

2018



INTERNATIONAL
ESSAY CONTEST

INTERNATIONAL ESSAY CONTEST

2018

Office for International Students and Scholars

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The presence of international students at MSU provides us with extraordinary opportunities to learn about other cultures. MSU is deeply committed to building international understanding through education and is proud to host students from all over the world.

The goal of the International Student Essay Contest is to build greater cross-cultural understanding and to learn from the experiences of international students. Living outside one's own culture can trigger a complex range of feelings that lead to powerful insights. This contest is an opportunity for international students to reflect on their experiences and share their stories as international students at Michigan State University.

OISS Essay Contest Winners

1st
PLACE

To Be a Spartan. To Be Empowered.
Natalie Lyric Kagole | Uganda

2nd
PLACE

Observe. Adapt. Repeat.
Erik Jose Amezquita Morataya | Guatemala

3rd
PLACE

Becoming Whole Again
Asif Iftekhar | Bangladesh

OISS Essay Contest Honorable Mentions

- Ursula Abou Rjeileh | Lebanon
- Dilnora Azimova | Uzbekistan
- Aagosh Chaudhary | India
- Yewon Jun | South Korea
- Di Liang | China
- Seema Momin | India

To Be a Spartan. To Be Empowered.

Natalie Lyric Kagole

My jaw dropped as I screamed with the utmost excitement when I arrived at the Munn-Ice Arena. Finally! I could not believe my eyes. It felt like a vivid dream. The fact that I was light years away from home momentarily escaped my mind. My previously cheerless mood suddenly sky-rocketed. How did these people manage to keep ice inside a building? I wondered. It was almost as if for every sad thought that crossed my mind about leaving my family behind, was a huge pleasant surprise that grasped my attention. I was very ambivalent about this new place, I was supposed to call home for the next quadrennium.

I pushed through the other international students in my cohort group and went straight up to the Team Leader and asked if we were allowed to ice skate. He looked at me like he was puzzled over my excitement, I wanted to try everything already. My feelings were beyond vocabulary at this point, all I wanted to do was maximize America. "Yeah, of course," he said, and directed me to the Spartan shop to purchase a skating ticket. Only 2 dollars? Is everything just almost free in America? This country is so rich, I nodded to myself. No one understood how much this meant to me. While I fastened my laces, I stared at the American kids that skated so effortlessly, just like I had seen in the movies. I could not wait to go on. I got up and into the arena.

As soon as my feet hit the ice, I came tumbling down like the bunches of matooke that would be unloaded from the local trucks back in our markets. My butt was on the ground. I had made a fool of myself, it looked so easy, a bunch of people came and helped me up, everyone was asking if I was okay and my only word that came out of my mouth was yes! Despite the fact that I felt like I had broken into one million pieces, I was too excited to give up, I tried again, held on tight to the side rails and went around the ice one more time, once, twice, three times and I slowly started to let go of the rails, my heart was pumping real fast, I wanted to be like the other American kids. With some more effort, I finally found my balance. This was one of the best days of my life.

I took the bus the next morning happy as a clam. I could not wait to see what an American school is really like. I was going for CEM 141. Yes! I love Chemistry. Everything here was exciting. The bus driver thanked me for swiping my card. "You are welcome," I enthusiastically replied, like I was not in extreme shock. Back in my country, not even the taxi drivers say thank you even if we are paying them face to face. I went and found a seat, I kept staring at the kids opposite and besides me like I had never

seen a human being. I had my school bag all stuffed with books, my laptop and an extra sweater since this country was freezing cold and I needed to survive, but somehow, everyone else seemed so casual. Are you kidding me? No one was wearing a sweater and a good number wore nothing that went below their knees. And why did everyone have a small bag? Was I abnormal? I seemed to be the only one who was a little off. My bag made me seem like I was going mountain climbing or hiking. However, this did not kill my joyful spirit. I made it a point to carry a lighter bag the next day so that I could sail through the breeze of the American College life. At least that is how the other students made it seem like. The first day of class was especially unconventional for me because first of all, I have never addressed anyone older than me by their first name. It is an abomination for the thought to even cross your mind in my tradition! Yet, here I was being encouraged to call my ISS professor by John. "John?" I thought. "Why not Mr. John? or Sir John? or Dr. John?" Why would anyone study all those years only to end up being addressed the same way that they were before they started studying. That is going to be a whole course unit on learning how to call him just John. I mean, he even has a P.H.D. It is just impossible.

Secondly, I have never had to introduce myself half as much as I had to in just my first week here at MSU. It is literally like a job interview everyday where I have to somehow always come up with an impressive format of showcasing my existence because everyone is so interested in knowing how an African Student was able to make it light years away from home and why I chose MSU in particular. At first, it made me feel uncomfortable but with time, I realized that whenever I talked about myself, because of the bravery that was attached to studying far away from home, people always said "Whoa! That is pretty cool." and this made me smile, even through my worst days. I made so many American friends off just these introductions. This was just amazing. I could not believe it.

I have become conditioned to smile whenever someone approaches me to ask what my name is or where I am from. When I smile it captures their hearts even before I speak. This format is going to stay with me for the rest of my life. MSU has taught me to smile before I speak, who would have ever imagined. Go Green, Go white! This is a truly interesting country to study from, and I am anxious for the great exposure I am going to receive, that is not only academic, but life changing which I cannot wait to take home and impart in my society.

Observe. Adapt. Repeat. **Erik Jose Amezquita Morataya**

My landing at MSU was relatively soft. I had never seen East Lansing before, or the Midwest in general. August 2018. I was standing there at the Marriott Hotel, just next to the Michigan Flyer bus which brought me all the way from Detroit's Airport. A 20-hour long journey from Guanajuato, Mexico. A large suitcase lay next to me and my back was aching for bearing a heavy backpack. I had carried literally all my life to an unknown adventure, and I was ready to devour my graduate program. My future housemate picked me up from the hotel and off we went to my future apartment. I opened my new room's door, only to discover it was completely barren except for a sleeping bag. Fear and excitement rushed, and it was a familiar feeling. It was time once again to absorb a new city, to observe carefully its people and streets. It was time once again to adapt and make those streets my own. For the second time, repeat the life cycle from scratch. A barren room was what I needed: a blank canvas to show off the skills I had acquired before.

Time warped. August 2013. I arrived Guanajuato, Mexico for the first time with a heavy backpack and a large suitcase. It was a 9-hour long journey from my house in Guatemala City. I was ready to devour my bachelor program. University of Guanajuato has no housing or boarding facilities, so all the adult choices were up to me. Early August is in general the worst possible time to look for housing in the city, as the demand is on all-time high. The rule of thumb is to stay at the first available option that fits your budget, lest somebody else takes it in the meantime. In my case that advice translated as a 2m x 2m room, completely barren except for a tiny bed frame. The house was old - once the roof from the living room collapsed, nobody got hurt fortunately - and noisy (8 people plus several pets), and my room was prone to flood whenever the sky poured down. I had barely any space to fit a mattress, a narrow desk and stack some wooden boxes for a makeshift closet. As a 19-year old young man back then, living in a foreign country, I couldn't be happy enough. I mean it.

Moving abroad to Guanajuato was an eye-opening experience. I was 19-years old, legally an adult, and Guanajuato treated me as such with no leeway. It was tough at first, but extremely rewarding. I organized my own schedule as I saw fit and I could go anywhere in the city, either the theater or a sketchy alley bar, if I wanted to. I also received my first check and made my first (extremely limited) budget. I was forced to finally learn how to cook. I had to bear some gooeey rice the first week and I'm not entirely

sure if my first pasta was edible at all. Things got better as months went by. I watched carefully a housemate of mine while he did wonders in the kitchen, and YouTube was an ever-present ally. I also moved to a larger room in a smaller house when I had time and money, feeling more in control of my life.

Time un-warped and I came back to my barren room in East Lansing. I hadn't anything for the past 24 hours but a meager plane meal. My head was spinning both of hunger and the overwhelming amount of work to set the pieces of my life together once more. I spent five years in Guanajuato to make it my own. I would even consider Guanajuato more of a home than Guatemala, and as soon as I was feeling part of the landscape, I'm thrown away to an alien land. I was finally able to guide tourists back then through Guanajuato's colorful cobbled alleys. Now I was staring at the streets as a tourist myself. Breathe and observe. The room was much larger and cleaner than my initial room five years ago. Financially speaking I was in slight better shape as well. Breathe and observe again.

In Guanajuato I felt at home because I had a solid bed, I could roam freely on my own through its streets and I knew exactly where to get food. Breathe and adapt. The next day I ordered a bed, bought a bike and stuffed the fridge. I cooked my first dinner, some rice with some fried pork: there are few things that give you as much security as knowing that you won't starve to death. Tortillas are a big miss, but as the chant goes, breathe and adapt. Buttered toast will be it then. I had barely been in East Lansing for less than 48 hours and suddenly I felt much more at peace. Observe. Guanajuato is a small, colonial, touristic town in the heart of Mexican semi-arid mountain ranges. It has gorgeous alleys that go up the hills, and such hills are covered by old, colorful houses. During my first month I couldn't really stay at home as I felt like a tourist with a need to picture every single corner in the photogenic town. Actually, the best way to get everywhere is by foot. Observe. East Lansing is strikingly green and flat, completely opposite to my previous home. The city is geared towards cars rather than pedestrians, which is a second shock. Adapt. Take your bike and ride as many streets as possible. Make the most out of the dying summer. Moreover, in Guanajuato, due to its hilly nature, it's impossible to ride a bike. Now it was time to finally fulfill a childhood's dream: conquer every avenue cycling it. Youtube is once again my ever-standing ally whenever I'm in need of biking expertise. Adapt.

Unlike Guanajuato, I don't feel like a tourist here but like a secondary character of a TV series. In Guatemala most of our TV comes from the US, especially cartoons. The first weeks in East Lansing were surreal. The

Observe. Adapt. Repeat.

university, the streets, the houses, the people. All of them looked like in the screen. You grow up believing such images are plain fiction with no real counterpart. And now I extend my arm I can actually feel them rather than the cold TV screen. In a way, such feeling kept me outside, akin to 5 years ago.

Weeks went by. Both my classes and the weather are tougher now. I don't feel the same joy as I used to in August. I miss my friends from Guanajuato, and I miss Mexican humor and its way of life. Life feels duller and I wonder if I'm doing alright. Observe. October 2013 was a very gloomy month back in Guanajuato as well. Back then I sulked for my high school friends and felt as mournful as I do now. Repeat. It is a natural feeling: I didn't mourn before because I was too busy making a room for my own. Now that such task is complete, I can sulk. Repeat. Eventually I'll fully embrace the facts and go on.

Observe. Back then, Guanajuato offered me the Festival Cervantino, the biggest cultural festival in all Latin America. Back in November 2013 I had the chance to dance along Goran Bregovic, watch Moscow Ballet and enjoy contemporary Colombian theater. Adapt. The East Lansing Film Festival is coming. It is small, yes, but it portrays people from all over the world, nonetheless. I haven't gone to MSU Museum since August and I'm sure they have a different exhibition right now. And above all, I'm in graduate school now. Adapt. The workload goes beyond homework and exams: it also involves actively looking for new ideas in the literature and invited speakers. I'm part of the forefront of science. My back tingles whenever I realize that.

Yes, the future looks bright indeed. First, observe your surroundings. Second, adapt them so they fit your basic needs. Whenever the time comes, and you have to fly away, simply repeat the two steps above and off you go. There is catch, however. First, you need time for your sight to adjust and observe properly. Second, you must find a balance of which habits are crucial and which are bendable depending on your circumstances. Don't worry too much about it, though, the cycle gets a bit easier the more times you iterate.

Becoming Whole Again

Asif Iftekhar

Crash. The sound of glass shattering filled my ears on a warm Friday morning as I pulled up a chair beside my lab partner, getting ready for Calculus I recitation that day. The Starbucks coffee I'd grabbed from the vending machine on my way in had slipped off the swinging table attached to the chair, and now lay on the floor in a thousand different pieces, with its contents spreading out in an elliptical puddle. I panicked. Thoughts began to run through my head at a mile a minute. What should I do? Do I leave it for the janitorial staff like I would back home? Maybe I should get the janitor. But they're nowhere to be seen! Am I allowed to use their supplies? Cleaning up coffee from the floor of a classroom in Wells Hall was not something I envisioned myself doing on the second Friday of the semester. I learned a valuable lesson that day: those Starbucks cans are not made of plastic, but glass. Very. Brittle. Glass. As it turned out, however, spilling coffee before recitation was the least of my worries.

Less than two weeks prior to this incident, I'd arrived at Michigan State University with my aunt, uncle, and their next-door neighbor who drove us there overnight, all the way from New York. If you've been keeping count, you might've noticed that that's a week short. And it is – I missed my week-long International Academic Orientation Program due to visa delays. You know that week where they assign international students into small groups and tell them about MSU and its procedures, give them tips to succeed, and essentially set them up for a smooth transition to the United States? I missed it all. This meant that I had to figure out all the processes, such as how the dining halls worked or how the bus system operated, on my own. But more than that, it meant that I had no one to guide me and no support network to start off with. Beginning from scratch was tougher than I imagined it would be; I frequently felt alienated in classes dominated by domestic students, sometimes for valid reasons but often for naïve ones.

I ended up becoming heavily isolated for most of my first semester, choosing to focus on academics to stay busy and distract myself from the chronic homesickness I experienced. When winter break finally came around, I was ecstatic to go back to my home in Bangladesh. I released an immense sigh of relief as soon as the plane touched ground; the lead weight that had been pulling down on my heart seemed to be lifted all at once. It brought me unfathomable joy to be in the arms of my family and friends once again. But it also made me greatly unsettled. In only a

few weeks, I would be returning to the US and leaving everyone behind again. And then what? Would I simply continue to cycle back and forth on a perpetual wave of emotional crests and troughs? No, I couldn't. I wouldn't. I made a vow to overcome this seemingly unnavigable obstacle, no matter what.

Upon coming back to MSU for spring semester, I immediately thrust myself out of my comfortable, yet toxic cocoon and forced myself to start getting more involved on campus. I didn't know what to expect, but I'd hit rock bottom and I could only go up from here on out. Eventually, I caught wind of the fact that there was an Association of Bangladeshi Students and Scholars at MSU, and they were soon about to hold their executive committee elections. It took me so long to learn of this organization due to the staggeringly low number of Bangladeshi undergraduates at MSU – about 5 in total. The majority of the students in the association were in graduate and PhD programs, so our lives rarely intersected. Nevertheless, I went on to join the executive board of the organization in the position of Media Secretary. This improved my situation drastically as I found a home away from home, but I was fully aware that this was only another bubble in the much larger world. I knew I couldn't fix the issues I originally set out to, if I enclosed myself again within the boundaries of my comfort zone. Aside from being intrinsically problematic and short-sighted, it would just be a temporary solution to a permanent problem. I had to extend my branches further if I wanted to have any hopes of reaching my end goal – to learn to be a global citizen in this continuously advancing world.

My circumstances stagnated after a while, but I continued to try and find ways to break out, albeit, finding little success. Then in late spring, I was approached by the Director of Public Relations for the International Students Association, who recommended that I apply for a position on the executive board at the upcoming elections. Jackpot. ISA was the umbrella organization for the international student clubs on campus, and by joining them I would become part of a diverse group of people, all of whom had the aim of improving the lives of international students at MSU. I decided to run for the position of ASMSU Representative and I was subsequently elected to the role. This came with the additional benefit of being able to serve on the general assembly of ASMSU, where I would represent the concerns of international students and the issues they faced on a college-wide platform shared by other student government leaders.

As I made progress and became increasingly involved on campus throughout the semester, I slowly but steadily recognized the flaws in

my mindset which previously prevented me from being able to adapt to the different environment in the United States. I had already undergone a massive change in my surroundings two years earlier when I moved to my home country of Bangladesh after living in Saudi Arabia for the first fifteen years of my life. Despite the nation being my homeland, it still required effort and time to acclimatize to the substantial change in culture. When I moved to the US, I had to rebuild my identity and start all over again in very rapid succession; this resulted in me becoming frustrated and resisting the changes that I was facing around me. I realized that if I wanted to move forward and be at peace with myself, I would need to embrace the transition and own it.

My experiences and development culminated towards the end of the semester when the Association of Bangladeshi Students and Scholars held their event, Bangladesh Night 2018. In addition to helping organize the event and participating in a few of the performances, I hosted the event in its entirety to an audience of about 150 people. As I stood on stage and delivered the program to a cheering crowd of domestic and international students alike, I realized that in the moment, I couldn't discern one from the other. On that night, we were all Spartans sharing and indulging in each other's cultures and appreciating the extraordinary beauty in our differences. And for the first time in a long time, I felt whole.

Later that summer, I worked as an orientation leader during the IAOP session for the incoming class of international freshmen. I was assigned a group of fifteen students who hailed from a plethora of different backgrounds and cultures, but they all walked into the auditorium on their first day of orientation with the same look on their faces – full of excitement, hope, and uncertainty. And as I watched them settle into their seats, I knew I would do everything in my power to ensure that they did not go through the harsh difficulties I experienced on my journey. With that in mind, I gathered my cohort outside Wells Hall shortly afterwards for their first ice-breaker activity and yelled out the words that meant little to me only a year ago but were now integral to my core identity: **“GO GREEN!”**



MSU is proud to have one of the nation's largest education abroad programs – one that spans the world and helps to build international understanding through education. The annual Education Abroad Essay Contest aims to capture the essence of education abroad by encouraging students to reflect and write creatively about the unique living and learning experiences that education abroad provides.

Studying outside of the U.S.A. produces powerful insights into the differences among the cultures of the world and deeper understanding of our own culture(s). Writing and submitting an essay gives students the opportunity to reflect on, and share, their experiences so we may grow our own understanding of the world and our place in it.

EA Essay Contest Winners

1st
PLACE

Chinatown, an Amazing Experience, and a Flaw in My High School Education

Rhett Pimentel

2nd
PLACE

Experiencing Racial Differences in Ecuador at a Time of Global Change

Emma Bignall

3rd
PLACE

One-Love

Jaclyn Rey

Chinatown, an Amazing Experience, and a Flaw in My High School Education

Rhett Pimentel

Every Saturday evening, my mom and her band partner would travel to the fanciest restaurant in town to play jazz music for the diners. In exchange, the restaurant owner provided dinner for the two of them. Unfortunately, this left my twin sister, dad, and myself to fend for ourselves once a week for dinner. Sometimes my dad would heat up some leftovers or throw a frozen pizza in the oven, but often we would end up venturing into town out of pure convenience. Despite all its advantages, living in a three-stoplight town with five thousand people means that dining options are limited.

There isn't too much to choose from besides the ubiquitous fast food trio: McDonalds, Pizza Hut, and Subway. Often, the three of us would find ourselves stopping at "Chinatown." Much like the décor of the entire restaurant, the sign was of minimalistic design, consisting of red and yellow block letters that blandly announced the name. Inside, a series of tables and sticky faux-leather booths encircled a single line of dishes. Heat lamps cast a harsh yellow light on the food. I found that it was better not to consider how the food was reheated or how long it had been sitting on the table. "Chinatown" was simple and unimpressive, but my family and I enjoyed it enough to visit every few weeks.

That restaurant in my hometown represented the extent to which I knew about China (although I would soon discover that the food was not authentic at all). Since visiting China, I have begun to realize how unaware I was of the country and its significance during the first eighteen years of my life. I rarely cast a thought to the vast and complicated population, economy, government, and culture on the other side of the globe. From the effects of increased Chinese demand for beef (I live on a cattle ranch) to the prevalence of low cost manufactured goods, I also had no idea how much China influenced me every day. I was oblivious to my own ignorance.

School did not help eliminate my ignorance, and in hindsight I have some concerns with the material taught at my high school. The last time I remember learning anything related to China was in middle school, when we completed a brief unit on the terra cotta soldiers. That lesson was less about China and more of a quick overview of notable sites from around the world. I now realize that I have learned about pre-1865 United States

history during three different classes. I believe that this is an important period for students to learn about, but covering the same material three times is redundant and a waste of time. My high school offered a single world history class that all juniors took. In hindsight, this was not really a “world” history class at all. We only learned about European history, and only up to the Industrial Revolution.

After visiting China, I now recognize how much my history classes skipped over or never even covered. I would argue that a thorough understanding of recent history is invaluable knowledge that can be exercised daily to better understand the world. In less than one hundred years, China has undergone a complete transformation. It has changed from an impoverished, predominantly agricultural country to one with highly developed, technologically advanced hubs of commerce and production. China’s rapid growth is not only economic, but also political and social. Recent changes by China’s leadership has put the United States and other world powers on edge. A new culture of innovation and capitalism seems to be emerging from a once strictly communist society. The United States must constantly address a myriad of issues that arise in the complicated relationship with China.

After landing in Beijing, I had one number stuck in my head. Twenty-two million. The population was surprising for those in my group from major U.S. cities, so it was especially shocking for a ranch kid whose nearest neighbors live two miles away. I quickly learned that yielding to pedestrians isn’t a thing in China and when someone honks, you better get out of the way. I was also unnerved to see security cameras hanging from every street corner. There was no place in the city to get out of sight—from human or electronic eyes.

My first night with a host family quickly showed me that there is a lot more to Chinese culture than the huge population. My host families taught me new manners, customs, and traditions. Throughout the two-week trip, my chopstick skills transformed from lacking to moderately proficient. Perhaps my most memorable experience came in the city of Chengdu. My host sibling and a friend brought me to a park at the center of the city. I sipped green tea while attempting to learn the thousands of years old game of Mahjong. Almost every table at the park hosted a group of Mahjong enthusiasts. I cherish this experience because it was so genuine and traditional.

The trip to China not only exposed me to a new culture, but also to vastly different political and government landscapes. Of the little information that I had gleaned from U.S. news sources prior to the trip, I somewhat

grasped my country's views on U.S.-China relations. A meeting with several officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs introduced me to China's official perspectives on matters such as Taiwan, tariffs, and the South China Sea. It is a very powerful experience to have candid and open discussion about contentious issues with someone who has fundamentally different opinions. Near the end of the trip, my group met with diplomats from the U.S. Consulate in Chengdu. In that setting, I learned the U.S.'s official stance on the same issues. Both meetings were enlightening because they offered two very different viewpoints, but also the hope of understanding and compromise.

My time in China left me with countless memories that I will not forget. Through photos and stories, I have enjoyed sharing my experiences with friends and family. However, my trip has left me with a much greater responsibility. I am humbled to have witnessed a country that I was but faintly aware of before this experience, but I realize that there are many people in my pre-trip shoes; China is just a dot on the map for them, another name that gets forgotten in the daily rush of school, news, and debate. Yet China does and will continue to affect the United States in all aspects. As current issues fade from the news cycle, new ones will pop up such as the One Belt, One Road initiative and Chinese environmental concerns.

I want my family, peers, teachers, administrators, and fellow citizens to understand the importance of a well-rounded, global perspective. In a globalized, interconnected world, politics on the other side of the world are arguably as relevant as those that occur within our borders. As I have discovered, poor quality Chinese food is not sufficient to understand the multifaceted characteristics of a country that influences us in so many ways.

Experiencing Racial Differences in Ecuador at a Time of Global Change

Emma Bignall

I arrived in Quito, Ecuador at night. The yellow lights from the city danced in black, positioned high on mountain tops and low in valleys. My plane landed, and soon my host mother was piling me into her son's pickup truck that chugged up a winding road. Away I went, thrust into adventure for five months in a country I knew little about. When I first entered the program, I assumed I would learn broadly about Ecuadorian culture and the Spanish language, topics that were discussed in my preemptive training.

Being that I am an anthropology major, it felt as though I had been reading, eating, and sleeping different cultural theories since sophomore year of college when I took my first class. I quickly learned that studying race as a social construct, and experiencing it are two very different things.

Zeheivy, my host mother, is barely 5 feet tall. She is a beautiful woman with striking features and a sharp tongue. Each night, I would sit at the two-seated counter, sip the traditional Ecuadorian soup she had prepared, and talk about any topic that would come to mind. During this time, President Trump had been elected for a little bit over a year and she began to slowly ask me questions about my thoughts on the state of our country.

Zehievy wanted to know mostly about the Black Lives Matter movement, police brutality, and how this was all tied to the man we elected. I would then feel slighted, mainly since I was incapable of completely responding in Spanish in a way that I felt used my prior knowledge on the subjects. I wanted to defend my country, while also recognizing the blatant racism from powerful people that had sparked her interest so much.

One day during dinner, Zeheivy explained that she considered herself a white, older woman in society and how this opened opportunities. There we were, a mestiza woman and a Caucasian woman both claiming the title of "white" in the context of our own societal makeup. Looking at her dark complexion, this removed the idea that racial categories were synonymous across all countries. Without my security blanket of being the racial majority, I was able to contemplate this social construct and compare her situation to those of others in the United States,

specifically African-American and Latinx individuals. With the news of rising political tension, I tried to explain in the best broken Spanish I could that I believed we hold a certain responsibility as white women to create an environment where discussions of race should be progressive and Zeheivy agreed. Two generations vowing to generate positive global change.

In the beginning of the program, my advisors told us to make ourselves blend in as much as possible, to remove any United States flags from our wardrobe and dress as a true Quiteñan. After a short while, I realized no amount of effort on my clothing would change the fact that my light hair and thick accent stood out.

Each day, I would walk to a bus stop for my commute to the university. If I looked up for too long on this overcrowded bus, a passenger would comment on my appearance and others would likely chime in. I was showered in compliments about my hair, eye, and skin color until I eventually blushed and looked away.

One morning, I saw two billboards towering over me that changed my perspective on the comments I was receiving. One sign was for tutoring young children in school subjects and another for a gym membership. What I saw in these advertisements was that white and beauty were shown as not mutually exclusive. I realized then that I set the standard for beauty and success without inherently realizing it and I carried many ideas of what a person from the United States was onto the bus with me. By looking away and not responding with the justification that there is beauty and intelligence found in all people, I was further confirming that these implications could be true.

Representation of the “White America” was a larger part of my Ecuadorian experience than I first thought it would be. I realized I had expected everyone that I interacted with to take liking to me as an individual, separate from my country and race. As I am settled back in my hometown, I realize what a ridiculous assumption this had been. Pre-conceived notions are bound to happen, but what can be changed is how conversations around race and society are formed.

Travelling through a study abroad program forced me into an environment where I could no longer hide behind how I thought my race and nationality should be viewed, but how it veritably is. Generating progressive conversations around these issues encourages global change that will have lasting effects on the betterment of our world.

One-Love Jaclyn Rey

I was reading my book on a bright, sunny afternoon when I met Ismael: the homeless, Argentinian man living underneath a tree in a local plaza of Buenos Aires. It had been a month since I had temporarily moved away from home to complete a Kinesiology internship. This day of work was particularly challenging. Despite the tremendous opportunity, I could not shake the feeling of vulnerability, loneliness and fear. And so, the inner dialogue began: *“How,”* I thought, *“am I supposed to teach people ‘yoga’ when I feel so scared. What do I do?”* The homeless man was watching me as I pondered, giving little attention to the words in the book. He asked me what I was reading. I remember feeling slightly uneasy while I nonchalantly gripped tightly onto my purse.

He continued to speak to me quietly, yet with a heavy Argentinian accent. I listened to him carefully as he shared with me his story. Although having suffered much in his life, Ismael was radiating genuine gratitude, contentment and joy. Feeling the warmth from the sun overhead and this man’s presence, my breath deepened as the fear in my chest began to slowly dissolve into something indescribable and unmeasurable. I had found yoga five years prior to this moment. Through the ancient philosophy, consistent movement and breath practice, my life began to develop a deeper meaning. Rather, I felt a sense of profound personal purpose, like I had something unique to share; something I had never noticed before.

Upon completing a 200-yoga teacher training as a Freshman at Michigan State University, I began focusing on my Kinesiology degree accompanied by a Spanish and Health Promotion minor in the pursuit of turning a passion into a career. As a senior, I had received an inquiry from Esclerosis Múltiple Argentina (EMA), a non-profit stationed in the heart of Buenos Aires, Argentina, supporting patients with Multiple Sclerosis (MS). I accepted the position to be an instructor for the yoga, meditation, body corporal and art sector of this organization.

In May of 2018, I flew to this vibrant, South American city, moved in with a local host- family and thus, began my work. What I quickly learned about EMA is that it is not just an organization or small community, it is a family. On the back-end, there is a team who handles the logistics including funding and marketing. I never saw much from this side of things, although I developed a great deal of respect for what it takes to keep a non-profit running within a small budget.

I worked with the ladies on the front- end: a small group of women who put their whole heart, soul and sweat into the daily success of EMA. I reported every Tuesday to teach meditation classes, alongside Sergio, EMA's twelve-year yoga instructor. Every Thursday, I co- taught natural movement and art classes with Flavia, a member of EMA living with the illness herself. The other days were filled with writing assignments, event-fundraising and facility cleaning. I had the opportunity to attend monthly "charlas," or educational events to inform patients and community members about topics regarding MS.

I learned that Multiple Sclerosis is a chronic disease that effects the central nervous system (CNS) causing a number of sensory, motor and cognitive effects to the patient. Essentially, the body begins attacking its own myelin sheath, which is the protective covering around the axon of the neurons within the CNS. If you can imagine, it is similar to a mail-person trying to deliver the mail in the morning, but with damage to the road, they cannot properly reach the countless homes to deliver the messages. The road damage is synonymous to the "demyelination" that occurs to the axon. When the neurons are unable to correctly communicate with each other, the CNS and the body cannot efficiently connect, which causes the various symptoms. The exact cause of MS, however, is still unknown, whether an autoimmune disease, carried on through genetics or external sources. Therefore, research is continuously done in this day in age to better comprehend.

Due to the fact that MS is extremely difficult to understand and treat because the symptoms vary so greatly depending on the individual, it made my work so interesting and truly life changing. The practice of mind- body connection is hard enough for an "able-bodied" human to comprehend, let alone an individual whom physiologically has pre-established problem with this interaction. Regardless, these patients put in the effort necessary to create a change in their reality. Irrespective of their physical or mental state, native language, background or age, they were still able to so profoundly and proficiently connect with themselves, one-another and with me. The inner dialogue persisted, "*How?*" I asked myself as I continued to breath into the heart.

Daily within EMA, the locals and I partook in the popular, and my personal favorite, Argentinian tradition: the drinking of Yerba mate. Mate is tea that originally was harvested in Paraguay, Brazil and various parts of South America. Brazil, the leading mate producer, began to emphasize coffee production in the 1930s, opening the door for Argentina to take over. (Institute Nacional de la Verba Mate). The tea is enjoyed out of the mate cup, most commonly made from "calabaza" (pumpkin), palo

santo (holy wood), or glass. Once the mate is filled with “la yerba” (the name for the tea itself), it is drunk from the decorative straw, known as a “bombilla.” Though a caffeinated beverage, it is more importantly an ancient symbol of friendship. Don’t be surprised to see mate everywhere: in the home, at the office, on the streets, shared between everyone: friends, family, colleagues, strangers. Clearly a method in which Argentinians communicate, I asked myself, “*Could the connection be from the mate?*”

While working on a special article assignment for EMA, I felt the connection again. My objective was to create a Mindfulness guide to leave behind with the patients upon my return to the United States. I was sitting in my favorite café, enjoying the delicious “medialuna,” a sweet croissant pastry cooked to perfection, when I noticed Argentina’s flag: pastel blue and white stripes with a radiant sun in the middle. The sun shines the same on every being, no matter who you are, where you are from or what you look like. This level of acceptance is truly reflected through Argentinian culture and the locals themselves. “*Oh, so the nature of the sun is a part of the culture!*” That time, I really thought I had it.

Through deep reflection, I have become aware of the universality amongst all these experiences. The connection I felt daily within EMA is the same that I felt within the the country. The same connection I felt all those years ago when I began practicing yoga. The same connection that brings people together to share in the ritual of yerba mate. The connection established between Ismael and I on that unforgettable afternoon. “*What is it?*” Well, this was the beautiful discovery that has brought me so much internal peace. **Love; it is unconditional love.** These words, no longer coming from an inner monologue within my head, but instead, an internal knowing which can only be understood or experienced through the feeling itself.

As I write these words, I realize the soft and silly way in which this message can be received. However, as we critically examine this concept, we begin to see the strength this phenomenon has over our lives. People change for love, die for love, kill for love. Love creates life. Love unites nations while a lack there of, separates people from different backgrounds, perspectives and realities.

On a fundamental level, we are all connected and able to commune. It goes beyond physical, emotional or mental state/status. I call it the powerful vibration of love, but even if these words mean nothing to you, I always like to use the saying “tomato, tomato.” [to-may-to, to-mah-to] It is all the same. It is not about you believing what it is that I

believe. It is about you believing what you believe with all your heart, all your mind, and all your soul. It is about you using this belief, or faith, or consciousness, or (fill in word that resonates with you here) to become the best version of yourself that you can possibly be, for the greater evolvment of humanity. Therefore, you may efficiently do the work, receive the rest and explore the play; therefore, you may wholeheartedly serve others and create a positive impact on the world in a time of *lasting global change*.

Every day, I find myself grateful, an acknowledgement I had overlooked in my daily life prior to this experience. I am grateful for my healthy body and mind. I am grateful for nature's gifts and life's infinite opportunities and abundance. I am grateful that my journey lead me to Argentina, where I had the opportunity to improve my Spanish- speaking, incorporate a passion into work, come closer to myself as a woman, and receive this message. I am humbled to the realization that, although I was called to Buenos Aires as a teacher, I too was a student. I have returned to the United States, independent, inspired and *full of love*, approaching graduation as an unstoppable Michigan State Spartan.

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Instituto Nacional de la Verba Mate. (2015). *History of Yerba Mate*. Retrieved from <http://yerbamateargentina.org.ar/en/yerba-mate/la-yerba-mate-y-su-historia/>





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