

Arthur F. Burns Fellowship 2019

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A lot of people told me that the Burns fellowship would be “life-changing” but I felt like that was a bit of an exaggeration until I did it myself.

Walking into the fellowship, I wasn’t sure what to expect. I had never been to Germany before. The only thing I knew about Berlin, aside from some of the history behind the Wall, was that it had a world-famous club scene. But looking back on it now, I appreciate the opportunity to get to know such an enchanting city, and to find my footing reporting in a new country.

Orientation:

The orientation week in D.C. was packed, and the schedule was a bit overwhelming. I think we probably could have done with one or two fewer panels. While I think the topics covered were interesting, as a Canadian going to Germany, I would have appreciated a crash course in domestic German politics and culture, maybe even led by some of the German fellows. Or an informal q+a. The other thing I would flag: almost every single speaker/panelist during orientation week was white. Considering that the topics covered included the rise of populism, the alt-right, and mainstream media coverage, I think we could have benefitted from hearing the perspectives of people of colour.

Airlie was awesome. It’s a beautiful property and it was just a very fun and relaxing couple of days. It also provided an opportunity for the fellows to get to know each other in an informal setting.

Language:

German is a fun language, but didn’t come easily to me. Our instructor Tom was energetic, hilarious, and all around a great teacher. I had pretty bad jet lag after we got to Berlin, so it was nice to have language classes to ease into our new setting instead of jumping right into work. Having said that, I was struggling with memorizing all the new vocabulary and rules. But even the small amount of German I did pick up was useful to me, and made me feel more immersed. A lot of people told me to try to learn a bit of German beforehand, and I wish I had heeded this advice.

Placement:

I chose to be placed at Deutsche Welle, Germany’s English-speaking international broadcaster. It’s like a German counterpart to BBC. I could tell pretty early on that DW wasn’t going to be a great fit for me. First off, there wasn’t a desk to accommodate me, so I was told I would have to ask around each morning to see if any desks were available. I was placed in the TV department and the expectation seemed to be that I would cut down clips of tape to be used in the broadcast—a task that I had no interest in doing. I had several conversations

with DW editors, and while they expressed interest in short video pieces, they told me they weren't very well-equipped to go out and shoot those types of stories. I mentioned my drug reporting background to one editor and he used terms like "junkie" and "hooker" a few times during the conversation, which was not a great sign that my ideas would be well-received. I decided to focus my efforts in writing pieces for VICE, both my home office and the German office. The VICE Germany office was very welcoming and helpful with ideas and contacts. But I spent most of my time writing for VICE Canada, juggling both Canadian and German stories.

Stories:

Getting German academics and experts to talk during the summer months proved to be a challenge. A lot of potential sources didn't reply or replied weeks after my request. So if you have a story you definitely want to pursue, it's probably best to do a bit of the legwork beforehand. Most people can do interviews in English, but sometimes they wanted to know the questions beforehand or, as is common practice in Germany, they wanted to approve quotes before publication. I managed to avoid the latter by offering to do a fact check by phone prior to publication.

To make it work, I tried to find stories that had both German and Canadian angles.

My first story was on the flight shame trend, looking at how it's taken off in Europe, but hasn't really caught on in North America.

I also did a piece comparing a xenophobic op-ed in a Canadian newspaper to Nazi propaganda.

I was invited as a guest on one of DW's morning broadcasts to talk about Justin Trudeau's blackface scandal and the story I had written about it. There were a couple of issues at DW, such as the producer telling me right before I went on air that she didn't feel Trudeau doing blackface was a big deal.

My main feature for VICE (which hasn't yet been published) will focus on how Canadian cannabis companies are expanding into Germany, while Germany's medical cannabis system is broken in the eyes of many patients. I will also do a couple of sidebar pieces on how Germans feel about Canadian weed and my insights going from a country with legalization back to a country with prohibition.

I also travelled to Munich for Oktoberfest and wrote a fun feature for VICE Germany about my adventures.

Overall, I'm happy with the work I produced, but perhaps more importantly, the fellowship provided me with a much needed change of scenery and helped to renew my interest in reporting.

Berlin:

Getting to explore Berlin in the summer was undoubtedly the highlight of the fellowship.

I lived on the Neukölln/Kreuzberg border and I couldn't have asked for a cooler location. There were tons of cafes, bars, restaurants, and parks nearby, and my flat was within walking distance of the canal. I asked friends who live in Berlin to help with my apartment search, and was lucky to find a large studio for 600 euros a month.

Walking around Berlin, I seemed to find story ideas everywhere. It's genuinely such a fascinating and authentic city, with a lot of history behind it.

The U-bahn system made it super easy to get around. Normally, I would be terrified of riding a bike in a city, but the bike lanes are so well-marked that I went for it, and had a lot of fun.

Berlin is known for its expats, many of whom I found to be friendly and helpful. If there was one downside though, I wish I had made more friends with Germans. I think language was part of the issue. I did get along with my VICE Germany colleagues, though we didn't hang out outside of the office much.

Links:

Flight shaming:

https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/xweynk/flight-shamers-want-us-to-give-up-air-travel-theyre-not-wrong

Nazi propaganda:

https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/a35kdz/how-that-xenophobic-vancouver-sun-op-ed-stack-s-up-against-actual-nazi-propaganda

Oktoberfest:

English version:

https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/evjm5j/i-thought-oktoberfest-would-suck-but-then-i-remembered-im-a-trash-person

Justin Trudeau blackface:

https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/bjw7v4/some-questions-for-justin-trudeau-our-prime-minister-who-loves-brownface-and-blackface

(I was on DW talking about this piece—there's no link but I have a copy of the video.)

To come:

Feature on Canadian expansion into Germany's cannabis system and two sidebars.