Exchange Report
Humboldt University of Berlin
Germany
Major: Gender Sexuality and Women’s Studies
March 2016-August 2016

Germany’s semesters are staggered differently from Simon Fraser’s, and so I had a lot of time off in the Spring semester to make some extra money for my exchange, get packing and say goodbye to friends. I boarded my flight for Germany on March 22nd, 2016, full of excitement for discovering my life abroad. I arrived in Frankfurt, where I caught up with some relatives, got my German cell phone set up (plans are so cheap compared to Canada- make sure to bring an unlocked phone), got a German bank card and began looking for accommodation. I know some people looked ahead of time but I wanted to be able to call and set up appointments, instead of just over email. Within about four days I had gotten a lot of fake messages, but did manage to set up two legitimate appointments to view apartments. Humboldt also offers dorm rooms, if you apply in advance with your school application, but they are very far from the school and centre of the city. You’ll find that you’re limited by transit stopping in the early morning. I’m sure it’s a great way to meet other students, but I think staying in the city is preferable if you’re up for the challenge of looking patiently and carefully for a room.

VERY IMPORTANT: While I was in Berlin, one of my closest friends was scammed while looking for an apartment. Never say yes to someone offering to send keys to you, while you wire them the money. This may look very legitimate, eg. from AirBnb (it was a fake account). Don’t think it can’t happen to you- keep vigilant, and don’t be afraid of waiting for a legit offer to come. It’s easy to feel desperate about not having a place to stay but staying in a hostel is an easy and cheap option. I heard of this happening to over half a dozen people, so please, be careful! You will find somewhere to stay, I promise! I also

Figure 1 Outside of Humboldt University of Berlin
found that Humboldt was flexible about needing an address to register— it could be added at a later date.

I boarded a small budget flight from Frankfurt to Berlin a few days before my matriculation date (a registration date at the university you must attend in person). For the first few days, I had to pay for public transit (they do check!) but once I had registered, a bus pass is included with your student card. I had a hostel booked for the first few days while I looked for an apartment. My first appointment did not work out, but the second apartment was perfect! So I knew I had a place to stay for my exchange from my first day in Berlin. I wasn’t able to move in for about a week, so I extended my stay at the hostel. My accommodation was 400 euros per month, about 600 CAD, with wifi, laundry, bedroom, kitchen and bathroom, sharing with a middle aged woman.

Germany is a cashed based society. You have to have it on you at all times, because it’s the only really reliable method of payment. It’s also good to have a German bank account because it has a special feature for transferring money that’s different from ours. You need it to pay for extracurriculars for sure, and I just found I used it quite often for various reasons. You will need to have a permanent address before you can set one up.

I stopped by the school to see what it was like— magnificent!— and also stopped into the International Student Centre— ORBIS, who were able to alleviate some of my concerns and questions. The centre proved to be helpful my whole semester. Plus they organized lots of activities and a semester trip, which was so much fun!

On my matriculation day, Humboldt required me to fill out a lot of paperwork and pay my students fees. All of this information was given to me ahead of time through email. I also stopped by the visa service, which gave me all the necessary forms and

Figure 2 The university library
information about what I needed to collect to apply for my visa. Once I applied (which I had to do within the first two months), it took about 6 weeks to get my passport and visa back. So I stuck around in town, and explored, and saved the travelling for after my passport was returned. There was also a 50 euro fee for the visa application. Before applying for my visa, I also had to register my living situation with the city. It’s a mandatory process, which can be quite stressful. I made an appointment at a “Burgeramt” out of town, and brought another international student with me who could translate, as the service is notoriously impatient with long lines. In the end, I didn’t have any problems, but it is a process.

The school offered a general orientation for all exchange students, although it was all in German so not particularly helpful for me. I also did a one-day course about studying in Germany where I got my most useful information, and met a lot of the friends I stayed friends with during the semester. The most daunting thing about studying at Humboldt is the class organization and how to register. I would suggest speaking to as many people as you can to coordinate the information- there’s not really one good place to get it. Speak to the Canadian advisor, ORBIS, and faculty advisor to get the best idea of what classes are right for you. My experience was that class formats are very similar to SFU. The big difference is that there are most likely only 1 or 2 big projects/essays that your grade is based on, unlike how SFU has lots of little assignments. Exams are often optional, where you only do them if you want a grade. I would also highly recommend taking a language class. Even if you just learn how to order a restaurant, simple greeting and numbers, it truly adds to the experience of living abroad.

Some notes on packing: Germany is very cold in the winter, and hot in the summer. Even in late spring, it was freezing so bring a warm jacket, mittens and toque for the cold days. It is absolutely beautiful in the summer though!

I would highly suggest buying an inexpensive bike through Facebook or German ebay. It’s really the only way to get around Berlin! Don’t forget a good lock, as bike theft is common.
Some highlights about Berlin: So many cafés and restaurants with excellent food and patio seating. In the summer, everyone sits outside. I also loved grabbing a beer from the corner store, and heading to the park for an impromptu barbecue or a day at a lake. Berlin has over 800 lakes surrounding it, most accessible by public transit. I also loved taking salsa lessons and kayaking lessons through the university. Kayaking was in German, but as I already have the basic kayaking skills, so it was a great way to enjoy Berlin’s nature, learn some language basics and make friends with locals.

Some of my favourite sites in Berlin:

- Teufelsberg - abandoned US listening station, now turned art commune
- Markthalle 9 - food market on Thursdays
- Tadshikische Teestube Berlin - cozy tea house perfect for a rainy day
Living and studying in Berlin was such a rewarding experience. Although it was enough tough being away from my family, friends and boyfriend, as well as the comfort of home, I thrived in having to push myself. There’s only you to help you, or at least to find the person to ask for help. The school system is challenging to figure out, have patience. There’s also a lot of paperwork continuously throughout the semester. Pay attention and review to make sure that you have everything covered. It was so much fun to figure out Berlin, and to make a little part of it my own. Honestly the hardest part for me has been adjusting to being back home. I can’t wait to go on my next adventure.