Managing Social Identities Abroad
Advice from the 2014 Bonderman Fellows

Tyler Mesman
As a reference point I will spell out some of my social identities below so that other students can reference them:

Gender - Male
Sex - Male
Race - White
Sexual Orientation - Gay
Ethnicity - Dutch/German/English/Irish
Socio-Economic Status - Lower Middle Class/Middle Class
Family Structure - (Mostly) Single-parent household/It's complicated
Citizenship - American
Religion - Agnostic/Atheist

If there are any other identities that students are interested in then they can feel free to contact me about them - my life is an open book.

I think one thing that students should keep in mind in regards to their social identities is that there is a major difference between visible and invisible social identities. Meaning that there are some that are evident based on appearance - i.e. race/skin color - and others that are not always so apparent - i.e. sexual orientation or citizenship. What I realized on the road is that the social identities that may be most important to you or have the most effect on your life in the US, may not actually play that much into every interaction on the road. The people you encounter will see what they want to see and my focus on a particular aspect of your identity that you didn't even realize.

For example - during my first month of travel I was having a hard time managing my gay identity on the road because I was mostly keeping it a secret to people I met for fear of how they would react. I reached out to Erin Busbee for support because I know she identities in similar communities to my own and since she was traveling as well I figured she would be a helpful resource for me. As it turns out people hadn't focused on that aspect of her identity at all and were more focused on the fact that Erin is African-American and few people had seen that before in the places Erin was traveling. Because Erin holds a different combination of social identities than I do the experience on the road is different and that is really important to keep in mind if you think you know what traveling to a specific destination will be like.

Travel guidebooks and blogs can be deceiving because they don't always take those factors into account - it's important to think of the both the author and the audience when doing research through those mediums. If the authors are predominantly straight, white, upper-middle class males then the experience will be skewed and if you identify with one or more marginalized identities then you're going to have a much different experience and you should be prepared for that.

This, however, can be a really good thing. While I've been traveling I have been able to explore what it means to be a gay person globally and I've sought out the gay community in each
country I've been traveling to in order to see what life is like in their communities and gain support on the road. I have the privilege of seeing a window in a community that most travelers wouldn't even think of seeing and as a gay person I get a lot of personal support because I am a member of that global community. It makes my travel experience unique and for that I am really grateful. It isn't always easy and at times I have had to bite my tongue when someone has said something that has really offended me personally, but the moments of community support make up for it. There are plenty of ways to seek out your own community using social media. Another aspect of this is that I have the opportunity to educate others at the same time that I am learning myself. In the times that I have revealed my sexual orientation to others they are generally very curious to learn from me and my life experiences. I know that some people get exhausted of educating others about their social identities, but I personally enjoy it and view it as an opportunity to help others understand and empathize. It is true that you will become a cultural sponge on the road, but that doesn't mean you can't or shouldn't share your own cultural experiences with others.

Another thing to keep in mind is that your social identities will not be treated the same in all countries or places. For example - when I was in South Africa I was definitely treated a certain way because of the color of my skin. The country has a long and sordid history of racial segregation and violent and that communal history had an impact on the way others saw me as a white person. I found that it was easier to make friends with white South Africans and it took much more effort to make friends with black or colored (this is the official race of people of mixed black/white ancestry) South Africans. This wasn't because people were overtly hostile to my skin color, but because the interactions were different with people of color - fewer of them traveling or working in customer service positions which had sustained interactions with tourists. Here in India, however, being white is a novelty and it is very easy to make friends with Indians. They often come up to me just to chat and ask where I am from. Some even ask to take their picture with me because it is less common to see white people in some of the communities here. So basically different countries equal a different cultural context in which to manage your own social identities.

One thing I want to emphasize is that travelers are the most tolerant group of people you will ever meet and you will be surprised by their level of understanding and empathy. There are definitely some people who you will meet traveling who have a long way to go in understanding other and interacting with them respectfully, but on the whole you will be stunned by how awesome people are. They will be consistent resources from which to draw support. Locals or native people aren't always as understanding - but you will also be surprised by how enlightened, understanding and kind people are. Obviously be smart on the road, but don't underestimate someone's abilities and intelligence.

Furthermore, my experience as an American has been wonderful on the road. Some American travelers will lie on the road and say they are Canadian to avoid being hassled - but I must say I have never once been seriously hassled for being American. In fact, most people are pleasantly surprised to meet an American and in most of the places I have traveled to, it is not common to see other American tourists. I've had a lot of conversations about our gun control laws though - seems to be a reoccurring theme with travelers from Western Europe and Australia.

Lastly, just as a matter of fine print - I want to emphasize that no one's experience on the road is the same. My thoughts and reflections are a result of my own experiences and cannot possible represent those of everyone who holds similar social identities that I do. Even though I hold marginalized identities I benefit A LOT from two major ones in my experiences - mainly being white and being male. These two dominate my interactions with everyone I meet on the road.
because they are immediately apparent and (unfortunately) are ridden with privilege. Furthermore, most people assume I am straight because I don't have mannerisms typically associated with effeminate gay men and people also assume that I am wealthy because I am able to travel continuously for 8 months. All together my identities hold a great amount of privilege and perhaps that is coloring my experiences as a traveler.

Erin Busbee
When I originally planned to add the southeast region of Asia to my itinerary, my first research was of the experiences of black people in those countries. I can't say that none of the other fellows did this but I know for me, it is a first thought when visiting anywhere. What is the climate like for black people in the region? Country? What is it like for women? What about LGBTQI people? What if you are all of those things intersected? And that was something I could never get an answer to.

For some people, the isolation of these identities is concerning enough but I couldn't answer any one without consideration to the others. That's the thing about identities, they don't exist in isolation and every one of them shapes the way we are perceived and received.

A while back during this fellowship, one of my fellow fellows asked me “If it’s not too invasive a question, how have you been finding it being a gay traveler? Have you been open about it or mostly silent on the issue/pretending to be straight?”

And my response was “I can’t really tell because I have so many distinct and “unique” identities to the places I visit. My gender identity is ambiguous at times so in Santiago, everyone in my hostel thought I was a man and I went with it, so speaking openly about my gf was nothing. I also happened to meet a gay man there. He was a Puerto Rican New Yorker who moved to Santiago for work and I had the opportunity to meet and interact with some of his friends. They took me to a lesbian club so that was cool and by chance. People stare at me a lot but it could be because I’m a black person in places where we aren’t common or many of them may be trying to figure out my androgyny...I think gender identity and race have been far more difficult to navigate and I haven't really made it to sexuality yet....I think when I get to Buenos Aires, I'll explore the scene a bit more but for here and now I'm asexual lol.”

He responded with “Ahh yes, very true - I suppose I hadn't thought about that. I was also going to apologize for not using the more inclusive acronym LGBTQ (etc) because I never really asked how you identified and just assumed so I do apologize...I’ve been finding it more difficult that I imagined - feels like I'm in high school again with everyone assuming I'm straight and since I'm in a majority Muslim country I don't feel so comfortable speaking up.”

Side note: I started my journey in 3 of 4 countries with equality law that surpass the U.S and there’s a chance of visiting places where same-sex relations(hips) are punishable by law. Location matters.

In a separate conversation with another fellow, we were catching up on our recent experiences and locations. He stated that where he was currently was not challenging for him and the subsequent conversation followed.

Me: “....Challenging how? What is it you're looking for?”
Fellow: “I prefer it when I step on a bus and people are all like What is that kid doing here? But Thailand isn't like that too much. The number of travelers there leads people to have a lot of western style accommodations and then they westernize their food too. Maybe I got that feeling because I was in the three most tourusty cities though.”

My initial thought when I read the response was, I’ve had that “hey what is this kid doing here” look at home, at Michigan, on a campus bus and it's not as exciting when it's everyday life. Don't get me wrong, I completely understand what he was saying and I can relate with that feeling in relation to what we want to get out of this fellowship, but it's never a feeling I have to look for. I will assume that there were very few if any times in his life that he stepped on a bus or many places at home and had that look or the feeling that comes along with it, so for him, this was a sign that he was away from his comfort zone, that people weren’t used to seeing him and that he was in the minority.

I on the other hand, I have been waiting to get to a place where I can just blend in for a moment and be a human and not a foreign sight, speaking on race specifically. When it comes down to the intersection of my identities, I have no idea why people look at me, what they’re thinking when they do or what type of judgments they are making. (Not speaking of only negative judgments just general.)

I think these two conversations illustrate just how different experiences can be, based on our identity and lived experience. From interactions I’ve experienced, I’ll safely say that I’m sure more than 50% of people I meet think I’m a man, which changes up a lot in people’s judgments. I’ve passed often, used men’s restrooms to avoid the external awkwardness and just held it all in to avoid the internal awkwardness. I think in general, those who have to be conscious of their identities all the time will find it less of a hassle to navigate abroad. You have to be able to judge your surroundings and if it is an identity you can “alter” you have to assess if a situation calls for that alteration.

I have not faced any outward discrimination based on any of my identities. I have become far more aware of my privilege, being an American outside of America, a native English speaker, an able bodied person, with a college education and the ability to travel the world (SES) to name a few. Those agent identities also do not exist in isolation of the target identities and they definitely play a large role in how I interact and how I am perceived abroad.

**Louis Mirante**

I can't answer for many [social identities] because I only identify as a Christian American, and, that added to my white skin, gives me a lot of cache with almost everyone everywhere. I am trying to absorb different identities as I go along, so my goal as it regards my identity is not self-preservation as much as it is self-abnegation.

But I will say that being a female is not a hindrance in India or any other country I've been to. You get heckled and maybe touched sometimes, but I've had people reach out to touch my blonde hair too, and no one means harm by it nor will harm come of it, unless you freak out and start scaring people. But people need to be willing to accept cultural norms that they would not accept at home if they intend to find a new way of living, which, as I see it, is a major goal of this fellowship. Sometimes a country asks that you put your identities on hold for a while, which may be challenging for some, but has led to some very educational experiences for me.