Mexican-American Anglophile

A Senior Project
Presented to
the Faculty of the Communications Studies Department
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Arts

By:
Lorena A. Saldana
December 2013

© 2013 Lorena A. Saldana
For a good chunk of Americans, the idea of submersing oneself in a different environment is terrifying and, as I came to find out, it is also something that a lot of people do not do. Why then was I so curious and enthusiastic about doing it? I have been obsessed with British culture since 2006, thanks to the ever-evolving music scene in Great Britain. I remember hearing a song called *Walk in the Sun* by a band called McFly for the very first time and from then on it was like pulling on a loose thread. McFly is a pop-rock band completely inspired by The Beatles, especially their earlier stuff. At the time, this pop-rock scene was just up my ally, and seeing that they were from The UK, it was only logical that my “cool factor” would only be increased if I listened to music from overseas. I mean that was pretty obvious. The more I found out about the band, the more I started learning about the differences in lifestyle between British and American. They had different slang, different (more formal) customs, they dressed better, and over all just seemed much more like me. Although I grew up with Mexican traditions, which are a lot less formal, I never really identified with them. I am and have always been a very reserved, well-mannered person. This in turn, allowed me to feel bit more comfortable with the inherent formality of the British. From then on I just wanted to be like them. I wanted to surround myself with the little things they did that I just though were so cool. Anything from using “whilst” instead of while, to attempting to acquire their accent I did. It was just fun for me.
The more I started using my new, what I thought were quirky, mannerism, the more my family started seeing them. Thankfully, they just thought I was weirdly going through a phase. Randomly, my sister introduced me to the world “anglophile” and while it may have sounded like a disease at first, she quickly described it as someone who admires or is passionate towards the British culture. Finally, there was a word for what I was and if there was a word for what I was, then there was others like me too. That is when I started to realize that I needed to be around those people. I needed to get out of this little town and find those adventuresome people willing to expose themselves to new experiences. I wanted to be British even if it was just by association.

Since then, making the leap across the pond has been on my radar. When I was presented with the opportunity to make the trip, I chose to take on the challenge of figuring it all out and making it happen. Though the process was not easy and there was constant miscommunication between all of the advisors, it happened. It turned out to be the trip of a lifetime, filled with so many good memories, friends, and above all, a better understanding of who I am as person and as a member of the society that I call home.

Being cross-cultured in America is like not being cross-cultured at all. I have been labeled Mexican by Americans and American by Mexicans. There is no hybrid of the two and I have never felt comfortable simply stating that I’m one or the other. In the piece “Names, Narratives, and the Evolution of Ethnic Identity, Dolores Tanno describes how certain Latin identifications are constructed. When she talks about what it means to be Mexican-American, she states that it is a state of “navigating precariously between both world, inhabiting both in good faith, and finally…forging a span between original Mexican and acquired American enculturations.” The balance being, as she states: “the achievement of the American Dream and
the reservation of cultural identity” (qtd. in Tanno, 4). As a person who grew up in America, chasing that American Dream is a driving force, but in this country many sacrifice family to do so. I’m not willing to do that and because of it, it seems that I do not strictly fall into one category. Balancing both world is difficult because both world need to recognize that the other is there as an influential factor. However, to the outside world the divide may seem so much more clear than it is, and therefore the fact that, for me, it is not cut and dry is something that others may not be comfortable with. I cannot say that I have ever felt included in either. It has always been “You’re Mexican, we’re American” despite the fact that I have never actually lived anywhere else. This country prides itself on how diverse it is, but does so little to actually make everyone feel included. I’m not blaming anyone; our customs are just different. There have only been a handful of times that I have been racially discriminated against, but those were times enough to make me realize that I was an outsider in this country.

As abnormal as it may seem, it took me leaving this country that I call home for a couple of months, separating myself not only from the customs of my parents, but also the American customs I have grown up with my entire life, to start realizing that I am American. It may not be the “cookie cutter,” “white picket fence” American life, but in my own way and in my own right, I am American. According to Martin and Nakayama the U.S demographic is expected to change as Asian and Hispanic population are predicted to triple by 2050 (12). With this increase in diversity, the definition of what it means to be American is going to have to expand. All incoming immigrants come different cultural backgrounds, but that does not at all mean that they would be any less American. America is often metaphorically seen as a tossed salad because we do not lose our identity in order to make up what it means to be American. The differences are what makes the salad unique, it is what it makes America unique. The purpose of this study is to
present a unique, auto-ethnographic, point of view so that I can continue to remember where my identity lies and for others to broaden their ideas of what it means to be American.

**Literature Review**

Given that I had an incredible passion for British customs, researching and finding more information about British culture was actually really fun for me. I wanted to learn all I could about British culture because it was fascinating for me. At the same time I realized that it was fascinating to me because it was new to me. And while new is fun and exciting, I also wanted to explore my own background. Everything I knew about my background came from my mother, and while she did her best, I knew I needed more details. I wanted to see the clear difference between these two cultures and then compare them to the American culture I had grown up with.

After conducting some research, the line between Mexican culture and American culture can be seen as quite thick. Culture is defined as “Learned patterns of behavior and attitudes shared by a group of people” (Martin, Nakayama 81). Mexicans are rooted in tradition and family. It is common for the extended family to be just as important as the immediate family and that relationships are kept through the year, not just on holidays. As stated in the study “The Relationship Between Mexican American Cultural Values and Resilience Among Mexican American College Students: A Mixed Methods Study,” traditional Mexican American cultural values include *familismo* (familism), the traditional gender roles of *machismo* and *marianismo*, *religiosidad* (religiosity), and *respeto* (respect). *Familismo* is the cultural value most studied with relation to positive outcomes. It includes the belief that family is fundamental and takes precedence over individual needs (Losada 201). *Religiosidad*, or the belief in a greater power, often takes the form of Catholicism in Latino/a cultures (Gloria & Peregoy 96). *Respeto* is
respect and deference paid to an individual’s position, including different family members. Familismo, respeto, and religiosidad together have been linked to positive outcomes such as academic engagement (Germán 209), and the related constructs of interpersonal support and faith have been found to help Mexican Americans deal with adversities in their lives (Morgan, 2007; Cardoso & Thompson, 2010). This contrasts with the American norm, which strongly emphasizes the individual. Extended family is seen on occasional holidays. And celebrations are much shorter because each individual leads a busy life and has other things to do. Quite often, families are spread across the entire country. Self is more important than the family as a whole. You control your own happiness and destiny and therefore are solely responsible for achieving that. Children are expected to “leave the nest” at 18 and forge their own lives apart from the family unit (America - Language, Culture, Customs and Etiquette).

According to The Hofstede Center, Mexico, with a score of 30/100, is considered a collectivist culture while America, with a score of 91/100, is highly individualistic. The United Kingdom is individualistic as well, trailing America only by two points. This is one key difference that has been really hard for me to balance. In my family, it has always been a “we” mentality. There is no decision made without consulting the team. Yet in America, the family’s opinion comes second to our own. I have the American mentality that wants to venture out into the world and make it on my own, but my Mexican background keeps my family’s interest in front of my own. What I do in life, has to be beneficial for the group, not just myself. This is frustrating. Sometime it feels like I’m being tugged out from both sides and I’m the one that looses in the end anyway. Leaving for Britain, I knew I was not going to a place that was very much different than America, but somehow it felt like it changed my mentality. The key
difference was that I could pick just one mentality. I did not have to make decisions for the team, it was just my own, and I started to feel a lot more comfortable just being a little selfish.

British culture is much more like the American culture and even less similar to the Mexican culture.

The British are very reserved and private people. Privacy is extremely important. The British will not necessarily give you a tour of their home and, in fact, may keep most doors closed. They expect others to respect their privacy. This extends to not asking personal questions. The question, “Where are you from?” may be viewed as an attempt to “place” the person on the social or class scale. Even close friends do not ask pointedly personal questions, particularly pertaining to one’s financial situation or relationships. There is a proper way to act in most situations and the British are sticklers for adherence to protocol. The British are a bit more contained in their body language and hand gestures while speaking. They are generally more distant and reserved than North and South Americans and Southern Europeans, and may not initially appear to be as open or friendly. Friendships take longer to build; however, once established they tend to be deep and may last over time and distance. (UK - Language, Culture, Customs and Etiquette).

I never really grew up with a family that is reserved. We all know each other’s business and I’ve learned to be a little offended if a family member does not confide in me. I would be likely believe that I’m not liked, trusted, or respected enough to obtain that information as a family member. Another contrast, is that as a whole, Mexican culture tends to be more open and welcoming. Strangers and guest are welcomed in our home and treated like family. We talk to
strangers like we do close friend. I like to think we are like the Sofia Vergaras in a world full of stick figures. We’re loud and expressive. We use body movement as an extension of our conversations, and we’re not afraid to throw out a joke here and there. I am quite reserved just because growing up I could not figure out when to be more Mexican and when to be more American, so simple retreated into myself.

With all these major contrast between Mexican, American, and British culture how was a shy, introverted, college student going to be able to handle it? I was going to a place that would be colder to me (not just the weather). I did not know anyone there. No one was there to greet me with open arms. No one was there to act like my Mexican family (my comfort zone), or like the Americans (who were by far more familiar to me than anything in Britain). I was going to be alone for an extended amount of time, and forced to figure out life in a different city, with different people. I knew this and was willing to do it, but I knew there were some major changes ahead. So I went into it with an open mind and hopes for the best.

For a minority living in an area with little diversity, culture shock is not something I occasionally felt, its something I lived with everyday. Culture shock is described as “A relatively short-term feeling of disorientation and discomfort due to the lack of familiar cues in the environment” (Martin, Nakayama 310). In the article *Analysis of Impact of Culture Shock on Individual Psychology* it is further described as:

“It seems that culture is a vague concept, which includes extensive content such as sight, smell, sound, value, tradition, custom, behaviour and the way of thinking. All these elements may be different from one country to another. Therefore when people are away from home and enter a new environment, they have to come into contact with many new
values, new practices and ways of living. This is especially true for those people who face a new cultural pattern which is different from their own ones” (Xia, 2009).

In *The Five Stages of Culture Shock: Critical Incidents Around the World*, by Paul Pedersen, culture shock is then broken down into five different stages. These stages include: the honeymoon stage, the disintegration stage, the reintegration stage, the autonomy stage, and finally the independent stage.

Traveling abroad was definitely going to lend itself to most if not all the stages of culture shock. I do not think I was completely aware that I was going through these stages while I was abroad, but after having done my research. Little uncomfortable moments begin to make sense. I began to find justifications for certain things I did, said, or even thought. The five stages are described as:

The first stage of initial contact, or the ‘honeymoon stage,’ is where the newly arrived individual experiences the curiosity and excitement of a tourist, but where the person’s basic identity is rooted in the back-home setting. The second stage involves disintegration of the old familiar cues, and the individual is overwhelmed by the new culture’s requirements. The individual typically experiences self-blame and a sense of personal inadequacy for any difficulties encountered. The third stage involves a reintegration of new cues and an increase ability to function in the new culture. The emotions associated with this stage are typically anger and resentment towards the new culture as having caused difficulties and being less adequate than the old familiar ways. The fourth stage continues the process of reintegration towards gradual autonomy and increase ability to see the bad and good elements in both the old and new cultures. The fifth stage is described as
reciprocal interdependence, where the person has ideally achieved biculturalism, or has become fluently comfortable in both the old and the new cultures.

Pedersen).

With all this research in mind, I revisited some of the most eye opening events during my travels to analyze how culture shock affected my cross culture identity. I found that even the little things like going to the supermarket and paying with different money, or using the tube, or crossing the street had their initial excitement, but then over time I would get frustrated, and then I would accept it. Given that I was in Britain for three months, some things like shopping in Primark, remained in the honeymoon stage. The build up of all the little things, however, definitely began to take their toll.

A Hop, Skip, and a Jump

The days leading up to my departure for London felt almost as if being out of body. Like I was doing things and getting things done just for the sake of getting things done, not actually to get me to an end point. I still do not know why I chose to view my trip this way, maybe I was trying to cope with leaving everyone I knew behind. I have never actually strayed too far away from my family. The people who have been in my life almost every single day have been my mother and two sisters. How was I to coupe with being away from them when I have never actually left them for more than a couple of weeks at a time? I was responsible for everything, from the time I said my last “See you in a couple months,” and it was scary, to say the least. I had my sister constantly repeat what I needed to do at the airport so that I did not get lost. How in the world was I supposed to take on a whole new city, alone?
The whole flight there was a blur; one big, sleepless, blur. Panic ensued when the flight attendant asked me what I wanted for breakfast and I could not understand a word he said. It was perfect English, but he was British. This was going to be perfect. When the plane finally landed I was relieved, but it was short lived. Making my way through customs was surreal. Everyone else was so happy to be there and knew what they were doing. I realized how disconnected I was with everyone that could calm my nerves. I had only ever been on very few flights and I had my mom and sisters to do everything for me, I just showed up. This time it was all on me. With a surge of panic, I filled out the customs card, dealt with the customs person and found my luggage.

I finally found my car driver and I thought it would be a relief. I thought that somehow finding someone that expected me there would allow me to feel more welcomed. He did not. The more I tried to get him to talk, the more I realized how much it was draining me to get someone to open up. I was being friendly for selfish reasons. I wanted a temporary friend, instead I got an old man that forced me to realize just how alone I actually was. So I sat there and looked out of the window being grateful that I even managed to get to that point.

That did not last long. This turned out to be the one and only time that I experienced real panic. Looking out at the unfamiliar streets of London it started to sink in how far away I was from everything I had ever known. I became aware that I didn’t even know where to go to get food or hand soap or toothpaste. I could not run to my mom for help. I did not know where I was and I did not know anybody that would care.

This feeling was something I had never really experienced before in my life. I grew up in a very tight-knit family. We have always looked after one another and we know each other’s strengths and weaknesses. The only people who knew just how terrified I was about actually being responsible and independent enough to take over this one task were thousands of miles
away. My entry into a foreign country depended on me, and only on me. I would argue that the dependency on my family is a massive downside to growing up in a Mexican-American household. I finally forced myself to realize that I was not homeless. For some reason I kept feeling that I was so out of place to the point that I had forgotten that I had an end point. So my energy shifted from getting the car driver to talk to me to actually making it to my flat. I told myself ‘just one thing at a time’ and, just like I would do at home, I made a list in my head of my next moves. “I just need to get myself and my stuff to my little corner of London and I will be okay.”

Looking back at this point of the trip, certain things become really clear. Despite the fact that I did grow up in America, a highly individualistic country, my roots were still Mexican, very collectivistic. Going through customs would have been something that my family and I as a group would have figured out. One person would figure one part of the task, and the others would figure out the others, and together we would make it through. This is something that I do not believe a lot of people would understand. It is so easy to think: “It is just customs”; but for me things of this sort had always been a group effort.

I was also scared to be on my own for three months. I felt a little guilty leaving everyone behind to fulfill my dream. I was not doing anything in London that was for the greater good of my family. I just wanted to go. It is a little unnerving to me to admit that my schooling in general has been pretty selfish, and a three month trip to London is far more guilt inducing. Over two decades of living in a country that kicks their eighteen-year-olds out of the house to “get a real job,” and I still felt guilty about leaving for three months. I think about my family still living in Mexico; they would have never allowed one of their own to leave the nest to go spend money on an experience, especially not a female. In Mexican culture the idea of masculinity and femininity
is still very traditional. Men are to work and females are not to leave the house until they are married.

Months after my trip, I did get the chance to tell my family what I had done. Most of them did not care. I was not married and that defined me enough. It was not until after, I would get approached by uncle or cousin and told that what I have chosen to do with my life (go to school and travel) is what they would be doing with their lives if they were given the chance. I was told that I was doing things right. It saddened me to hear this because as Mexican as I grew up, I realized that, being American had allowed me special privileges; and again I felt guilty for taking advantage of them alone. On the other hand, I noticed a slight shift in their traditional attitude. Though they still, for some reason, keep it relatively secretive, their attitudes about unmarried women leaving the house, getting an education, and not having children as soon as they become legal seem to be changing to a more individualistic, and less chauvinistic, view. Being a first generation immigrant, I cannot help but feel that I’m paving the way. For now, they may not agree with everything I have done or will do. They may even call me selfish. But as individualistic as they may see me, I am still looking out for the greater good of my family. The only difference is that I’m taking a different approach to help. I’m choosing to broaden the road to success. I’m saying I’m successful in anyway, but I want to show my family that there are other options rather than just staying in one place, getting married, and having kids.

**The Queen**

One of the most interesting and rare events is the day we briefly saw The Queen! Some friends and I
decided to expose ourselves to some traditional British culture and made our way to Buckingham Place to watch the Changing of the Guard. Unfortunately, we were unprepared for the swarms of tourists that also wanted to catch the same event. The part of the ceremony that we did get to see was beautifully elegant. It was conducted in an extremely orderly manner and everyone seemed to respect and admire the show in its entirety. The biggest downside was that I just could not handle being surrounded by that many people. Apparently two of my friends felt the same way, and one decided she wanted to continue to watch. We knew something like this was a once in a lifetime event, so we told her that we would be waiting for her across the street.

I finally decided to put my camera down, when immediately I noticed two police motorcycles leading a beautiful burgundy car into the palace. I did not have time to react or turn my camera on. I knew that if I looked down I would miss everything. We looked inside the car that there she was, Queen Elizabeth II, dressed in all cream color waving at people. I was in shock. Then there was a wave of tourists flocking towards the palace trying to get a better view. Everyone went crazy! It took us a couple of seconds to take everything in. It felt like everything froze and went silent. When I finally turned around to see my friend’s reactions we just started yelling and were in complete disbelief.

Even today, when I get asked what my favorite part of my trip was, I always mention that I saw The Queen. This is usually met with a look of pure astonishment and an “Oh my God!”

In America, there is nothing like this. There is no event, or Royal Family, that people just respect, admire, and feel completely
prideful about. There is always going to be someone that just disagrees and would likely be on the outskirts rioting or protesting. However, in Mexico, there are events like these but the celebrations are different. Mexicans celebrate with everything they got in them. They do not constrict themselves or keep things orderly. Whether they are celebrating in the name of religion, or just a little family matter, it is always a spirited celebration.

Another example is the time I got to attend a Manchester United game, after having witnessed a Mexico vs. Venezuela game here in San Diego. It was the exact same thing as with The Changing of the Guards. In Manchester the chants were orderly, nobody really yelled or cheered, and most of the time people were sitting (the cold weather may have also been to blame). The Mexico vs. Venezuela game was a sharp contrast. The audience was mostly made up of Mexican-Americans and there was not a bottom in a seat. For the entirety of the game people were yelling, screaming, cursing, chanting, jumping, dancing, kissing, and drinking. This is what I felt comfortable with. I had grown up in America where celebrations fell right between these two extremes, but Manchester felt alien to me. I just did not understand why at such an incredible event people were not losing their minds with all the emotions the event elicited. The only time I did see a glimmer of excitement was after The Queen had entered Buckingham Palace, but in no way did it rival what my cultural background had thought me about celebration.

Both seeing The Queen and attending a Manchester United game highlight how culture is to a large extent created though nonverbal communication. The British are very stiff, non-expressive people. “As a nation, the British tend not to use superlatives and may not appear terribly
animated when they speak” (Cultural Differences between the US and the UK). So when it comes to their celebrations, they do not just let go of all their inhibitions. The lack of expression on the guard’s faces signaled to the audience just how proper and serious the event should be taken. It let the audience become aware of the importance of who lives in Buckingham Palace and how one should behave. I was not acting anything short of proper when I was witnessing these events, because I picked up on the nonverbal social cues that told me not only how to act, but also how important the Royal Family was to this country. The same thing goes for the Manchester United game. When we did cheer for #14, Havier “El Chicharito” Hernandez, we were met with stern, “what are you doing?” faces. It was as unusual for them to hear cheering as it was for us not to hear cheering. My cultural identity and their cultural identity were almost completely opposite, but their non-verbal cues helped guide my behavior so that I was able to code switch. I was able to reel in my instinctive way of celebrating, and act more like the locals. I did not want to stand out and I did not want to offend anyone, and so I adapted.

Mind The Gap

To my surprise one of the scariest parts of living in a big city was the public transportation. I was not prepared to tackle London’s Tube system. Living on the Central Coast of California my entire life had left me with a deficiency in understanding how people got around when they did not own a car. I did not study the tube system before I left, and I knew that if I tried taking the tube from the airport to my flat on the very first day of my arrival would leave me overwhelmed and
with a bad first impression of London. So I booked a car. Getting around London made it
inevitable to eventually come in contact with the Tube, though. My first ride was completely
disorienting. My roommates led the way, and before I knew it I was on a platform listening to an
automatic announcement telling me to “Mind the Gap.” I did not know how we got where we
needed to get, I did not know how far away I was from home, and I did not understand why
everyone seemed to walk around as if their errands were far more important than the next
person’s. It was like a secret society, and I felt like I stood out for not knowing what I was doing.
Everyone was incredibly icy and unapproachable. No smiles, no friendly faces, no nice
greetings; but if you got in the way or blocked foot traffic, the faces and smirks you would get
would be enough to send you packing. I needed to figure it out. So I spent a good time studying
the Tube maps and asking my roommate what everything meant. Now, I’m not great with
directions, and it got to the point where I did not even understand why there were two different
platforms per stop. So I decided that I needed to just go for it. I gave myself a good four hours to
find one building down in the city. It was just barely enough time. I remember just stepping into
a cart and hoping that I had picked the right direction, otherwise I’d be going the opposite way. I
had never felt so uncomfortable as I did right then. I kept thinking that I just wanted to go home,
skip all my classes, and change my schedule so
that all my classes would be located on the part
of campus I already knew. My stomach would
drop when I realized I could not do that, and
that no matter what I did or thought, figuring out
the city was something I had to do.

“Algate.” As soon as I heard that I
realized that my time on my comfortable and safe seat was over. I got lost as soon as I stepped out of the underground. The machines had done their job, but getting me from point A to point B was still subject to human error.

If I could go back, I would have probably done the same thing and booked a car from the airport to my flat, but I would have definitely not shied away from the Tube as much as I did. The more I rode it, the more I noticed the people stuck on the sides trying to figure out the system. The Tube is not complicated. With thousands of tourists visiting London all the time, it is laid out so simply. I complicated it by being so scared of it. If I think about it, the Tube was probably one of the biggest differences between life on the Central Coast and Britain. I always felt like people could tell that I was not from London. I felt that I always looked like I was lost. Whereas in Western California, I had my car, and for someone who drives as much as I do my car is like a second home to me. For three months I braved the Underground. I saw it at its worst where each cart was so packed only one person was able to get on when it stopped, and I had seen it at its best when the car was empty and clean. The amount of people and the diversity of the people I saw was so amazing. When I finally got comfortable, I would take the Tube, alone, just to shop. I got to see most everything including musicians, gentlemen giving up their seats for the elderly, lots of children, lost tourists, and even Mario and Sonic the Hedgehog. I went from every emotion you could think about when it came to that Underground. I feared it, hated it, loved it, was amazed by it, and got tired of it too. But in all honesty, mastering that Tube system made me feel
more British than riding on a red double decker. As strange as it may sound, figuring out the transportation in London felt like a right of passage and solidified my place as a Londoner. It was the one aspect of London I was scared of and I managed to figure it out. I could get around the city of my dreams with no one to hold my hand and I did not need to ask for directions. It was like I was free and capable of doing what ever I wanted at what ever time, and I loved it. I loved that independence and the confidence of knowing I could do it all again today.

The Tube was probably one of the things that was most foreign to me. This was the reason behind the biggest wave of culture shock. Seemingly harmless, but completely eye opening. In his article, Pedersen breaks culture shock into five different steps, all of which I felt in a period of three months. There was the honeymoon stage, the disintegration stage, the reintegration stage, the autonomy stage, and finally the independence stage. Besides the fear, my first ride was cool. It felt new and different and like I was experiencing something so fantastic, like a new roller coaster at my favorite amusement park. It was weird and amazing that I was getting from one place to another without the responsibility of keeping my eye on the road, and I actually did not mind being seen as completely inexperienced. But this stage lasted for a very short time. I eventually started feeling unhappy having to take public transportation. I felt that, even though I had managed to figure out some things with the Tube, I still made simple mistakes and I just felt like everyone knew I was on the wrong cart and I did not belong in London. The third and fourth steps, of reintegration and autonomy, kind of blurred together for me. I would go back and forth between hating having to deal with the Tube, to being content using it. Some times the Tube was just a hassle. I did not like having to carry all my groceries or guarding all my bags or jumping in the cart quickly to avoid the doors slamming on me; and at other times I felt like I could have ridden the Circle line all day and just people-watched.
The last weeks of my time abroad I learn to depend on that Tube system as a crucial part of life. It was my lifeline and I learned to view King’s Cross St. Pancreas as the heart of London. Anything and everything I wanted to do in London started there. When my sister made the big leap to go visit me, showing her all that I had learned in the Underground was such a prideful moment. She was lost and disoriented with every trip, and I felt completely British. I was showing her, and indirectly my family, that something besides settling was possible. I wanted them to see that I was smart enough to figure out life on my own, even if it was for just three months. If I could figure out my life, somewhere completely unfamiliar, then figuring things out at home would be doable for me too, even if I did choose to do it differently.

It’s Raining in Paris

When the opportunity presented itself to go to Paris, France there was no hesitation. A friend had told me that all I had to do was book a hotel and tickets on the EuroStar and we would make a weekend of it. She had already been there and knew French, so if ever there was a good time to go it was then.

Though we struggled to find where the EuroStar actually was, we still managed to make it to the City of Love. It was beautiful. I had never seen a more picturesque place. Besides a little
normal wear and tear, the buildings, streets, people, and shops all looked just like in the movies. We found our way to the nearest restaurant to get some breakfast when it hit me just how foreign I was. I did not know the language, and I had gone into this city with a preconceived notion that all French people were going to be rude and snooty towards me for not speaking like them. Immediately I wanted to appear anything other than American. My friend tried to get me to relax and told me that French people just want to hear you attempt to speak their language, but for the most part they will talk to you in English once they hear your accent. That still left me with the task of trying to the point of looking foolish. I tired, and I failed. My order was wrong and I did not want to say anything simply because it involved me talking French (or at least what I thought was French). It was not fun. I did not want to offend them, but I just did not want to talk at all.

The rest of the trip was better. People would hear me and, without a single facial expression, switch to speaking English. I never encountered anyone being deliberately rude to me, just really indifferent. They did not make me feel overly welcome, they did not seem overly helpful, and they did not seem liked they cared at all for my wellbeing or my enjoyment. They were just rather cold. I anticipated this to an extent, and the trip really did rely on my friend maneuvering the subway, and getting us to all the main tourist spots. The one place I felt at ease was, surprisingly, at a bookstore called “Shakespeare and Company” right outside the Notre Dame. This place was where Hemmingway would buy books because it was the only place in Paris that sold books in English. Everywhere else in the
city we were on our own. But in this little part of Paris, surrounded by books with titles I could actually read, I just felt a sense of home, a sense of comfort. Nowhere else did I feel like I could ask a question and not get a sense of anxiety, nerves, or judgment. It was nice knowing that in all this unfamiliarity, there was this little corner where I could just talk and somebody would understand.

From my first broken French word, I could not get my mom out of my head. How had she migrated to America not knowing a word of English and managed to make a living? I was lucky, as for my first real experience traveling to a country where I did not recognize the language at all, I had my friend helping me out and the locals seeming to know enough English to help a poor lost tourist. How my mother braved a whole new world alone, I will never understand. All I wanted to do after every time I spoke French was just hide under some blankets. I just felt so completely out of place. What I found the most surprising was just how scared I actually was about talking at all. I figured if they did not hear me talk, there was no way for them to know that I did not know French. While this may have been true in some cases, my “I have no idea what I’m doing here” face probably gave me away. I tried putting myself in my mother’s shoes and thinking how she probably felt when she needed to get somewhere during her first days in America. It must have been so traumatizing. I realized just how terrible America was towards the immigrant population. In America there is such a negative stigma associated with the word “immigrant” that sometimes there is a little bit of hesitation when I say that I come from an immigrant family. I’m pretty sure it’s a little obvious that I do, but
I always wonder if people’s perception of me changes once I confirm what they are already thinking. While the French may have been cold, I never got a sense of “You need to get out of our country” at all (granted I was only a tourist for two days); whereas here in America (especially in Southern California) the “immigrant problem” is always on the news, and acts of racism have been something that I have experienced firsthand. Naturally, I started asking myself why in this foreign country I wanted to go home to America, but in America some would argue that my home was in Mexico? Why, in a country made up of immigrants, did one ethnicity seem to be favored over everyone else who also migrated there? With all that in mind, to this day, I still do not know if I would have been able to do what my mother did for me to even be writing this paper, let alone finishing college.

According to Martin and Nakayama, there are six imperatives for studying intercultural communication: self-awareness, demographic, economic, technological, peace, and ethical. During my time in abroad, I was able to experience just how these imperatives affect the way I interpreted some of the things I saw and did. I would go back and forth thinking about how lucky I was to be able to live out these experiences, and at the same time I thought about how my family in Mexico would view my adventures. The self-awareness imperative states that we learn about our own culture and reality when submersed in a culture different than ours. Through my Parisian travels my judgment compass was making decisions and assumptions based on my cultural background (Martin and Nakayma 31). I had learned that people should be friendly,
helpful, and warm to strangers from my Mexican background and therefore the French were seemingly too cold to be approachable. My American background had shown me that being an immigrant is a negative identity, so I felt that in Paris people already had a negative view of me whether they talked to me or not. It became clear that my ethnocentrism was a good mix of Mexican and American. Being Mexican in America, I have always been aware of my differences, but in Paris, I was so aware that I was American. Of course while I was in Paris, I wanted nothing more than to be seen as a local, or at least not American. Now, however, I realize just how special if felt to feel American. Internally, I was happy that I could finally start seeing myself as part of my homeland instead of just a visitor. For those days, anyone who had ever given me any grief about being Mexican or American could not have been further from my mind. The people around me knew I was American, and I felt American and that was all that mattered.

Visiting Paris as a young college student made things quite interesting. Everything was fascinating and even the very cheap food was great. The demographic group and economic group that I belonged to presented me with a really rare opportunity. For some American students, a trip like this may not be a once in a life time deal, but considering that I am Mexican-American, a trip like this is just so completely rare that no one in my family had ever done it before. In Mexico, I have cousins younger than I am with less education, financial struggles, and kids to take care of. For them, Paris is something unreal, unattainable. Their economic imperative does not at all make a trip like this imaginable. Their demographics have them judging me for not having children and for traveling the world alone. But, my demographic of being in a position of some economic privilege and knowing how important and rewarding travel abroad can be, made for a very different outlook than my relatives’. If I had been raised in Mexico, and I was still
unmarried and not a mother at my age, something would be wrong with me. I still get those looks of disbelief when I do tell my family that yet another year has gone by and I’m not married. But in America, where I was raised, going to college and traveling is part of growing up. It is part of taking your youth and doing something unforgettable with it. This in turn satisfies the peace imperative because at a young age we learn to be more open-minded to other cultures and backgrounds. We learn to be sensitive. I have learned that the French are helpful people. They may not be the most welcoming, but that just is not how their cultural background taught them to be friendly. I have put myself in situations that I have not been too comfortable with, but that has only helped me empathize with people from different backgrounds more. In an increasingly diversifying world, skills like these are becoming more and more crucial.

London Metropolitan University

Though the “study” part of my “study abroad” was supposed to be the main reason behind my travels, it did manage to take a little bit of a backseat to everything else. Probably not the best thing to admit, but the newness of everything else was just too appealing to trade in for a textbook. That being said, the schooling system at London Metropolitan University was quite different than what I had expected. I had heard that overseas, many thought Americans were not so bright, and I did not want this imagery associated with me. After all, I had managed to find my way to a position where I could study abroad; how hard could a couple of British classes be? Unfortunately, my optimism for the American students came crashing down on the very first day, when our lecture professor asked the class how many states where in America. Most of the British students came close guessing everything from 40 to 55. But when the professor pointed out one American student and she said 52, I just wanted to pick up a British accent and pretend I
was not part of the American group. Was it that our schooling system was that bad, or did she just feel nervous?

Their setup was a little different. Each class only met once a week, there was no homework other than reading. There was no tests, or quizzes. My grade was dependent on two things: our final essay and class participation. Most everyone took advantage of this setup. To my surprise, the American students were the ones that actually took class seriously, most of the British students were loud, spoke out of turn, and were disrespectful towards the professor. Many times, cell phones were on loud and the students would not turn them off. It got to the point where we, the American students, found it incredibly disturbing and distracting. The odd part was that the professors would lecture over the side conversations, or when they did try to address the issue, it was always so softly said. It was like the roles were reversed, in a way, and the professors essentially were begging to be heard and the locals had a sense of “You’re lucky to have me in your class.”

In all but one of my classes there was American students. While we were all curious about British culture, we found it so easy to stick with each other. We made great friends with a bunch of the study abroad kids, but not many of us made friends with the locals. We all complained about how difficult it was to meet British people; we all felt like they stuck with each other and the friendships that had already established. I kept thinking, why would they want to go out of their way to get to know me when in a matter of weeks I would be leaving and all their efforts would have been wasted? I still do not understand why we, as guest of the country, felt that the locals should have been the ones to approach us.

On one occasion a young man approached my friend and I, and, for the life of us, we could not understand a word he was saying. I think we asked him to repeat himself three times
before I finally understood that he was trying to get to know how we felt about the British. I told him that it was far more difficult to approach them than I had originally thought, to which he replied:

“Well, you American students just stick together.”

This was incredibly eye opening for me. Here I thought they were the ones that did not want to get to know us, but I realized that we did actually just stick with each other. It was easy. We all lived in the same building, we all understood each other’s frustrations living in a different country, and we all knew going into this whole thing that we needed each other to survive. We actually even had an easier time making friends with other study abroad students that were not from the United States. The British had labeled us and we had labeled them. Why there was this separation or this fear to get to know each other I still do not completely understand.

One particular day, a group and I had to give a presentation and I was in charge of describing the premise of *Remember The Titans*. First thing I blurted out was

“I’m American, so when I say ‘soccer’ I mean ‘football.’”

Instinctively, I froze. I had never in my life identified myself as just ‘American,’ and much less having that kind of identification not be met with any kind of resistance. I looked out at my classmates and there were just blank faces. I kind of paused a little waiting to hear the “No really, where are you from?” follow-up questions that I had learned to expect; but nothing.

Thinking back on this day I always think, why was it that I needed to go thousands of miles away from my home country to finally feel comfortable identifying myself as a part of it? Why, in a completely foreign country, did America seem like home, but when in America I always felt like a visitor? As a Cal Poly student I constantly have to code switch between my Mexican family lifestyle and my college persona, but in London I was just American. Anything I
did, whether I saw it as Mexican or American, my fellow classmates saw as just American. As much as I wanted to come out of this experience feeling like I had earned my British identification, I actually came home feeling so much more connected with my home country.

**Bringing it Home**

I have seen a massive boost in my confidence as a Cal Poly student. Now, when I meet people, the first thing I think about is not what are their preconceived notions of me based on my appearance alone are. Throughout my final year at Cal Poly I actually began to feel like I was where I belonged. I no longer felt out of place or that I did not belong. What I found interesting was that the American study abroad students also had no issue identifying me as American in a foreign country either. These same kids would be the ones that at home would have given me the whole follow up conversation, but here it felt like they needed me to consider myself one of their own to feel a sort of comfort themselves. They may never actually know just how important their inclusivity was to me, but it has made a huge impact in the way that I see myself as a student and as a person. I have broadened my ideas as to what is expected of me and how other people see me. I may never look like the typical Cal Poly student, but that does not mean that I can’t be one.

On the other hand, I am still left with the question about what it means to be American. What is “American”? Is it just whoever happens to live here legally or permanently? Why was “American” an identification that I was just not comfortable taking on when I was home? “When dealing with how individual migrants develop multicultural identities there are three dependent issues: the extent to which migrants want to maintain their own identity, language, and way of life compared to how much they want to become part of the larger new society, how migrants develop multicultural identities is the extent to which they have day
to day interactions with others in the new society, and how migrants relate to their new society involves the ownership of political power. (Martin, Nakuyama 322)

These imperatives are highlighted in my upbringing. In my family, keeping our traditional Mexican heritage alive and present has always been a top priority for my parents, but when it came to American traditions or values, those were just celebrated lightly. My parents resisted the adoption of a second culture and therefore I grew up completely aware that I was different, that I did not come from the same cultural background as my peers. It is not a negative quality, it only enriches America’s cultural salad bowl. However, the attachment to Mexican traditions, for me, was simply not as strong. I wanted to be seen as everyone else. I wanted to have a similar cultural platform to everyone else’s. I did not want to forget my cultural upbringing, but I did not want to be different either. For me, the day-to-day, face-to-face interactions were limited growing up. I met people just like myself and just like my parents. They migrated to America and, just like I stuck with the American kids in London, my parents found comfort in sticking with fellow immigrants. This continued putting my Mexican identity at the forefront.

It was not until I got older that I realized I needed to interact with people who identify themselves as American to start learning how to take on that identity. This was not as easy as I thought it would have been growing up. Because most of my life had centered around my traditional Mexican beliefs, I felt comfortable with people similar to myself and therefore never really branched out. London changed that in a lot of ways. I had no choice but to make friends with people who grew up strictly “American.” I chose to live my life, if only for the time being, with their ideas. Yes, I was still making judgments based on my already established moral compass, but I was more willing to adapt to what my peers considered normal and what I saw
them do on a day-to-day basis. Finally, I took control of my identity by changing my mind on what it meant to be an American. I realized I do not have to look like what is stereotypically thought to be American in order to feel comfortable enough to say it. I happen to really like the fact that I do have my mixed cultural background. It may be hard, at times, not to purposely single myself out, but I have become far more self-aware, and I am choosing to put myself in situations where I can learn more about myself so that I can be comfortable with the identity that I have chosen to morph into and represent.

My trip to London was everything I could have hoped it would be, and then some. As cliché as that sounds, it is true. I was that skeptical kid in the background thinking I would be the student without the life-altering experience. After all, what where the chances that the most anti-social person be the one to enjoy her trip the most? I was wrong. I ended up submersing myself in different cultures accompanied by other explorers who were as willing as I was to broaden their views on life. Analyzing certain events that occurred during my travels helped me better understand certain reactions I had or helped me justify the opinions that I formed. In an increasingly diverse country, being able to understand that my moral compass may differ from others based on my cultural background is going to help me be more understanding and empathetic towards other minority groups, and toward people in general. We are all individuals, and as hard as it may be to alter communications based on demographics or culture, it is becoming something that we are just going to have to learn to internalize and change within ourselves.

“Living in another country widens your horizon,” note Martin and Nakayama. “It makes you appreciate the things you have, and it strengthens the family unit. You look at your country from a different point of view. We have learned not to expect everything to be the same as ‘at
home,’ but if we happen to find something that reminds us of home, we really appreciate it and it makes us very happy, ultimately we are all very thankful that we had the opportunity to live in another country” (Martin, Nakayama 31). By far, in all my research, this is something that I completely agree with. When I first started attending orientations and meetings about going abroad, I did not believe that every single person came out of the experience with a new outlook on life. Statistically it just did not make sense. As soon as I got home, I knew I had changed. I left for London scared out of my mind, that I would not figure out the airline, the tube, that I would not make any friends, or that I would miss being home, but I came home having conquered all of it. I have always been a shy person who hesitates to do anything (try a new restaurant, ask for help, approach a new person, etc) but when I got home, things seemed so much less intimidating. I stopped second guessing myself as much, and I stopped being fearful of the little things. I’m still a pretty shy person, but I’m more comfortable with who I am as a student and as a person in general. I became so much more independent because now I know I can do whatever it is I want to do. I do not need my family right beside me at all times. I’m a smart enough person to know what is right for me, but at the same time I know what is important to me and what should always take priority. That is the appreciation I have for the entire experience making everything worth it.

I was the girl who felt so incredibly culture-shocked when I first began to attend Cal Poly. I had experienced a handful of things that made me realize that I was different; everything from my cultural upbringing, to the resistance I felt from my fellow Americans when I tried to describe myself as American. And while all those differences left me a little confused, they gave me my own personal, custom-made, identity. There were so many eye-opening experiences abroad because everything was so new to me. And even if the British and the American customs
were not completely, black-and-white different, the fact that I got to do it independently was enough to make me realize just what kind of a person I am. I would have never expected that going to a different country would have helped me better understand the world I live in today as much it did. My London adventure may have come to a close, but the lessons I learned, and the experiences I had, will be with me always. I am Mexican. I am American. I am an Anglophile, and I love it all.


