This past summer, thanks to Barger Leadership Institute, I was awarded Summer 2015 Global Scholarship for my Global Course Connections trip to Amsterdam, Netherlands and Berlin Germany. With fellow students from diverse backgrounds and academic interests, I was able to explore ways in which organizations and agents in various countries engage community residents in social and political acts. This experience exposed me to various narratives, provided me many opportunities to get to know others, and helped me foresee my future goals as a scholar and a leader.

In both countries, I had many opportunities to engage in conversations with various people and learn more about the countries through different narratives. In both Amsterdam and Berlin, gentrification is rampant. Areas where immigrants and people of lower socioeconomic status used to reside were being transformed into newly painted houses and fancy coffee shops. Every corner I turned I saw a battle against the poor - the people who really do need a community dedicated to themselves were being wiped out in the names of creativity, innovations, and money. Erasing the graffiti on the wall meant erasing the narratives of the marginalized.

Acts of gentrification in Amsterdam and Berlin are very similar to what is happening in Detroit; masked by the word “revitalization”, Detroit is currently being exploited by young, creative individuals who are seeking to make a lot of money. However, when a community is being revamped and turned into a cooler, more “hip” place, housing prices go up and the residents of such communities can no longer afford to pay rent. They are being displaced. Gentrification not only leads to physical displacement but also “cultural displacement”, which Meagan Elliott, an urban planner and Ph.D. candidate in sociology at the University of Michigan, describes as “a loss of a sense of place and community and [your] right to [create] the vision for that community's future”. Even if the people are still able to live in the area, cultural displacement strikes an imbalance between community representatives, leading them to lose their attachment to their communities.

When I saw gentrification with my own two eyes in Amsterdam and Berlin, I began to question people and their underlying motives: Why is it okay for some to change other people’s communities without meeting eye to eye, without considering their positions? Is everyone so blinded by their own gains that they do not see the pain reflected in others? Are we that selfish?

Then a voice in my head asked me quietly. Am I that selfish?

As someone who loves to explore and visit new places, I too may partake in gentrification. I can’t say that these creative processes are always bad or unwelcomed; people always crave the “next best thing”. Moreover, new businesses can sometimes also help stabilize the city’s tax base, which means more money for the city for essential services like garbage pickup, cops, and firefighters. But the working-class and low-income residents who are outcompeted by newcomers almost always end up falling through the crack. Prison-industrial complex (overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and
imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems) and the overall disproportionate impact on minorities become more and more noticeable. So the real question is, how can we continue to make money to sustain the community without kicking out the original community members? How can we benefit everyone and make sure we are listening to everyone’s voice?

On this trip, we were encouraged and pushed to analyze how various countries use different approaches to mobilize people for collective action, challenge oppressive structures, and build cohesive communities. Disruptions in the communities due to international flows of labor and education were especially analyzed to address concerns regarding globalization and immigration. Engaging in such conversations lead me to realize that it’s everyone’s job to help a community sustain itself on its own account. People have their own cultural upbringing and history, and that shapes who you are as a community member. Therefore, outsiders should not infiltrate that space. When others try to disrupt that space, no matter how well-meaning they are, the place is no longer the same. As an aspiring community social worker and leader, I was reminded to always value people’s individual identities and narratives, no matter how beneficial my work may seem. As a leader who wants change, I need to take a step back first and ask: Am I here to help or to intrude? Are my actions invited or disapproved?

Hear people’s voices. Respect their existence. This is a lesson I can apply to any part of my life, in any relationship, and I am thankful to have been selected as one of the students to learn such important message.