyone at the hostel having come from different areas around the world, they were able to give me their unique opinion of the United States. One guy in particular was very informative; despite coming off as a very gentle type of person, he was quick to tell me about his collection of guns, some of his reasons for which I believed related rather closely with my study of the need to conform to masculine stereotypes in the west.

Unfortunately, it was at this stage in the trip that I was informed that one of my main reasons for being in that particular area was now forfeit. Upon arrival in the States, I had booked a trip to Tombstone, ‘the town too tough to die’. Tombstone is a site featured in many representations of the west, and despite the fact that it has now become a bit of a tourist attraction, it is still cited as being one of the most faithful portrayals of an Old Western Town still functioning in America. My particular problem came about due to the tour company revealing a day before we were due to set off that they no longer had enough people to make the trip financially beneficial to them.

So instead, I spent my day in Old Town Scottsdale, which, whilst not actually a ‘Cowboy Town’, still retained the architecture from times gone by. I spent the rest of the day wandering around the Desert Botanical Garden, which had tons of information on what life was like for various people and creatures in the desert, with only plants to survive and make homes out of, which I was able to relate to my dissertation topic in a roundabout way.

**Flagstaff, Arizona**

Whilst I had thoroughly enjoyed my trip until this point, my time in Flagstaff was certainly the portion that I enjoyed the most.

Staying in another hostel for around the same price per night, I was once more surrounded by other travellers, these ones even closer to my own age due to the town’s student status.

My first day in Flagstaff happened to coincide with Independence Day (and, unfortunately, monsoon season), which meant I received an overload of American culture, with heaps of music, food, drinks and various celebrations occurring throughout town. After spending the day celebrating with my new friends, we ventured out to watch a percussion band in town,
which, like their crowd, were not put off by the pouring rain in the slightest; instead just happy to be celebrating one of the biggest days of their year.

My next day only got better; up bright and early, I was picked up by the tour guide and the other passengers and driven north, stopping at a couple of Native American reservations, before spending the day at the Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park. The price of the tour was about £110, and included the pick-up, transport and lunch with a fantastic view, on top of the informative and enjoyable tour that our guide provided.

Our tour guide even went above and beyond the call of duty, as he helped the other passengers sort out various accommodation issues, and upon hearing about my previous cancelled trip to Tombstone, gave me a quick run-down on what he knew about the town. He also told me about John Ford’s relationship with the various areas around Arizona, which of course again related directly with my topic of the Old West.

The scenery at Monument Valley was phenomenal, and paired with our guide’s in-depth knowledge of Arizona and the other states with which it shared Monument Valley (Utah, New Mexico and Colorado) it made for the best day out I had in my time in the United States. Not only that, but seeing the place where so many Westerns are based truly made me understand why such a place is so filmable; it encompasses many of America’s traits; it’s vastness, beauty and intensity.

The following day held a trip to somewhere with a similar type of geology, as me and some friends drove down to Sedona to climb the buttes. We chose to climb up Bell Rock, which
gradually evolved from a slight slope to a vertical climb. We were later greeted with a ‘guest book’ at the top of the butte for any travellers brave enough to make it to the finish. Like the hike up Camelback Mountain, this also made me more aware of the intense conditions of the desert landscape, except this time round, a chance of falling made it far more exhilarating.

After a couple of days exploring Flagstaff and spending time with my new travelling companions, I headed to the Grand Canyon to finish off my trip. That part, I can’t really put down into words, because the canyon, as many claim, is truly indescribable, and something you can’t really appreciate until you’ve seen it for the first time. I’m hesitant to even put down pictures, because I don’t believe they truly do it justice.
In those three weeks, I learnt to understand my university subject in a way I never really could have before my trip. I knew the history and I’d studied the culture, but now that I’ve really experienced it first hand, my understanding of the United States has only grown stronger.

In giving me the money to conduct my trip, I was not only given a chance to study, but also a chance to gain new friends, connections and experiences that I will never forget.

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