



MY YEAR IN A BERLIN FOREST XÓCHITL BADA

Xóchitl Bada is an Associate Professor of Latin American and Latino Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She received a Doctorate in Sociology from the University of Notre Dame. Her research interests include migrant access to political and social rights, rural migration and development, migrant organizing strategies, violence and displacement, and transnational labor advocacy mobilization. Her research has appeared in *Forced Migration Review*, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *Journal of Agrarian Change*, and *Labor Studies Journal*. Her book *Mexican Hometown Associations in Chicagoacán: From Local to Transnational Civic Engagement* (Rutgers University Press, 2014) demonstrates how and why emergent forms of citizen participation practiced by Mexican Hometown Associations engage simultaneously with political elites. She is co-editor of the *Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Latin America*, (Oxford University Press, 2021), *New Migration Patterns in the Americas*, (Palgrave, 2018), and *Accountability across Borders* (University of Texas Press, 2019), a cross-national book addressing migrant rights advocacy in North America. – Address: Latin American and Latino Studies Program, University of Illinois at Chicago, Suite 1519 University Hall M/C 219, 601 S. Morgan St., Chicago, IL 60607, USA. E-mail: xbada@uic.edu.

A short commute to work, excellent public transportation to explore every neighborhood in Berlin and Brandenburg, lightning-fast book deliveries, thought-provoking lunch conversations, and a lake view from my apartment: all told, the accommodations provided by the Wiko to develop my academic projects were extraordinary.

Since I began my first collaboration with German scholars from the Freie Universität Berlin in 2007, I had heard a lot about the Wiko from several colleagues at Bielefeld University, Ruhr-Universität Bochum, the Forum Transregionale Studien, and former Wiko Fellows from Chicago and New York City. The idea of living in an interdisciplinary group of scholars while enjoying the total freedom to read, write, and explore new ideas was incredibly exciting to me.

I moved to Villa Walther with my daughter in late July. Knowing that in the fall I would be devoting all my time to my book manuscript on transnational labor advocacy, I took some time to explore my new surroundings, visiting museums, *Tanz im August* performances, local swimming pools and lakes around Berlin, and the Christopher Street Day Parade. My husband joined us in late August, and I am grateful for his sacrifice of leaving behind his beloved Argonne National Laboratory, where he studies theoretical astrophysics, to spend the year with our daughter and me in Berlin. Thanks to the support of the wonderful Wiko staff, my daughter was able to attend a public bilingual school in the fall, and she also delighted in taking violin and ballet lessons and sampling the wonderful ethnic restaurants in Kreuzberg.

The intensive German classes for true beginners offered a great opportunity to form a special bond with the other Fellows in the course. I became familiar with their research interests and learned a great deal about their fascinating projects, which included the interconnectedness of different ecosystems on Earth, the post-Soviet history of Azerbaijan, the prevention of brain cell injuries, and the difficulties of setting up clinical trials for acute stroke treatments. The German language classes also helped me practice my language skills in the fabulous Berlin restaurants, and by February, I was able to read most menus and communicate with the waiters. I loved the well-organized walking tours of Prenzlauer Berg, “Kreuzkölln”-Rixdorf, Grunewald, and Oranienburger Vorstadt. These tours afforded me, as an immigration scholar, the rare opportunity of taking a closer look at different immigrant experiences in Berlin. I also enjoyed the “Believing in Berlin” tour. The visit to multiple neighborhood churches and faith-based organizations showcased the collective actions performed by different religious organizations to support local immigrants. Having a Jesuit theologian in the group encouraged me to reconnect with my Catholic roots, and I also treasured my talks with Nicole Brisch, a wonderful Assyriologist who organized the most spectacular tour of the Pergamon Museum and inspired my daughter to focus on early Egyptian food culture for a school project.

Another highlight was the film series organized by the German language instructor to better acquaint Fellows with German history and how contemporary films have addressed the memories of the Holocaust. The films thoroughly prepared me for my visits to the House of the Wannsee Conference Memorial and Educational Site. At a time when global networks allow for extensive communication between U.S.-based xenophobic White Supremacist groups and sympathizers of the far-right Alternative for Germany party, it is urgent to remember the lessons of the Holocaust and the Berlin Wall to prevent the resurgence of divisive rhetoric, towering walls, and totalitarian regimes.

The enduring legacy of the Wall affected me deeply and resonated with my own work. Learning about the lives of those who were separated by the Berlin Wall at the Berlin Wall Memorial on Bernauer Straße provided new inspiration to continue addressing the inequalities, drama, and separation created by unjust walls along the Mexico-U.S. border. During the celebrations of the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Wall, I appreciated that multiple museum exhibits in Berlin invited artists from the Americas to reflect on the contemporary meanings of borders. The *Durch Mauern gehen* exhibit at the Gropius Bau and *The Voice Before the Law* exhibit at the Hamburger Bahnhof were particularly successful in highlighting the relevance of the Berlin Wall to contemporary issues of borders, immigrants, and language identities.

I also immersed myself in other areas of German cultural life. The 100th Birthday Celebration for the Bauhaus movement included multiple events throughout 2019. On an early Sunday morning in late September, I took the S-Bahn from Grunewald to Dessau to visit the famous Walter Gropius Bauhaus building, now converted into a fantastic museum of architectural history. I marveled at the similarities to several Bauhaus-inspired residential buildings I am familiar with in Mexico City, where I went to college. Along with several Wiko Fellows, I returned to Dessau in February to listen to *Unknown, I Live with You*, an opera installation by Krystian Lada premiered during the Kurt Weill Festival. Last but not least, Germany was also celebrating the 250th birthday of Alexander von Humboldt during my stay. To honor the occasion, the Humboldt Forum in Berlin put on a brief commemorative exhibit cataloguing the connections von Humboldt established with Latin American scholars, along with a thought-provoking critical analysis of decolonizing knowledge.

In terms of my professional work, my year at the Kolleg made it possible to accept projects and invitations that I could never have agreed to while teaching and directing the graduate program at my home institution. Due to the pandemic, I was able to deliver only

one talk at the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt an der Oder in the fall, as the virus forced the cancellation of all my spring conferences. Nevertheless, being released from all teaching and administrative obligations allowed me to accept offers to edit the first *Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Latin America*, a *Routledge Handbook of Latin American Migration*, and (in collaboration with several colleagues from Mexico and Germany) a *Routledge Handbook of Transnationalism*. During my year at the Wiko, I was able to finish the *Oxford Handbook*, which has now been published. The collection includes more than 40 essays of sociological scholarship produced in Latin America in the fields of state building, social inequalities, religion, collective action and social movements, migration, gender, violence, and health. I established a new collaboration on violence, migration, and displacement with colleagues from the Freie Universität and took advantage of my newfound time to read across many disciplinary boundaries and publish a book review in the *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* on the anthropology of borderlands. I published an article on rural migration in the *Journal of Peasant Studies* and published a book chapter with colleagues from Ruhr-Universität Bochum. I also accepted an invitation to serve as an associate editor for Sociology with the *Latin American Research Review*. Upon my return to Chicago, I quickly began to regret my Wiko-induced enthusiasm for saying yes to a multitude of projects.

To advance my book manuscript on transnational labor advocacy, I spent most of the fall reading the work of German immigration scholars to gain some comparative insights on how Germany and the European Union enforce the labor rights of non-EU immigrant workers. I took advantage of the multiple seminars on contemporary labor and immigration issues offered by the American Academy of Berlin and the WZB Berlin Social Science Center, as well as the excellent seminars organized at the Wiko and the Hertie School on solidarity at work in Germany and France. I also had an opportunity to meet with the migration scholars affiliated with the Berlin Institute for Integration and Migration Research (BIM) at the Humboldt-Universität. I had fruitful and illuminating conversations with staff at the German Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs on immigrant labor regulations in Germany. The methodological discussions held during the Fruitful Frictions Forums compelled me to reconceptualize the introductory chapter of my book to account for the ethical dilemmas of working with vulnerable immigrant workers. After sharing the main ideas of my book project at my Wiko colloquium, I received many useful comments. I am grateful for the feedback provided by Bénédicte Zimmermann, Nicolas Dodier, and Michael Karayanni. Equally productive were the many

conversations I had with the Fellows who were developing projects related to law and society. The book is now under contract at the University of California Press.

During my year in Berlin, I came to rely on exceptional friends both old and new, especially after the pandemic confined us to our home for six weeks. My local friends always made sure that I was never too alarmed after local authorities announced updates on mitigation strategies. I was also inspired by the sense of solidarity and mutual responsibility that emerged among all Fellows and Wiko staff during the lockdown. We continued our conversations on Zoom and tried to keep each other company by scheduling long walks in Grunewald forest. I am especially grateful to Alastair M. Buchan for his unbiased assessment of the risks of COVID-19 early on during the health emergency and to his wife Angelika Kaiser for encouraging me to start a knitting project to find peace amid the chaos. Unfortunately, the spread of the virus in Germany, as in the rest of major industrial economies, uncovered the harsh consequences of entrenched labor inequalities. Unsurprisingly, the virus found its greatest opportunities among refugee homes, meat-packing plants, seasonal farmworkers, and many other places where foreign workers are disproportionately represented and basic labor standards are not always enforced. Industrial economies can now be certain that modern slavery for large groups of low-wage foreign workers, apart from being immoral, is a transnational phenomenon with devastating consequences during a pandemic.

Coming back home meant preparing for a teaching life under extraordinary circumstances. However, having to teach during unprecedented times offered an opportunity to continue my fruitful exchanges with Wiko Fellows, as we discussed how best to navigate new educational challenges at our home institutions. While the current uncertainty makes it hard to predict when academic life will go back to normal, I certainly solidified previous collaborative relationships with German colleagues and developed promising new ones with scholars from both sides of the Atlantic. I am eager to return to Berlin and once more explore its rich cultural and intellectual environment.