

ALLEGHENY COLLEGE

James Morgan

**On Travel and Discovering how Culture can Define how Life is Understood: A
Reflection on Western Massachusetts and Seville Spain
Sobre viajar y descubrir cómo la cultura puede definir las concepciones de la
vida: una reflexión sobre Massachusetts del oeste y Sevilla España**

**Submitted to the Department of History & Philosophy (Philosophy Program)
& the Department of World Languages and Cultures (Spanish Program)**

In partial fulfillment of the Senior Comprehensive Project Requirement
for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy & in Spanish

Date 4/20/25



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*I hereby recognize and pledge to fulfill my responsibilities as defined in the Honor Code and to
maintain the integrity of both myself and the College community as a whole.*

James Morgan

(James Morgan)

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I stand on the shoulders of giants. I would like to thank my family and my friends for being my guides, my protectors, and my supporters. I would like to thank Allegheny College and all the staff for cheering me on and driving me to achieve more, for granting me the opportunity to study abroad for a year, and for working with me to graduate this Spring. Thank you Professor Eric Palmer for your infinite understanding and your ever engaging conversation, in your role as teacher, Comp advisor, and contemporary. I hope we can stay in touch and you find ever more joy in retirement. Profesora Herrera, no tengo las palabras suficientes de agradecerte. Ha sido un tiempo inolvidable en trabajar y hablar y relacionarme contigo. No pudiera hablar ni escribir ni entender todo así, sin su ayuda y comprensión.

These last four years have been a time full of incredible moments and memories I will cherish forever, even if I never write an essay about them. I would like to thank my teammates in the Frisbee club, the brothers of Delta Tau Delta, and my friends in Green Living for being the communities of people I could return to and count on. We may all spend our whole lives finding where we fit, but for these four years I found a way to fit here, and it's truly been an honor and a gift to share this place and this time with you. Even as we graduate and head different ways I hope to see you again. Everyone I got to share a smile with, a class with, a drink with, a dance, a frisbee field, a table in Brooks, a spicy Chai in GFC, a jam sesh under the gazebo, a late night walk, a study room in Pelletier, a ping-pong table, a long talk about something real, or something stupid, has a permanent place in my heart. Life keeps passing and the only way through is gratitude, so in this moment, and in every moment, thank you. Thank you for everything you are, and everything you helped me to become, because I wouldn't be me without you.

I see friends shaking hands, saying 'how do you do' they're really saying, 'I love you.'

ABSTRACT

On Travel and Discovering how Culture can Define how Life is Understood: A Reflection on Western Massachusetts and Seville Spain

This essay is inspired by the philosophical tendencies of Montaigne, with a deeply personal self-reflection of the ways in which my understanding of life was influenced by my social upbringing and the cultural values I inherited. The purpose of the exploration is to get a clearer idea of what it means to live a life autonomously, to be truly driven by the self. I explore themes of personal and interpersonal values and norms, manifestations of community, and cultural expectations. I hope to illuminate some of the ways in which I learned what life was supposed to be like, how I was meant to be within a society, and how the society is supposed to order itself. The experience of my time abroad in Spain is shared in parts, to illustrate some of the ways in which I saw culture manifest; in ways that compared and contrasted with my previous experiences of life. I try to avoid making generalizations, remaining cognizant of the intrinsic bias of my experiences, while taking extra care to acknowledge how my bias is an important aspect of my experience. For anyone insistent on reading this essay, I hope that it provides interesting insight into myself, my home culture, or my experience in Spain. For the intrepid reader, I urge you to allow yourself to reflect on the ways in which you have been formed by the culture(s) you've experienced, and perhaps allow yourself to extend your conception of self to reach beyond the conceptions of your society. What seems like concrete truth, may prove to be socially accepted norms.

RESUMEN

Sobre viajar y a descubrir cómo la cultura puede definir las concepciones de la vida: una reflexión sobre Massachusetts del oeste y Sevilla España

Este ensayo se inspira en las tendencias filosóficas de Montaigne, con una autorreflexión profundamente personal sobre las formas en que mi forma de entender la vida se vio influida por mi educación social y los valores culturales que heredé. El propósito de la exploración es tener una idea más clara de lo que significa vivir una vida de forma autónoma, ser verdaderamente impulsado por uno mismo. Exploro temas de valores y normas personales e interpersonales, manifestaciones de comunidad y expectativas culturales. Espero iluminar algunas de las formas en que aprendí cómo se suponía que debía ser la vida, cómo debía ser yo dentro de una sociedad y cómo se supone que la sociedad se ordena a sí misma. La experiencia de mi estancia en España se comparte por partes, para ilustrar algunas de las formas en que vi manifestarse la cultura; de maneras que comparaban y contrastaban con mis anteriores experiencias vitales. Intento evitar hacer generalizaciones, siendo consciente del sesgo intrínseco de mis experiencias, al tiempo que tengo especial cuidado en reconocer cómo mi sesgo es un aspecto importante de mi experiencia. Para quien insista en leer este ensayo, espero que proporcione una visión interesante de mí mismo, de mi cultura de origen o de mi experiencia en España. Para el lector intrépido, le insto a que se permita reflexionar sobre las formas en que le han formado las culturas que ha experimentado, y quizá se permita ampliar su concepción del yo para ir más allá de las concepciones de su sociedad. Lo que parece una verdad concreta, puede resultar ser una norma socialmente aceptada.

What do you want to be when you grow up? This question is very familiar, it is asked out of curiosity in both economic and personal spheres. Genuinely interested parties ask this question as a way to get to know you better, to see what you want and what you plan to do. I often found this question limiting and confusing, it asks you to define yourself and specialize towards a specific professional interest. It is a question that can be asked of anyone, young and old, and while some people have specific plans and aspirations, I find it hard to answer in concrete terms. I simultaneously want to be everything and I don't feel particularly inclined towards a specific career. The way it's presented, the profession you choose defines the life you will live, but the life itself is what is more important to me.

I prefer another question. What do you want your life to look like? This question is unfamiliar because it requires genuine reflection. It requires reflection on what you want from your life, what you really want it to look like, to feel like, and the person you want to be in it. This reflection is particularly difficult because it is hard to imagine a life that is fundamentally different from what you know. Sure, you can imagine making more money, working a different job, or living the life of a celebrity, but the imagination includes your perspective; it is framed within your understanding of life. It is hard to imagine a fundamental difference in the form life can take, what it could look like, what it could feel like, until you experience it.

When kids are asked what they want to be when they grow up often they give predictable answers. Some say firefighters, police officers, or teachers, while others parrot their parents. They choose the things that they admire, the jobs that they know and see valued around them. But none of them talk about jobs they've never heard of, how could they? So when asked what do you want your life to look like, how could anyone answer with a life that they don't even know is possible? They more likely choose a life that they know and see valued around them. They may obviously find this just as fulfilling, but it allows their surroundings to dictate their life. In order to choose to live the life you want, you must be aware of the aspects of life which are defined by those around you, and you must be able to choose independently how to lead your own. These choices rely on both an awareness that there are other options, and a deep self-understanding in determining what it is that you want. It requires another level of volition, a trust in the self; of intuition.

It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.

-Ralph Waldo Emerson (10)

Emerson is similarly a product of my area of Massachusetts and his philosophy has reached me through the teachings of my father. In that way I've come to question the nature of the individual. Emerson's writing opens the door for a certain unique self, independent of their conditioning. It is this nature that allows people to come to decidedly certain conclusions that differ from those around them, it is the inner nature that compels someone to trust that they know what feels right to them, if they allow it to compel them. Flying in the face of conformity, Emerson writes that: "No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution; the only wrong what is against it" (9). The nature of the individual illuminates a personal truth above any societal judgment. Societal judgments exist as truths only within the given society and even then they can change on a whim, so the most valuable judgments are the ones that come from the self. The question remains how we can be sure the decision comes from the self; the nature of the individual.

Many people believe they are autonomous, making autonomous decisions, choosing their life. Autonomy derives from greek: *auto* meaning self; and *nomos* meaning law. An autonomous individual is self-governing: they choose how they act and live, they set their priorities and their values, they affirm their responsibilities and obligations. Much of the force behind autonomy hinges on the influences on the decision-maker. It is considered of utmost importance that an autonomous actor is truly acting of their own volition and not that of another.

I'm not here to debate free-will. That would be a much more complicated and nihilist essay. Instead, I'm considering the importance of the relationship between the autonomous individual and the influences on their decision making process. What role do cultural factors have in interfering with autonomous decisions? It is generally not considered a threat to autonomy when the decisions that an individual makes are influenced by themselves, by their preferences, by their values, and according to their morals. But when preferences, values, morals, and personal identity are learned and formed through a cultural background, it becomes less clear that any decisions are made autonomously.

Additionally, autonomy is limited by the choices available to the individual. Not simply through what is practically available, as a viable option, but also what is consciously accessible, what is conceivable. Most conceivable options are not practically available, acknowledging that imagination is more active than reality; some things just can't be done. Other conceivable options are often dictated by cultural norms, meaning that they are filtered by and conceived of within a cultural understanding. This means that most unfamiliar practical options prove inconceivable, and some conceivable options reform to fit within the frame of understanding. Again, how could anyone choose something they don't know is even possible? So an autonomous decision requires the practical ability to choose and a conscious awareness of how cultural identity works to limit and dictate the choices. A choice limited to a single cultural viewpoint is hardly a choice at all; the choice is to conform.

This isn't to say that conforming couldn't be an autonomous decision. Conformity provides a lot of comfort: safety, familiarity, camaraderie, community. Most people choose in many ways to conform every day: to drive on the right side of the road, to wear pants in public, to support a football team, to tip the waiter at the restaurant. This doesn't threaten the autonomy of the individual, rather it recognizes the necessity of awareness in making autonomous choices. For some people, the explicit expectation is to drive on the left side of the road, to wear a dress in public, to support a fútbol team; to never tip at a restaurant. In order to make an autonomous decision in any of these cases, one must be aware of the expectations and the potential consequences of non-conformity. These examples have real practical consequences for nonconformity that an aware individual will likely choose to avoid. So an autonomous individual must be aware of the legal and social systems in which they function, but this is not a complete awareness. An individual with just this type of awareness -an awareness of expectations and consequences- simply drives between the lines and takes the marked exits.

An autonomous individual recognizes when they're conforming and only does so intentionally. They consider the implicit expectations, the ones internalized while never directly explained -the cultural logic, the cultural identity- that make conformity go unnoticed on a familiar cultural background. In order to know the implicit expectations and understand why they choose to conform to them, the autonomous individual must first recognize them. For me, that meant seeing the implicit expectations that I had internalized, against an unfamiliar cultural background in Spain. In this way I gained insight into a second aspect of autonomy: beyond the

awareness of how to function within a social system of expectations and consequences, was the realization that the system in which I had been functioning was just that, a system, one way of doing things. Greater autonomy doesn't mean driving off the road, it means seeing that your map is drawn with a particular understanding and looking beyond it to see the exits that aren't labeled.

In the pursuit of autonomy, in order to live the life that I want, it is clear that I still must know what it is that I want. In order to be self-governing, one must know oneself. Understandings of life: preferences, values, attitudes, morals –all of the factors that play into decision-making– are learned starting at a young age, conditioned by the environment, the society, the community, the family. An individual, in order to reach towards autonomy, must understand the origins of their motivations. More than just driving on the right side of the road because that's the law, it means that they understand that their preferences, values, attitudes and morals are all informed by a learned cultural framework. In order to understand my motivations, in order to understand myself, I must understand where I come from, and how it formed me.

It may be easy, for some, to understand conceptually that they are a product of their cultural upbringing. Less easy however, is understanding actually what the implications are and how far-reaching, how deeply-ingrained, cultural logic really is. In order to see how my cultural upbringing formed me, I had to see myself through new eyes. They were still my own eyes, mind you, but my new insight came from immersion in another culture. I had the great privilege -thanks to my dedication and conviction, the support of my family and my university, the kindness of countless strangers, and a shocking amount of luck- to study abroad in Spain for a year. It was an incredible eye-opening experience. I got to meet new people, new ideas, marvel at spectacular architecture and food, practice a new language, and learn how to behave in a new society. When I returned everyone always asks, they want to know, "What was it like?" I expanded my horizons, pushed out of my comfort zone, and gained new intimate understandings about life. But what was it like? It's impossible to reduce a year of life, to reduce a culture, to reduce a place to your experience of it. At the same time, my experience of it is the only thing that I know for sure. When I try to explain it I have to just say "It was different." From the start it seemed different to me, and of course it seemed different; it was another culture. What struck me though is this word 'different'. In order for their culture to be different, I realized I was

comparing it to my own. In this way I realized I was using my own culture as my baseline expectation without ever really looking at it.

The realization that I was a product of my cultural upbringing came hand-in-hand with the realization that everyone I met was similarly a product of theirs, whether they knew it or not. This insight allowed me to step back from a place of comparison, a place of judgment, of confusion, and simply observe. I learned to appreciate differences, to embrace discomfort, to participate and to celebrate. But most importantly I learned that this is life. That life is different in different places, that people are different, and that they're the same.

I write this in the interest of pursuing my own autonomy, in knowing myself. I don't pretend that this exploration will actually make me autonomous, but it seems a necessary part of a process that I feel I must attempt, and it seems unlikely to lead me further from my goal. Likewise, my writing will unlikely help any reader to gain their own autonomy, because it is my personal self-reflection. At best, it may be enlightening or inspiring, and if you like, it may demonstrate a model for your own self-reflection.

I find the specifics of Spain to be consequential more for my lived reality than for the exploration itself. I imagine that one could come to similar realizations as I have by immersing themselves and engaging earnestly with any culture that challenges their cultural assumptions and understanding of life. They may not have to travel at all, a particularly observant individual could come to understand how their culture influences the way they think about life in much the same way that I have begun to grasp. However, I find it difficult to believe that this kind of understanding could be learned from a class, a textbook, or an essay. The feeling that the life around me truly is different from the way I learned was so visceral in nature that I don't believe it can be communicated directly. It seems that this feeling requires a certain conflict, a challenge to what was held as truth, a true reassessment.

With that being said, I must first acknowledge my own limitations. First, the obvious: my memory is doubtless imperfect -being incomplete or biased-, I am limited to my single perspective, and my progressive growth as a person changes me as an observer. And then, the slightly less obvious: in every case I find my place in the inseparable roles of both actor and

observer, and any experience I have is inevitably interpreted through the lens of my personal understanding.

For these reasons, I will endeavor to not generalize, to not compare cultures, to not pass judgement. Due to the progressive nature of life, I was never the same person experiencing any of these events; I was changing: in the ways I thought, in the ways I behaved, in the ways others perceived me, and in the role I played in each situation. My experience of Spain is unlikely to be exactly like anyone else's experience, although there are undoubtedly parallels. The man I was during my time in Spain was formed from my own life-experiences and that inevitably colors my experiences and my interpretations of them. How I was, and how I was treated in any situation, is intrinsically tied to my identity. However, for my purposes, in my self-reflection, this is a necessary aspect because it is true to my experience.

I grew up in rural western Massachusetts, in a small town called Conway. Where you grow up isn't just a location, it is your physical and social environment. Your experience forms you physically, mentally, ideologically it sets the foundation for who you are and how you understand the world. The culture around me, the people, the communities, their relationship with their environment, their attitudes and approach to life, what and how they celebrated, their values and their expressions of self; those were my role models. They explicitly and implicitly formed my understanding of what life was like, what it meant to be part of a society, how I was meant to behave and engage with others.

Growing up, I learned that life is tied closely with nature. It is founded on a deep respect and an even deeper struggle: of survival. I won't pretend that my situation was the same as everyone else's in my town, but it was not unique, and it was closely tied to the historical and cultural roots of the area. My mother taught me about some of the indigenous ways that early settlers adopted. I heard about how they would use the whole animal from a hunt. The meat, the fur, the bones and teeth, the organs, all had a use and they were careful not to waste them. For the indigenous people this was motivated by gratitude to the animal and to all of nature. They recognized that taking the life was an unfortunate necessity and that they must be grateful to the spirit of the animal for the sacrifice that they made.

A local summer program organized by members of the community taught me and other children wilderness survival skills and values with respect to nature. I learned to thank the trees

for the needles that we pinched from their branches to start our fire. I learned to respect the animals in their own habitat and to recognize it more as theirs than my own. I learned to listen and watch, to be still and silent to let the forest come to life around me, to coexist comfortably. I learned to respect nature with a deep reverence in both its power to provide and its ultimate indifference to my survival.

My father would talk about our Puritan roots, the ways that early settlers had to act and adapt to survive. I learned the Puritan value of thrift. In addition to nature, it is important to treasure and make the most of all of your possessions. We collected food scraps for making soup stock or feeding our chickens. I learned to care for and protect our chickens, to let them out every morning on the way to my bus stop, to close them in and collect the eggs every night. Scrap wood was minimized through careful planning and whatever was inevitably scrap could be used for another project or burned in the fire to cook our food or keep the house warm during the winter. This process was applied to everything from cloth, clothes, furniture, even our house. I learned to appreciate the material, to salvage, fix, to reuse, to see the value in the old, to make use. I quickly learned that old didn't mean worse, it often meant better, designed before planned obsolescence, before everything became single-use plastic, unfixable. Certain things are worth fixing because they are quality. If you treat them well they will treat you well.

Growing up in the country, I learned that being responsible for our land meant protecting our green spaces, our vegetable garden and our yard, from the ever-encroaching surrounding forest. In this way I spent a lot of time tending to plants we liked, dealing with plants we didn't, and learning how to treat plants we wanted to move. Tending to our outdoor space became a foundation of my work ethic and of my understanding of our relationship with nature. Our fruit trees and berry bushes would bear more food when we kept them healthy and animals would come eat first if we didn't harvest quickly enough. The trees were something to be appreciated and something to be tended to. They provided us with shade during the hot summers, and when they grew old and threatened to fall they provided the means of heating our house during the winter.

Coping with rough winters plays an influential role in forming many of the cultural values of the area. Making sure we had enough wood stacked and drying before the end of the summer was a foundational understanding of my interaction with the seasons. I learned that the early settlers dealt with the winter as the indigenous tribes had before them. The values necessary

for survival propagate in the area and influence the culture to this day. The indigenous concept of using the whole animal resounds throughout the ideology of the area. It illustrates both the deep respect and gratitude held towards the providence of nature and to the careful balance of survival.

I learned to split and stack wood with my dad, my mom, and my brother. We stacked the split logs outside at the beginning of the summer so they could dry in the sun. When I was still young, my job was to push the wheelbarrow from the pile we had stacked outside to the pile inside the shed where we could use it. My mom would load the wheelbarrows outside and my dad would re-stack inside because he could reach the top of the pile. When I got too tired I would offer to fetch cold water for everyone from inside. As I grew older, stronger, and more experienced, more of the responsibility fell to me. Eventually, I would split and stack most of the pile outside by myself, but bringing all the wood inside still required a group effort. I would recruit some of my best friends and they wouldn't ask for money, settling for a good home-cooked meal at the end of the day. My dad would still work in the shed, setting the stack to his specifications. My brother would help when he could. My mom would insist on helping before heading inside to take care of other responsibilities and prepare dinner. We coordinated responsibilities to maximize efficiency, to minimize standing around, so that everyone is always loading, unloading, or wheeling.

As a kid I would often complain, feeling that the responsibilities weren't split fairly. I saw what I was asked to do when my brother was idle. I was always reminded that the responsibilities were split beyond what I could see, and this was true. I learned about the common weal. The common weal was posed as the overall wellbeing of the family, of any group or community. It was the common interest of the family, and I learned that we all worked to provide for each other. I was encouraged to do my best, at what I did best, to bring the most benefit to everyone. In this way, responsibilities were split by ability and availability. I learned to work with my strengths and to see and help others when I was not busy.

My parents told me they don't believe in traditional gender roles, but that family matters are best addressed when responsibilities are split. They came to an agreement with each other as to what they would each take on as part of their role. This wasn't a strict separation; in most cases they would still rather work together. In other cases they respect the separation and allow the other to handle it themselves. "If you don't cook, you clean," was a core understanding of the

common weal. Every night, after eating dinner together around the table, I would clear my own plate and anyone else's. I would help clear the table, wipe down surfaces, empty the dishwasher, or wash the dishes, wherever there was a need. I learned to appreciate what we had because I was expected to contribute to it.

I grew up on a hill overlooking a valley, this valley is known to locals as Pumpkin Hollow. This was my first introduction to the small neighborhood community. It formed my first understandings of how neighbors treated each other and what they expected of each other. It was a tight-knit community in that everyone knew each other, I knew their last names, and if I was ever around I could say my last name and they knew which house was mine. At the same time, everyone kept mostly to themselves, the home is a sort of refuge, from the elements, from the outside, a sort of personal fortress with its grounds around it. We had a neighbor down the road from us, at the bottom of the hill. He is a hunter and trapper, he catches and eats his food, he sells pelts, his name is Mark. I often saw him outside chopping wood for his fire, building an orderly pile much like ours. I waited by Mark's house every morning for the school bus, and after I got my driver's license he would wave when I drove past. Mark has fires in his front yard and his family and friends park their cars on the road in front of his house so they can sit in chairs, grill food, and play with his dogs. Mark one time found a deer freshly killed on the side of the road. He worked to butcher and clean it and he ended up with more meat than he needed so he offered some to us. He brought us pounds of venison which we put in the chest freezer in our woodshed. My mom made some chili with it and brought some back to him. There was so much meat in our freezer that it lasted for months.

The culture I experienced growing up must be viewed on multiple scales, from New England, rural Massachusetts, to specifically my hometown and my family. My town had around 2,000 residents, my school around 200 students and about 20 in my grade. I grew up talking and socializing with the same kids with slight variations from year to year. There was very little mixing between grades and we had one teacher each year. At the same time, my town was one of the largest by area in the whole state. Upon reflection, this environment was very isolated, nature oriented, and socially limited.

Some of my town's public spaces, the sports fields and the swimming pond, are reserved for town residents. The exclusive nature was explained to me as protecting the natural resources of the town, making sure it didn't get overcrowded; making sure the beauty wasn't spoiled for

the rest of us. Some of the fear is genuinely concerned with simple overcrowding and residents from other towns having less respect for the spaces. But, it was the tone people used when they spoke about it that betrayed the meaning between the lines. My father was the first one to point it out to me. The people from the larger, more diverse towns made some people extra protective whether they admitted it or not. There was only one black family that lived in my town and they would likely be recognized, but there was an obvious distinction between people that may be questioned about their presence and those who likely wouldn't.

This judgment was not always a race-based assumption. Many of the older residents, the residents whose families had lived in the area for generations, accepted new residents with guarded looks and distrust. The one store in town sold prohibitively expensive gasoline and simple food. The oldest residents had a habit of sitting at the tables and my dad told me they would pause their conversations when he walked in. They would watch him in guarded silence as he picked up an overpriced gallon of milk. Even after we had been living there for over a decade we were considered newcomers and treated as more of an out-group than an in. There is a certain pride in knowing that your family has survived, stayed, and thrived in one town for as long as they had, they were proud of their lineage, and their persistence. They saw anyone that moved to the town as changing it, as coming in to take advantage of the nature, of the place they had grown up in, their own cultural heritage.

When I wanted to see my friends my parents would call their parents, eventually I would call them myself. We would make plans to meet and hang out at one of our houses. I relied on my parents to drive me there and pick me up at the end of the day. Because we always picked someone's house, it would be strange to show up uninvited, and there were almost always parents around. We would usually play sports, run around in the woods, build Legos, play with toys or video games.

Sports were very important growing up, especially for socializing. The teams were organized by the schools or by the towns. I played soccer every year with all the kids from my town. We were driven to practice and back. The towns played against each other and I met the kids that I would go with to middle and high school. I played travel baseball for a youth team sponsored by my highschool. My mom drove me around New England for a couple summers before I stopped playing. Some of my first friends in middle school were from that team.

The freedom that I would feel upon getting my own license at 16 contrasted starkly with the limited mobility I'd faced to that point. But even then, I didn't find myself driving much beyond school and home with the occasional movie. The nearest larger town sat about 15 minutes from my house so if I didn't have somewhere I needed to go I would go home. I had the freedom of agency granted by my car but my agency predictably concluded to go home after finishing my responsibilities.

This practice of gathering in the home was not limited to me and my friends. I saw adults around me giving tours of their houses, hosting dinner parties, hosting birthday parties, sharing drinks on the porch. When they wanted to see their friends they invited them over to their house to catch up and enjoy the company. Otherwise, youth sports seemed just as important for parents, they would talk to the other parents on the sidelines and point out which ones were their kids. My parents would become friends with the parents of my friends while they let us play for 20 more minutes before everyone had to go home.

I first learned around the dinner table, and later in school, that conversation was based on taking turns, hearing someone out before responding; volume was almost never necessary. There was a therapist at our school and all the boys and all the girls would go in groups to see her and talk about any disagreements or qualms that were ailing the class. She taught us to take turns talking, hearing out both sides equally before judging. She taught us how to express disagreements carefully, without offending others, to criticize someone else's behavior by talking about its effect on you. Having all the boys there made anyone's issue everyone's consideration, so we could work together to find truth and learn from each other's mistakes. She guided us to healthy resolutions and every year we would meet with her less.

These lessons infused the whole class, and the whole school. But she was only one influence, many more influences were much less direct. We all learned how to behave in school, in the classroom, in the community, by being in them. I learned that the teacher was a wealth of knowledge for us to engage with, we were encouraged to ask questions, ask for clarification when confused; to participate in the learning process. We had weekly classes of Spanish, art, chorus, and twice physical education. For those willing to put in extra time, and haul an instrument back and forth to school on the yellow school bus, the school also offered music classes. We would perform in the gymnasium to a crowd of parents.

In my physical education class in elementary school we learned how to move, we learned about cooperation, competition, and sports from around the world. We played soccer, basketball, hockey, rugby, bowling, and track events. Sometimes we had specially arranged lessons. My classmate's father Steve lived in town, down the hill from our school. A few times during class he would oversee square dancing. As we learned, he was what was known as the caller. His job was to instruct the dancers: in this case a group of 20-odd semi-enthusiastic elementary schoolers. The music played off an old cd player that sat by him on the basketball court that was our gymnasium. He arranged us in orderly rows, each with our own space around us, and the music thrummed its simple beat.

Steve would call out the instructions, "Do-si-do your partner," "Sashay," "Promenade," and more I can't recall. We would step to the beat and follow the instructions as we'd been taught. We swung each other around with arms interlocked, we pranced, and laughed. We all followed along, getting into the swing. I felt closer to my classmates for getting to dance with all of them. It was especially satisfying when everyone understood the call and we executed it in time without tripping. They explained how this was a traditional dance style, that Steve would call for any dances happening in the area. The image of the dance brought with it the feeling of a straight-backed, formal kindness. It would bring a whole community together into one room to dance, to coordinate in time, without breaking the reserved organized energy of its socially conservative heritage.

My elementary school always held a traditional celebration of May day, the first day of May, to celebrate the coming of spring and the agricultural growing season. All the students and teachers would dance down the hallway with traditional Morris dancers to welcome in the new season. The dancers wore bells around their ankles and their dance created the music as they led us outside into the sun. They danced with fake swords and handkerchiefs to pantomime choreographed battles that ended the winter and brought in the spring. In sixth grade, we learned and performed a traditional rhythmic dance in which we collaborated as a class to braid colorful ribbons on a tall pole as we danced around it. This was a show of maturity for the eldest students in the school and a demonstration of cooperation and order. Any mistakes in the pattern of the dance would show up in the weave of the ribbons on the May pole and we would practice to perform in front of the whole school.

My middle school was larger than my elementary school, a regional school of kids from the four neighboring towns. These were the same kids I grew up competing against in sports and interacting with at summer camps. Our middle school dance saw my whole grade, less than 100 students from the four towns. It was held in the gymnasium of another elementary school nearby, we could only act as we'd learned. Some of the boys recognized the lines on the basketball dancefloor and they chose to run laps in excitement. Not like anyone expected traditional square dancing; no one expected a caller. It seemed that no one knew what to do with no examples to look to or emulate. Much of the dance was spent with boys and girls standing around the gymnasium in separate groups. The boys around me were teased for even talking about the girl that they might approach. The approach was already difficult with all eyes on anyone that approached a group of the opposite gender. We were simultaneously acutely self-aware and completely naive.

In much the same way that dancing was so unnatural to us, for having so little exposure to it, democracy was ingrained in everything we did. We practiced mock elections in our elementary school, learning to use ballot stations, learning that everyone's vote counted for one. We would await the announcements over the school speakers for which presidential candidate won among our student body. We were too young to really understand what we learned about the branches of government but we knew that democracy was the most important and the most fair. This played out in recess disagreements, choices of food and movies. "Let's take a vote," concluded many if not most unsettled matters.

I internalized democratic values from my friends, my parents, my teachers, and I saw them in action in the institutions of the town. The town is run by a selectboard, a group of democratically elected residents that collaborate to oversee town planning, events, and regulations. Selectboard meetings are bi-weekly and allow public attendance. The positions pay little to nothing and people choose to dedicate their time out of a personal sense of obligation. Other branches of government such as the Conservation Commission, which protects nature and ensures that any new developments are following proper environmental regulations, pay nothing at all. My mom volunteered to serve on the Conservation Commission because she has a degree in forestry and an interest in protecting the environment in the town. I learned that Democracy relies on the active participation of its members and their sense of civic duty.

My town is one of a few that still holds on to its formative Democratic history. Every year there is a town hall meeting in the gymnasium in the elementary school. The selectboard sits at tables at the front and they run the meeting. Folding chairs are arrayed in an audience that fills the rest of the room. Anyone can attend the meeting and anyone can stand and speak when appropriate. Town residents can voice their concerns, their opinions, their ideas, from the crowd. Other residents can stand and respond directly and decisions are made through verbal assent or dissent as called for by the select board members. In the case of close votes the tally is written down and recorded. I watched town residents debate budget cuts, town spending habits, business and industry regulations, and proposed housing projects. Some people spoke only a little, appealing to ideology to sway the crowd. Others call attention to the numbers, tell stories, and establish narratives to try to convince people to judge the proposal in their favor. People made their positions clear and even when they wanted the opposite as someone else they always wanted what was best for the town. Any disagreement was simply on the best way to achieve the common goals.

The largest and most important celebration my town has is called the Festival of the Hills. It is a celebration of the fall, the colors of the leaves, the pumpkins and gourds, the changing of the seasons. It brings people from the surrounding towns but primarily it brings our own community together. Local artisans show their jewelry, pottery, paintings and handicrafts in the center of town. The local wild-animal refuge shows off birds of prey to gathered children, the blacksmith shows off his skills, musicians play live music and local food trucks gather. People can sign up to compete in competitions of splitting wood and tossing cast-iron skillet. The big parade celebrates the town's emergency services, the police, ambulances, fire trucks; local and highschool marching bands are military-style in nature, antique cars and small community organizations are scattered along the procession. The youth of the town are expected to volunteer to participate in various aspects of the setup, running, and breakdown of the festival. They are rewarded, upon graduating highschool, with an equitable share of the total profits generated by the festival as a scholarship to help pay for college.

In my college search I had a few conditions. I wanted to be far enough from home that it felt like somewhere new, I wanted an ultimate frisbee team, and I wanted the chance to study

abroad. The small class sizes, financial aid, and the family connection nearby sealed my mind on the decision to go to Allegheny. I had the great privilege -thanks to my dedication and conviction, the support of my family and my university, the kindness of countless strangers, and a shocking amount of luck- to study abroad in Spain for a year.

In Spain my host mother Rosario would keep a bedroom empty in case her son visited. It was already a small apartment, especially with two college students (myself and Ethan). She had a small kitchen, a single bathroom, three bedrooms, a room with a table and chairs and a television, and a balcony that I came to love. This apartment was clean and full of love, the television was always playing some old western movie or home remodeling tv show. The dinner table was small and draped with a blanket that reached to the floor. When I tucked my legs under the table I could feel the warmth of a space heater that kept me warm while I ate or watched television with my host mother.

She taught us straight away to always turn off lights and fans when we were not in the room to save on the electricity bill. She instructed us to take short showers and to turn the water off when we didn't need it during the shower. She would take our dirty clothes from our rooms and wash them before putting them out on the balcony to dry in the sun. She was very old and she did what she could to make us comfortable. She made sure to wake up before us and prepare breakfast on time. She learned that I have a large appetite but she did not want to break the immersion with my experience of Spain so instead of switching from coffee and toast she would make me six slices of toast with jam. I wanted to help her by bringing my plate back to the kitchen after eating but she insisted that I sit and let her take care of it. Every night she would ask what fruit we wanted. I learned that she would always offer fruit after dinner and that she took pride in peeling it herself. When I said I liked peeling it and I could do it faster she scoffed and handed me the orange while happily peeling the other for Ethan.

When her son did visit, he would stay in the room she kept empty. If that room was not empty she would let him sleep in her own bed. In those cases she would slowly make her way down a half flight of stairs and knock on her neighbor's door. She told me her neighbor was old too, that her husband used to manage her finances and a successful business, but that he had passed away and now she was often lonely and overwhelmed. Rosario would spend those nights sleeping in her neighbors apartment. During the day, her son would follow her steps down to the apartment and talk to the woman. He was a financial advisor so he would help her manage her

finances and keep track of the business for her. She would not have been able to handle it otherwise, but since they knew she needed help he was happy to spend a day every week or so helping her make sure everything was in order.

I learned a lot from my few interactions with her son. He was in his 40s, he lived nearby with his wife, whom I never met. When he spoke about life with his mother they smiled and reminisced. They told me that he worked long hours at the supermarket downtown. They told me he had lived at home while he attended university, while he found work, until he got married and settled down. They told me that this was normal, that it made more sense. Why spend money trying to live on your own when you could be saving it up? He lived nearby, he could point to his building from the window. They pointed to other buildings, her sister, her cousin, her niece, they all lived near enough to say. They would see each other and get loud, rejoicing at each other's presence, catching up as if it had been forever. They would bustle around and look at everything. They were all incredibly nice to me.

I was not the first student she had hosted, I was closer to the 70th student she had hosted. I asked her why she kept hosting. She told me she liked sharing her home, sharing her country, sharing their customs and their food, and giving this experience to students to bring them joy. We brought a youthful energy to the space, we made her feel less alone. She had reason to get up in the morning and make toast, to go to the market almost every day, to put the tv on, to talk to us, to do laundry, to organize. She spent a lot of time cleaning and organizing. It was more than I expected, she was always cleaning something. She told us about her back problems, which required new stronger medicine, a medicine that she told us made her feel better but dizzy. She would get too dizzy on her way to the market, too dizzy to feel safe. She asked the study abroad program to place us with another host while she dealt with her back and the new medicine. In the four days before we could find and move to a new host she kept getting up to make toast, she kept cleaning everything all the time. We told her she could take it easy, clean less, we didn't need her to do all this for us to stay there, but she would insist that it was nothing, that she was going to clean anyway. She would ask me each day when I got back from class whether we had found a new place to stay and then she would clean or sit and watch her show.

Sitting with her I got to learn about her impressions of the study abroad students. She had stories of girls that would make huge messes and stay out late to come back and cry about boys. She told us she preferred hosting boys because of that, she said we were still gross but we

weren't as messy spatially or emotionally. She told us about a German student she hosted that would always ask for mango, after every meal: mango, mango. Mangoes are too expensive to eat that often but he always asked for mango, she would say no. We would eat oranges, bananas, apples, she always had some fruit sitting out to eat.

One of my Spanish professors was teaching linguistics. He said it was funny how Americans asked for things, "Would you, could you, please, if you get the chance, maybe, if you would, pass the salt." He said it was ridiculous. "Pasame el sal." Pass me the salt. "Porfa." Please. He said that Americans like to dance around what they're trying to say. Most store clerks or busy servers would greet me with a "Dime," Tell me. Tell me what you want, what are you waiting for?

He told us the most common mistakes Americans make, "Can I have," translates to "Puedo tener," but they would never use it the way Americans use it. "Can I have a coffee?" Of course, yes, this is a cafe; if you give me money I will give you coffee. Why are you asking? "Un café," or "Dame un cafe," suffice to get the message across and let everyone get on with their day. You don't have to ask if you can have it when that is what they sell, just say what you want.

Linguistic differences don't always point to concrete truths but they can indicate different attitudes towards certain things. Americans talk about time like money: spending, saving, wasting, even investing time. Time is calculated and maximized in this conception, it is a resource to be leveraged. En español el tiempo pasa (time passes). Pasa tiempo trabajando, jugando, saliendo con amigos. Time passes whether you use it or not, it can't be saved or lost because it's not yours, it just passes. Time is money, I've heard it hundreds of times in America, but that's only one way to look at it; time is life.

A recurring motif of my experience in Spain actually came from hearing their impressions of America. I was always hearing about how crazy America is, how crazy the American mindset seems to make people. Their primary interactions with Americans were those as portrayed in news, film, and social media or those that had taken the opportunity to travel to Europe; but their comments resounded with me and I often felt the same looking back across the Atlantic. I heard about the Spanish ideal of Work to Live, which they loved to compare to the American ideal of Live to Work. I heard this used as a base comparison that was obvious to them. In their figuring: Americans spent their lives working to get ahead in their career, to work more; and Spaniards simply worked in order to support themselves and enjoy the life they were

given. The purpose of the American life was therefore defined by the career, the product; the bank account. As they explained it, the Spanish life was defined by the strength of social connections, of the lived experience, of the joys and happiness enjoyed and shared. Careers were seen more as a way of participating, of providing and giving back, and to earn enough to live comfortably.

At the same time, I noticed differences in the way that educational paths were chosen. Schools would offer degrees that led to specific career fields, the degree students chose led them down a predefined path of classes to be taken in certain semesters and in the particular order. There were a few elective courses that fit within each path but generally there was almost no deviation in class schedule. It was shocking to my classmates that I could study Philosophy, Spanish, and Computer Science at the same time. The liberal arts education system that promotes a holistic and self-directed approach to education was not what they were used to. It seemed to me like they were young to be choosing an educational journey with such little variation. It seems to me that selecting such an ordered specialization would require significant confidence for their age, to be sure it's what they wanted. There is usually variation among educational institutions even within the same culture but this is what I saw.

Upon reflection I found it interesting to specialize education so carefully to funnel into a career field while not defining people by their career. It first seemed to me to be indicative of a cultural shift towards what I was familiar with, but it might not be so. As with my host brother, who unflinchingly worked long hours at the supermarket, and the respect I saw given to service workers and public servants, this specialization may have been less about getting an education to achieve more for the self -what I would've otherwise seen as chasing a more respected position in society-, but in order to maximize the value one could bring to their family and their community. When people are respected regardless of their job, working becomes less about personal status and more about providing value to society, to the community, for the family. Even with variations in the sense of obligation held by each person, a system and a culture that allows for multiple visions of success and promotes the value of community makes people more free to live and lead their life with a purpose separate from their career success.

This manifested itself too in the ways I saw people relax. It was common to see cafe's full throughout the day, people enjoying the sun in outdoor seating, park benches, sitting around in plazas and by the river. Walking through carefully gardened parks throughout the city, I would

often see people laying around in the grass in couples and groups. They enjoyed snacks and wine and cheese and laughing loudly. I saw them laying in each others arms, brushing their fingers through each other's hair, kissing and laying on each other in the grass. Some of the younger adults I saw carried this on all over the city. I saw young love sitting on each other's laps and kissing in bus stations, on the bus, on the train. Most people seemed to just ignore them unless they got particularly aggressive.

I didn't stare, I knew that well enough, but I did have to stifle a laugh. It would sometimes get so ridiculous to me that I couldn't believe they were so unfettered in public. I realized that it didn't affect me at all and that no one had any reason to interrupt them, and no one did. As with the two kisses upon greeting, the comfortable physical contact while speaking, and the impassioned style of dancing, affection seemed to be shown with different rules, the expectations of what were acceptable social interactions was shifted from what I knew.

My host mother explained that the 'dos besos' two-kiss greeting was not as prevalent since the Covid pandemic, but I still saw it among family members, close friends, and from the most extroverted strangers. I was happy to be included in the greeting, if a little hesitant to initiate. At first I found conversation quite difficult, even as my Spanish improved. It was easy to talk one-on-one but in groups I found myself outpaced. I didn't think it was an issue with my Spanish, I thought it was my speed. During quick class-discussion or going out with a group of friends, I found people talking loudly, passionately, talking over each other and carrying on multiple conversations through other conversations. I realized that I wasn't talking too slowly, I was talking too shyly. I would stop when they interrupted me but I didn't see them stop when they interrupted each other. I realized that their conversation was just different, they maybe felt like they were still listening while they spoke.

I didn't start talking over my friends, or cuddling and making out in public, but I did realize that the way I'd been conditioned was just that, conditioning. While immersed in Spanish culture these things quickly stopped seeming weird to me. I came to appreciate the 'dos besos' greeting, and conversation became much more lively and engaging. The contact immediately broke down social barriers and made me feel more connected with the people I was talking to. What I otherwise would've considered flirting unmasked itself as genuine kindness, comfort and connection, a level of presence in conversation that I was unaccustomed to in that way. For me, the physical contact communicated a level of trust even with someone I had just met. It was an

allowance of humanity, an acknowledgment of physical presence, an immediate communication of inclusion and togetherness.

The personal space bubble I had been taught to respect fell away, the presumption of physical solitude was shifted. I became acutely aware of how the social norms I had grown up with were limiting me in my interactions with other Spaniards. I realized that I seemed fundamentally uncomfortable to them because I had not adapted to their style of communication. I wondered how this might translate to my life upon my return to the US.

I spoke to a few Spanish classmates of mine that told me they had studied abroad in the US. When we spoke about friendship and socializing they never failed to mention the cultural differences, they told me they often felt uncomfortable or judged in their communication style, unsure of whether they could communicate properly or appropriately, unsure if they were making people uncomfortable. They told me that people would shift away, give weird looks, and even ask not to be touched. I understood exactly what they meant, some cultural expectations are so deeply ingrained that, when broken, can make people exceedingly uncomfortable. Just as I had seemed uncomfortable at first as I adapted to the cultural norms, they had been seen as too comfortable too quickly, having not earned the level of familiarity required to engage the way that was ordinary to them.

I volunteered for a couple weeks at a bilingual school in Nervión, a neighborhood just east of the city center. I got to speak with the students in pairs, for five to ten minutes at a time, so they could practice their english. Some were very shy and others were not. I liked to ask them simple questions to get them comfortable. The classic question was “Sevilla o Betis?” a choice between the rival football clubs from the city. Historically, Sevilla was supported by the residents on the east of the river, the Guadalquivir, and Betis fans were from Triana, the neighborhood to the west. When I asked why they picked their team it was always from their parents, they carried on the tradition, and they would insist that it was the only answer. There were very few kids with no strong preference.

I also liked to ask them what they did for fun. I asked kids from ages 12 to 18 this same question. They told me about their private futbol clubs, the teams were never organized by the schools. Music was also an independent venture, lessons had to be arranged outside of school. A lot of the kids said they like to watch videos on youtube or play videogames. Almost all said they like to go out. I asked them what that meant and they would almost always act a little confused,

unsure how to answer. “I go out with my friends.” They would almost all say. “Just out in the streets?” I would ask for clarity and they seemed more confused. “Yes.” They told me they would just go out and walk around the neighborhood, explore the city, bike, scooter, or skate. They couldn’t explain what else they were doing. They would just hang out with their friends. I learned quickly that kids didn’t really go to each other’s houses the same way as I knew. They went to parks, the mall, even just the streets. This was foreign to me because nothing ever happened in my streets at home. I could walk for half an hour before finding someone my age -in their house. When I left the apartment in Sevilla, activity was already going on all around. The kids couldn’t explain what they did in the streets because it was always just whatever happened: who they ran into, whatever they saw or thought of along the way, whatever looked good.

This carried on to adults as well. It was very rarely that I saw someone in the apartment that wasn’t family. Almost never. When adults wanted to see their friends, they went out. My Spanish teachers at home have always had trouble translating the word “tapas”, not because it’s hard to describe, but because it’s hard to understand. “Little plates for sharing.” They would always say, and that’s what they are. But that’s not a meal, if I went out for dinner I would want a meal, right? It’s a little plate for sharing, you eat it to keep pace with your drinks, you go from bar to bar to try different plates; to spend the night talking, drinking, eating little dishes one bite at a time. The center of social activity wasn’t the house but the streets, the city itself. In this way the city felt alive. Sitting and eating tapas I saw friends meet, I saw football fans heckle their rivals, I saw groups get together to find the next stop of the night.

I joined an ultimate frisbee club in Sevilla and I got to meet some of the kindest, most inclusive people. Over half the club was from Sevilla and there was a core that had been playing together for years. They would usually go out at night after practice, they invited me and the other American players. The bar was within walking distance, a small place with seating outside. I couldn’t tell if they’d never been there before; they bantered with the owners immediately. A team member ordered tapas for us all, over a dozen hungry athletes, and another friend was happy to order more. The drinks went around as we pushed the tables all together.

We were talking and joking around in minutes, they made sure to include newer people in the conversation. Once everyone was settled, around time for a second round, someone brought out a cake. It was a birthday cake, for two of the players on the team, they were surprised, abashed, joyful. The bartender gave us a knife and extra plates when they heard us singing.

Everyone got a piece, old friends, new friends, new players. We shared the chocolate cake as a celebration of two birthdays and for a third teammate that was moving to another city before our next practice.

The crowd slowly dispersed after that, pairs walked away to find their bicycles; a group headed to the bus stop. I walked with my friends to a station for the public bike system, Sevici. A yearly subscription got me infinite use of the very heavy and slow bikes, provided that I returned it to another station before I got home. I rode home with my friends through the city, working slowly along sidewalks and bike paths, talking until we had to part ways, taking different streets to get home.

Just as social interactions had their own norms, the culture around going out was completely new to me. I would walk or bike, or take a bus to meet with friends, or I would already be with them from earlier. Going out for the night usually meant a bar or two and then clubbing until late with our Spanish friends. After that, people typically went home or relaxed for a little while in a park or by the river. While drinking was a big part of the culture, a certain level of decorum was expected throughout the night. When they saw I was American, Spanish people liked to tell me their opinions of American behavior. They frowned upon binge drinking and getting drunk, dressing too casually, and wanting to be the center of attention. They knew before I explained that not all Americans were like that, but I was still surprised to see the attitudes reflected among many Spaniards. Much of the issue seemed to be with American tourists that didn't observe societal norms.

Clubs would turn men away if they were wearing shorts, if they looked unkempt, or if they were already tipsy. Club culture was also new to me, the clubs in my town were for hunting and fishing. There was one club in particular that I was told was for a slightly younger crowd, this meant that 16-17 year olds were sneaking in and older adults avoided it. The dance floor was mostly stagnant as groups of friends were standing packed together with the loud music pounding. I was there with a couple other American students and a couple Spanish friends. Within the crowd, the energy was different than I anticipated. People seemed particularly attached to their groups, and the people we met and danced with were mostly from other countries. Even trying to delve deeper into the crowd brought us disapproving looks and resistance. Bumping into people -even when dancing- was frowned upon. It was clear to me that they assumed our group energy came from overdrinking and that we were too drunk to control

ourselves. This was a surprise to me even as I was getting used to Spanish norms. It seemed to me that everyone would be dancing and that a packed crowd would expect a certain amount of physical contact. A few people shouted over the music or bumped to make it clear that they wanted space for their group, that they thought we were out of control.

This was not my first experience being treated and viewed as a foreigner, a visitor. As an American, I shouldered all of the assumptions and prejudice that the people harbored. As such, my experience and the way I was treated was colored by the expectations people had of me. Many times, people would assume I only spoke English. Even when I spoke exclusively in Spanish, some would continue responding in English. We would converse effectively, so it wasn't an issue with my communication, they may have seen it as an opportunity to practice their English or they may have simply refused to engage with me in Spanish.

The Spaniards that spoke about it were proud of how Spanish people were not racist. Part of this is in the historically varied population, and another part is simply based on what is perceived as racist. As my history teacher explained earnestly to the class, the n-word didn't carry the same implications for them as it did for the Americans in his class. He told us that people used it descriptively, I already knew that it was the word for the color in Spanish but he said something that surprised the whole class. I felt the discomfort in the room when our white teacher demonstrated how he would answer the phone with "Hola, mi negro," when his black friends called him. He insisted that his friend would not find this offensive, and that no one would bat an eye, and that may be as true as it needs to be. To my sensitivities, while everyone in the interaction may have not been offended, the racial basis behind the greeting still called the not racist claim into question.

This showed itself even more directly in the colloquial term for the classic corner store, which they called a "Chino" because they were typically owned by Chinese people. They did not distinguish between Chinese, Japanese, Korean, or any other south-asian ethnicity, and it didn't matter if the store was owned by a European Spaniard. "Voy al Chino," I'm going to the store, was perfectly common. I saw social media posts and graffiti protesting the use of the word Chino to refer to these stores as younger generations noticed the hypocrisy and the insensitivity of the term.

The most direct forms of racism came in the most genuine of warnings. I was told to avoid certain markets because of the Moroccans gathered in the area. I heard generalizations

about the work ethic and criminal leanings of “los negros”, and in the sly “you know how they are.” I nodded along. I wasn’t sure what to make of it but the sentiment behind the warning seemed genuinely in the interest of my experience. I wondered whether they felt that these particular immigrants didn’t represent their country the way they wanted, or how generally the attitude applied.

In my classes in Spain I quickly learned that students rarely asked questions of the teacher, even when they didn’t understand. I learned that asking questions was seen as undermining the authority of the teacher. It implied that the student didn’t believe the teacher, or that the teacher hadn’t taught it well enough the first time. When I asked what they did when something was unclear they told me it remained unclear, and they would teach themselves after class, or go to office hours.

The classroom even had an air of competition. The teacher would offer extra points to students for demonstrating solutions in front of the class, challenging anyone to answer it. He would offer bonus points for the whole class if we could answer challenge questions correctly before the exam. He gave the class the choice to gamble points on other questions for the chance to win more. Collaboration was loud and crowded, the loudest voices were listened to first and throughout. Participation in the discussion was not required, a correct final answer meant victory for the whole class. The teacher would often not specify whether we had answered correctly until the grades were given back.

I also got to take a class with other students on Spanish dances. It was held in a small basement dance studio that was clean and well-lit. The instructor was a bearded man that moved with incredible grace. He tried to teach us how to dance Flamenco, Salsa, Sevillanas, and a couple others I cannot name. He arranged us in a circle where we could practice our footwork next to each other, we would dance forward and back, shrinking and growing the circle. The music was loud and unfamiliar, we had to learn to step in time to the swinging rhythm. The dance instructor had to encourage us to hold hands, to spin each other, to get comfortable being close. He demonstrated once with a girl from our group, he led her around in the dance, guiding with his feet, his hips, his hands; she looked a little flustered. He dipped her and she laughed, exhilarated and stunned as she returned to the circle.

None among our group of American students had the confidence or the ability to emulate his moves, his confidence, or his conviction, to dance with each other the way he'd demonstrated. I learned that there was a shield of uncomfortable formality between all of us, what we had internalized as a requisite respectful distance. It limited us from engaging with the dance, from reaching the level of comfort that I saw in the instructor. We seemed to share a certain inherited expectation of what was allowed as far as dancing with each other and physical contact among people we saw as classmates.

Walking around the streets of Sevilla one night I ran into a large gathered crowd. The streets are very narrow in the center, influenced by old planning established by the earlier Muslim empire. At first the center of the crowd was obscured, indiscernible, there was a slow rhythmic movement. Some people were taking videos and photos with their phones, others had towels wrapped around their heads with a roll arranged on their shoulders. I got up closer and saw a strange contraption, with dozens of feet. It was a metal frame with cinder blocks arranged on top. Under the frame fit rows and rows of men with the towels on their heads. The frame rested on their shoulders and on their upheld arms. I watched them step in time with each other to slowly maneuver down the narrow streets. Onlookers had to press themselves against the walls or clear the way. Most of the men were fully grown, even graying; kids stood around watching hopefully, a few had their towels wrapped.

I asked a man in the crowd what they were doing and he told me they were practicing for the Semana Santa. I had already heard a bit about it. They were practicing to carry big floats with religious statues and scenes. They would carry them from a historical church and through the massive crowds that always thronged the city center. The Semana Santa is one of the most important celebrations of the year in Sevilla and people travel from all over the country and the world to see the procession and the celebration. As I watched them practice, they had a silent, almost mechanical proficiency, the task was incredibly serious.

Even in the brisk night air I could see the men sweating from the effort. At times, one of the men would carefully extricate himself from the ranks and duck out from under the float. Wordlessly, another man would step from the crowd and take the empty place beneath the yoke, adjusting his posture to match the height of the float, and using the rolled towel to cushion against the wooden beam resting on his shoulders. The most impressive part of the process came

at the end when they had to turn around a tight corner and maneuver into a garage that was only just big enough to fit the float in. They reached the turn and it seemed to me as if the progress had stopped, it was impossible to turn the whole float to face it towards the new narrower street.

I don't know if anyone in particular led the movement, there were no obvious spoken instructions. The float began to sway forward and backwards in short slow movements. As they went, the rows of feet shuffled to rotate a little with each oscillation. The crowd watched in rapt appreciation of the cooperation. It seemed miraculous when they finished turning the float and faced down the new street. That's when I saw the door to the garage they were aiming for. It was another feat of cooperation, timing, and persistence that finally rotated and fit the float through the narrow entrance.

Schools get the whole week off for Semana Santa while the city celebrates. It is a celebration of the passion and the death of Jesus Christ and I heard from many around that it is their most important holiday. There is a competition among artists to create a representative poster for the week each year. This year the chosen artist depicted his own son as a tender and young Jesus Christ to represent the celebration. I heard older Spaniards question whether it was the best design, whether the representation was appropriate, and the validity of the artist's son being the model for Jesus.

The other largest celebration during the spring is La Feria de Abril. I didn't have to ask where to find it. Our group had planned to meet on the west side of the Guadalquivir to walk together to the fairground. As soon as we got close to the river, a seemingly endless stream of people created an unmistakable building tide. It was impossible to not follow the flow. Almost all the men were dressed in suits. Most women wore expensive fancy dresses in the style that marked it as a Feria dress. I learned that those who could afford it would buy a new dress every year to collect and treasure as memories of Feria. Other women still had multiple dresses from years past so that they wouldn't wear the same outfit every night of the week.

The Feria officially starts at midnight when the huge arch and the fairground is lit up all at once with lights. Hundreds, if not thousands of people gathered before it to wait for the lights to turn on. People took photos of the arch, and the dresses, and their friends. The crowd erupted in cheers when the arch lit up. The gates opened and people poured into the fairground. One half was similar to what I'd seen before: fried food, skill games, dizzying rides. Little kids and teens

ran around with candy and churros. I didn't spend much time in that section except to find a cheaper mix of Rebujito, the classic drink of Manzanilla mixed with 7-up and ice.

The other half was the traditional side, the side that was more interesting to me. It consisted of well-lit dirt streets lined with tent-like houses called Casetas. Some of the casetas were public, meaning anyone could enter provided they were dressed well and willing to wait in line. The public casetas were those representing the neighborhoods of the city and certain political parties. In these public casetas there were people sitting around at tables and many more dancing. They had a bar in the back that would sell beers or pitchers of rebujito to anyone with a couple euros. The music was for dancing, loud and rhythmic. Some groups danced more than others, some knew or practiced classic dances such as Sevillanas, the local dance. The fun of Feria came from the hyper-formal dress, the celebratory energy, the late hours, and the nearly constant movement of people between different casetas.

The private casetas were different. Some were dedicated to public services like the police, the fire department, medical and sanitation workers. The majority of the private casetas seemed to belong to specific families. They allowed only invited guests and their friends, they set up inside how they wanted. The larger casetas were full of tables, food, drinks, and relatives. My friend's host family had rights to a caseta and they were incredibly proud, bordering on conceited. They spoke about how there was a years-long waiting list to rent a spot for a caseta, and that families would retain their caseta for as long as they could afford it. Having a caseta last for generations was an incredible feat because it meant that the family was successful enough and unified enough to maintain their position and their influence.

While the prospect of having a family caseta naturally comes with the exclusion of others, this didn't mean they were unfriendly. My friend was invited in to see more members of the family that he hadn't met before. I waited outside the caseta with my other friends, but we were soon leaning over the metal railing and joking around with a man sitting in the caseta. He was friendly and engaged with us happily. It didn't take long before he was offering and pouring us plastic cups of the rebujito from the pitcher he had on the table. For me it was an interesting combination of pride in owning the caseta, and the underlying joyful nature of the event and the energy of the people.

Upon returning home, I wondered if I would be different, if I could really choose the ways I wanted to be; the ways I wanted to live. I thought maybe that I was irrevocably different, that I might not fit back where I had been. I was worried that I might not be comfortable returning to the ways and the community I'd known before. I also wondered if I really wanted to return to the same life as before; I wasn't sure what it meant to relearn to conform. At the same time, it proved incredibly difficult to swim against the river here, because it doesn't feel like it's moving when you're in it. I quickly forgot how exactly life felt like when I was in Spain. When I heard them say that America seems crazy to them, I agreed; it seemed crazy that I had been caught up in the way of life in America; the American ideology. Now that I'm back, I can't explain exactly what I meant when I agreed. I can't explain exactly how it felt, because I'm back within a system in which everyone already agrees, and that agreement forms social reality more than any objective truth. Upon realizing this, I realized that every way that seemed different -the way that life seemed to have a different definition, a different tune- was determined by the people around me, and their understanding. So it seemed like, when choosing whether to conform, an individual would be judged and defined by the values of the culture in which they find themselves regardless of if their personal values and desires are different. However, in avoiding generalizing about either culture I experienced, it strikes me that culture has always been richer than categorical definitions, because individuals each have their own stories and unique mix of influences.

During the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, my parents invited me with them to a neighbor's house down in Pumpkin Hollow. The neighbor has a celebration every year and invites the whole neighborhood. It was close enough to walk but it was freezing out, so my parents put on their wool coats and I wore one I bought in Spain. We walked down the hill, past Mark's house to the other end of the valley. I was a little apprehensive outside the door because I wasn't an adult the last time I'd seen them. I didn't think I would know the people there. I was right, I didn't know some of the people, but a couple others recognized me. I got to meet and talk to some neighbors that I didn't know lived nearby, and I realized that plenty of them didn't know each other either. The event was a potluck so everyone brought food to share, we brought a loaf of nice bread. I got to talk to some of the older members of the community and, in hearing my experience in Spain, they shared that they had lived and worked in Peru as anthropologists for decades. They told me about their house and offered to draw me a map of the best places to live

and visit in Peru. They told me that they always returned to Conway because they loved it here and they were growing old. I also got to talk to some of my younger neighbors. I asked them about the teachers I remembered from elementary school and they told me new stories and new names. One told me she wanted to learn Spanish and travel to Spain one day and I encouraged her to pursue the dream. While we were talking, she was called up to read a poem with the host of the party. The small band in the corner stopped. There were small cut-outs of the sun and the moon on sticks that were swung above her as she read the poem with the host. It was a poem about endings, and beginnings, about the changing of the seasons, and about opportunity. They spoke about the community coming together now, on the longest night of the winter, to share in food and drink and revelry, to burn the fire bright to ward off the cold night. It felt like a poem I'd heard before, but it felt like it had more meaning for me now, because it isn't like this everywhere. And we all gave thanks, for the poem had come to an end.

SPANISH

¿Qué quieres ser de mayor? Esta pregunta es muy familiar, se hace por curiosidad tanto en el campo económico como en el personal. Los auténticos interesados hacen esta pregunta para conocerte mejor, para ver qué quieres y qué planeas hacer. A menudo he encontrado esta pregunta limitadora y confusa, ya que te pide que te definas y te especialices hacia un interés profesional concreto. Es una pregunta que se puede hacer a cualquiera, joven o mayor, y aunque algunas personas tienen planes y aspiraciones específicas, a mí me resulta difícil responder en términos concretos. A la vez que quiero serlo todo, no me siento especialmente inclinado hacia una carrera específica. Tal y como se presenta, la profesión que eliges define la vida que vas a vivir, pero la vida en sí es lo que es más importante para mí.

Prefiero otra pregunta. ¿Cómo quieres que sea tu vida? Esta pregunta no me resulta familiar porque requiere una auténtica reflexión. Requiere reflexionar sobre lo que quieres de tu vida, cómo quieres que sea realmente, cómo quieres sentirte y la persona que quieres ser en ella. Esta reflexión es especialmente difícil porque es difícil imaginar una vida que sea fundamentalmente diferente de la que conoces. Claro que puedes imaginar ganar más dinero, tener un trabajo diferente o vivir la vida de un famoso, pero la imaginación incluye tu perspectiva; está enmarcada dentro de tu forma de entender la vida. Es difícil imaginar una diferencia fundamental en la forma que puede adoptar la vida, cómo podría ser, cómo podría sentirse, hasta que lo experimentas.

Cuando se pregunta a los niños qué quieren ser de mayores, suelen dar respuestas previsibles. Algunos dicen que bomberos, policías o profesores, mientras que otros repiten lo que dicen sus padres. Eligen lo que admiran, los trabajos que conocen y ven valorados a su alrededor. Pero ninguno habla de trabajos de los que nunca han oído hablar, ¿cómo podrían hacerlo? Así que cuando se les pregunta cómo quieren que sea su vida, ¿cómo podría alguien responder con una vida que ni siquiera saben que es posible? Es más probable que elijan una vida que conocen y ven valorada a su alrededor. Obviamente, puede que esto les resulte igual de satisfactorio, pero permite que su entorno dicte su vida. Para elegir vivir la vida que quieres, debes ser consciente de los aspectos de la vida que definen quienes te rodean, y debes ser capaz de elegir de forma independiente cómo llevar la tuya. Estas elecciones dependen tanto de la conciencia de que hay

otras opciones como de una profunda autocomprensión para determinar qué es lo que quieres. Requiere otro nivel de volición, una confianza en uno mismo; de intuición.

Es fácil en el mundo vivir según la opinión del mundo; es fácil en la soledad vivir según la nuestra; pero el gran hombre es aquel que en medio de la multitud mantiene con perfecta dulzura la independencia de la soledad.

-Ralph Waldo Emerson (10)

Emerson es igualmente un producto de mi zona de Massachusetts y su filosofía me ha llegado a través de las enseñanzas de mi padre. De ese modo he llegado a cuestionar la naturaleza del individuo. Los escritos de Emerson abren la puerta a un cierto yo único, independiente de sus condicionamientos. Es esta naturaleza la que permite a las personas llegar a conclusiones decididamente determinadas que difieren de las de quienes les rodean, es la naturaleza interior la que obliga a alguien a confiar en que sabe lo que le parece correcto, si se permite obligar por ella. Frente al conformismo, Emerson escribe que: "Ninguna ley puede ser sagrada para mí salvo la de mi naturaleza. Lo bueno y lo malo no son más que nombres fácilmente transferibles a eso o a esto; lo único correcto es lo que sigue mi constitución; lo único incorrecto lo que va contra ella" (9). La naturaleza del individuo ilumina una verdad personal por encima de cualquier juicio social. Los juicios sociales sólo existen como verdades dentro de una sociedad determinada e incluso entonces pueden cambiar por capricho, por lo que los juicios más valiosos son los que proceden del yo. La cuestión sigue siendo cómo podemos estar seguros de que la decisión procede del yo; la naturaleza del individuo.

Muchas personas creen que son autónomas, que toman decisiones autónomas, que eligen su vida. Autonomía deriva del griego: auto, que significa uno mismo, y nomos, que significa ley. Un individuo autónomo se autogobierna: elige cómo actuar y vivir, establece sus prioridades y sus valores, afirma sus responsabilidades y obligaciones. Gran parte de la fuerza de la autonomía radica en las influencias que recibe el que toma las decisiones. Se considera de suma importancia que un actor autónomo actúe realmente por su propia voluntad y no por la de otro.

No estoy aquí para debatir sobre el libre albedrío. Eso sería un ensayo mucho más complicado y nihilista. En su lugar, estoy considerando la importancia de la relación entre el

individuo autónomo y las influencias en su proceso de toma de decisiones. ¿Qué papel desempeñan los factores culturales a la hora de interferir en las decisiones autónomas? Generalmente no se considera una amenaza para la autonomía cuando las decisiones que toma un individuo están influidas por él mismo, por sus preferencias, por sus valores y de acuerdo con su moral. Pero cuando las preferencias, los valores, la moral y la identidad personal se aprenden y se forman a través de un fondo cultural, resulta menos claro que las decisiones se tomen de forma autónoma.

Además, la autonomía está limitada por las opciones de que dispone el individuo. No sólo por lo que está disponible en la práctica, como opción viable, sino también por lo que es accesible conscientemente, lo que es concebible. La mayoría de las opciones concebibles no están disponibles en la práctica, reconociendo que la imaginación es más activa que la realidad; algunas cosas simplemente no se pueden hacer. Otras opciones concebibles suelen estar dictadas por normas culturales, lo que significa que están filtradas y concebidas dentro de un entendimiento cultural. Esto significa que la mayoría de las opciones prácticas desconocidas resultan inconcebibles, y algunas opciones concebibles se reforman para encajar en el marco de la comprensión. Una vez más, ¿cómo podría alguien elegir algo que ni siquiera sabe que es posible? Así pues, una decisión autónoma requiere la capacidad práctica de elegir y una conciencia de cómo la identidad cultural limita y dicta las opciones. Una elección limitada a un único punto de vista cultural apenas es una elección; la elección es conformarse.

En la búsqueda de la autonomía, para vivir la vida que quiero, está claro que aún debo saber qué es lo que quiero. Para ser autónomo, uno debe conocerse a sí mismo. La comprensión de la vida: preferencias, valores, actitudes, morales -todos los factores que intervienen en la toma de decisiones- se aprenden desde pequeños, condicionados por el entorno: la sociedad, la comunidad, la familia. Un individuo, para alcanzar la autonomía, debe comprender los orígenes de sus motivaciones. Más que conducir por la derecha porque es la ley, significa que comprenda que sus preferencias, valores, actitudes y morales están informados por un marco cultural aprendido. Para entender mis motivaciones, para entenderme a mí mismo, debo entender de dónde vengo y cómo se me ha formado.

Para algunos puede ser fácil entender conceptualmente que son producto de su educación cultural. Menos fácil, sin embargo, es comprender realmente cuáles son las

implicaciones y el alcance, lo profundamente arraigada que está realmente la lógica cultural. Para ver cómo me había formado mi educación cultural, tuve que mirarme a mí mismo con otros ojos. Seguían siendo mis propios ojos, pero mi nueva visión surgió de la inmersión en otra cultura. Tuve el gran privilegio -gracias a mi dedicación y convicción, al apoyo de mi familia y mi universidad, a la amabilidad de innumerables desconocidos y a una cantidad asombrosa de suerte- de estudiar en España durante un año. Fue una experiencia increíble que me abrió los ojos. Pude conocer gente nueva, nuevas ideas, maravillarme con una arquitectura y una gastronomía espectaculares, practicar un nuevo idioma y aprender a comportarme en una nueva sociedad. Cuando volví, todo el mundo me preguntó: «¿Cómo fue?». Amplié mis horizontes, salí de mi zona de confort y adquirí nuevos conocimientos íntimos sobre la vida. Pero, ¿cómo fue? Es imposible reducir un año de vida, una cultura o un lugar a una única experiencia personal a contarla. Al mismo tiempo, mi experiencia es lo único que sé con certeza. Cuando intento explicarlo sólo tengo que decir: “Era diferente”. Desde el principio me pareció diferente, y claro que me pareció diferente; era otra cultura. Pero lo que me llamó la atención fue la palabra ‘diferente’. Para que su cultura fuera diferente, me di cuenta de que la estaba comparando con la mía. De este modo, me di cuenta de que estaba utilizando mi propia cultura como expectativa de referencia sin haberla analizado realmente.

Al darme cuenta de que yo era producto de mi educación cultural, me di cuenta de que todas las personas que conocía también eran producto de la suya, lo supieran o no. Esta percepción me permitió alejarme de la comparación, del juicio, de la confusión, y simplemente observar. Aprendí a apreciar las diferencias, a aceptar la incomodidad, a participar y a celebrar. Pero lo más importante es que aprendí que así es la vida. Que la vida es diferente en distintos lugares, que las personas son diferentes y que son iguales.

Escribo esto con el interés de buscar mi propia autonomía, de conocerme a mí mismo. No pretendo que esta exploración me haga realmente autónomo, pero me parece una parte necesaria de un proceso que siento que debo intentar, y parece poco probable que me aleje de mi objetivo. Del mismo modo, es poco probable que mi escrito no ayude a ningún lector a ganar su propia autonomía, porque es mi autorreflexión personal. En el mejor de los casos, puede resultar esclarecedor o inspirador y, si lo desea, puede servirle de modelo para su propia autorreflexión.

Considero que las particularidades de España tienen más consecuencias para mi realidad vivida que para la exploración en sí. Imagino que uno puede llegar a conclusiones similares a las

mías si se sumerge y se compromete seriamente con cualquier cultura que desafíe sus suposiciones culturales y su forma de entender la vida. Puede que no tengan que viajar en absoluto, un individuo particularmente observador podría llegar a comprender cómo su cultura influye en su forma de pensar sobre la vida de una forma muy parecida a la que yo he empezado a comprender. Sin embargo, me resulta difícil creer que este tipo de comprensión pueda aprenderse en una clase, un libro de texto o un ensayo. La sensación de que la vida que me rodeaba es realmente diferente de la forma en que la aprendí es de naturaleza tan visceral que no creo que pueda comunicarse directamente. Parece que este sentimiento requiere un cierto conflicto, un desafío a lo que se tenía por verdad, una verdadera reevaluación.

Dicho esto, primero debo reconocer mis propias limitaciones. Primero, las obvias: mi memoria es sin duda imperfecta -por incompleta o sesgada-, estoy limitado a mi única perspectiva, y mi progresivo crecimiento como persona me cambia como observador. Y luego, lo ligeramente menos obvio: en todos los casos me encuentro en los inseparables papeles de actor y observador, y cualquier experiencia que tengo se interpreta inevitablemente a través de la lente de mi entendimiento personal.

Por estas razones, procuraré no generalizar, no comparar culturas, no emitir juicios. Debido a la naturaleza progresiva de la vida, nunca fui la misma persona experimentando ninguno de estos acontecimientos; estaba cambiando: en mi forma de pensar, en mi forma de comportarme, en la forma en que los demás me percibían y en el papel que desempeñaba en cada situación. Es poco probable que mi experiencia de España sea exactamente igual a la de cualquier otra persona, aunque sin duda existen paralelismos. El hombre que fui durante mi estancia en España se formó a partir de mis propias experiencias vitales y eso desempeña un papel crítica en mis vivencias y en mis interpretaciones de las mismas. Cómo fui y cómo me trataron en cualquier situación está intrínsecamente ligado a mi identidad. Sin embargo, para mis propósitos, en mi autorreflexión, este es un aspecto necesario porque es fiel a mi experiencia.

En mi búsqueda de universidad tenía algunas condiciones. Quería estar lo suficientemente lejos de casa como para sentirme en un lugar nuevo, quería un equipo de ultimate frisbee y quería tener la oportunidad de estudiar en el extranjero. El reducido número de alumnos por clase, las ayudas económicas y el contacto con la familia que tenía cerca me hicieron tomar la decisión de ir a Allegheny. Tuve el gran privilegio -gracias a mi dedicación y

convicción, al apoyo de mi familia y de mi universidad, a la amabilidad de innumerables desconocidos y a una cantidad asombrosa de suerte- de estudiar un año en España.

En España, mi madre anfitriona, Rosario, dejaba una habitación vacía por si venía su hijo. Ya era un apartamento pequeño, sobre todo con dos estudiantes universitarios (Ethan y yo). Tenía una cocina pequeña, un cuarto de baño individual, tres dormitorios, una sala con una mesa y sillas y una televisión, y un balcón que me encantó. Este apartamento estaba limpio y lleno de amor, la televisión siempre estaba reproduciendo alguna vieja película del oeste o algún programa de televisión de remodelación casera. La mesa era pequeña y estaba cubierta con una manta que llegaba hasta el suelo. Cuando metía las piernas debajo de la mesa podía sentir el calor de un brasero que me mantenía caliente mientras comía o veía la televisión con mi madre de acogida.

Nos enseñó enseguida a apagar siempre las luces y los ventiladores cuando no estuviéramos en la habitación para ahorrar en la factura de la luz. Nos enseñó a tomar duchas cortas y a cerrar el grifo cuando no lo necesitáramos. Nos sacaba la ropa sucia de la habitación y la lavaba antes de sacarla al balcón para que se secara al sol. Era muy mayor e hizo lo que pudo para que estuviéramos cómodos. Se aseguraba de despertarse antes que nosotros y de preparar el desayuno a tiempo. Se enteró de que tengo mucho apetito pero no quería romper la inmersión con mi experiencia de España así que en vez de cambiar el café por tostadas me preparaba seis rebanadas de pan tostado con mermelada. Yo quería ayudarla llevando mi plato a la cocina después de comer pero ella insistía en que me sentara y dejara que ella se encargara. Todas las noches preguntaba qué fruta queríamos. Aprendí que siempre nos ofrecía fruta después de cenar y que se enorgullecía de pelarla ella misma. Cuando le dije que me gustaba pelarla y que yo podía hacerlo más rápido, se burló y me dio la naranja mientras pelaba alegremente la otra para Ethan.

Cuando su hijo la visitaba, se quedaba en la habitación que ella tenía vacía. Si la habitación no estaba vacía, le dejaba dormir en su propia cama. En esos casos, bajaba lentamente medio tramo de escaleras y llamaba a la puerta de su vecina. Me contó que su vecina también era mayor, que su marido solía llevar sus finanzas y un negocio próspero, pero que había fallecido y ahora ella se sentía a menudo sola y agobiada. Rosario pasaba esas noches durmiendo en el apartamento de su vecina. Durante el día, su hijo seguía sus pasos hasta el apartamento y hablaba con la mujer. Él era asesor financiero, así que la ayudaba a gestionar sus finanzas y le llevaba la

cuenta del negocio. De otro modo, ella no habría podido hacerlo, pero como sabían que necesitaba ayuda, él estaba encantado de pasar un día a la semana o así ayudándola a asegurarse de que todo estaba en orden.

Aprendí mucho de mis pocas interacciones con su hijo. Tenía unos 40 años, vivía cerca con su mujer, a la que nunca conocí. Cuando hablaba de la vida con su madre, sonreían y recordaban cosas. Me contaron que trabajaba muchas horas en el supermercado del centro. Me contaron que había vivido en casa mientras iba a la universidad, mientras encontraba trabajo, hasta que se casó y se estableció. Me dijeron que eso era normal, que tenía más sentido. ¿Por qué gastar dinero intentando vivir por tu cuenta cuando podrías estar ahorrando? Vivía cerca, podía señalar su edificio desde la ventana. Señalaban otros edificios, su hermana, su prima, su sobrina, todas vivían bastante cerca para apuntar a ellos. Se veían y se ponían a gritar, alegrándose de la presencia del otro, poniéndose al día como si hubiera pasado una eternidad. Trajinaban y miraban todo. Todos eran increíblemente amables conmigo.

No era la primera estudiante que acogía, sino casi la número 70. Le pregunté por qué seguía haciéndolo. Le pregunté por qué seguía acogiendo. Me dijo que le gustaba compartir su casa, su país, sus costumbres y su comida, y ofrecer esta experiencia a los estudiantes para que se divirtieran. Aportamos una energía juvenil al espacio, hicimos que se sintiera menos sola. Tenía motivos para levantarse por la mañana y hacer tostadas, para ir al mercado casi todos los días, para poner la tele, para hablar con nosotros, para hacer la colada, para organizar. Pasaba mucho tiempo limpiando y organizando. Era más de lo que esperaba, siempre estaba limpiando algo. Nos habló de sus problemas de espalda, que requerían un nuevo medicamento más fuerte, un medicamento que, según nos dijo, la hacía sentirse mejor pero mareada. Se mareaba demasiado de camino al mercado, demasiado para sentirse segura. Pidió al programa de estudios en el extranjero que nos alojaran en casa de otro anfitrión mientras ella se ocupaba de su espalda y del nuevo medicamento. En los cuatro días que pasaron hasta que pudimos encontrar un nuevo anfitrión y cambiarnos de casa, no paraba de levantarse para hacer tostadas y de limpiarlo todo a todas horas. Le dijimos que podía tomárselo con calma, limpiar menos, que no necesitábamos que hiciera todo eso para quedarnos allí, pero ella insistía en que no era nada, que iba a limpiar de todos modos. Me preguntaba todos los días al volver de clase si habíamos encontrado un nuevo lugar donde quedarnos y luego se ponía a limpiar o se sentaba a ver su programa.

Sentada con ella, pude conocer sus impresiones sobre los estudiantes extranjeros. Contaba historias de chicas que hacían grandes desastres y se quedaban hasta tarde para volver llorando por los chicos. Nos contó que prefería acoger a chicos por eso, que seguíamos siendo sucios pero que no éramos tan desordenados ni espacial ni emocionalmente. Nos habló de un estudiante alemán al que acogió que siempre pedía mango, después de cada comida: mango, mango. Los mangos son demasiado caros para comerlos tan a menudo, pero él siempre pedía mango y ella le decía que no. Comíamos naranjas, plátanos, manzanas, siempre tenía algo de fruta para comer.

Uno de mis profesores de español daba clases de lingüística. Decía que era gracioso cómo los americanos pedían las cosas: «¿Quieres, podrías, por favor, si tienes la oportunidad, tal vez, si quieres, pásame la sal». Dijo que era ridículo. «Pásame la sal.» Pásame la sal. «Porfa.» Porfa. Dijo que a los americanos les gusta bailar alrededor de lo que intentan decir. La mayoría de los dependientes o camareros ocupados me saludarían con un «Dime,» Dime. Dígame qué quiere, ¿a qué está esperando?

Nos contó los errores más comunes que cometen los estadounidenses, “Can I have”, se traduce como “Puedo tener”, pero ellos nunca lo utilizarían como lo hacen los estadounidenses. “¿Puedo tomar un café?” Claro que sí, esto es una cafetería; si me da dinero le daré un café. ¿Por qué lo pregunta? “Un café” o “Dame un café” bastan para transmitir el mensaje y que cada uno siga con su día. No hace falta que preguntes si te lo dan cuando es lo que venden, simplemente di lo que quieres.

Las diferencias lingüísticas no siempre apuntan a verdades concretas, pero pueden indicar actitudes diferentes ante determinadas cosas. Los estadounidenses hablan del tiempo como del dinero: gastar, ahorrar, malgastar, incluso invertir el tiempo. En esta concepción, el tiempo se calcula y se maximiza, es un recurso que hay que aprovechar. En español el tiempo pasa. Pasa tiempo trabajando, jugando, saliendo con amigos. El tiempo pasa, lo uses o no, no se puede guardar ni perder porque no es tuyo, simplemente pasa. El tiempo es dinero, lo he oído cientos de veces en Estados Unidos, pero es sólo una forma de verlo; el tiempo es vida.

Un motivo recurrente de mi experiencia en España fue escuchar sus impresiones sobre Estados Unidos. Siempre me hablaban de lo loco que es Estados Unidos, de cómo la mentalidad estadounidense parece volver loca a la gente. Sus principales interacciones con los estadounidenses eran las retratadas en las noticias, el cine y las redes sociales o las que habían

aprovechado la oportunidad de viajar a Europa; pero sus comentarios resonaban en mí y a menudo yo sentía lo mismo mirando hacia atrás al otro lado del Atlántico. Oí hablar del ideal español de trabajar para vivir, que les encantaba comparar con el ideal estadounidense de vivir para trabajar. Oí que lo utilizaban como una comparación base que para ellos era obvia. Según ellos: Los americanos se pasaban la vida trabajando para progresar en su carrera, para trabajar más; y los españoles simplemente trabajaban para mantenerse y disfrutar de la vida que les había tocado. La finalidad de la vida americana se definía, por tanto, por la carrera, el producto; la cuenta bancaria. Tal y como ellos lo explicaban, la vida española se definía por la fuerza de las conexiones sociales, de la experiencia vivida, de las alegrías y la felicidad disfrutadas y compartidas. Las carreras profesionales se veían más como una forma de participar, de aportar y devolver, y de ganar lo suficiente para vivir cómodamente.

Al mismo tiempo, observé diferencias en la forma de elegir los itinerarios educativos. Las escuelas ofrecían titulaciones que conducían a campos profesionales específicos; la titulación elegida llevaba a los estudiantes por un camino predefinido de clases que debían cursar en determinados semestres y en un orden concreto. Había algunas asignaturas optativas que se ajustaban a cada itinerario, pero por lo general no había casi ninguna desviación en el horario de clases. A mis compañeros les resultaba chocante que yo pudiera estudiar Filosofía, Español e Informática al mismo tiempo. El sistema educativo de artes liberales que promueve un enfoque holístico y autodirigido de la educación no era a lo que ellos estaban acostumbrados. Me parecía que eran jóvenes para elegir un itinerario educativo con tan poca variación. Me parece que seleccionar una especialización tan ordenada requeriría una confianza significativa para su edad, para estar seguros de que es lo que querían. Suele haber variaciones entre las instituciones educativas, incluso dentro de la misma cultura, pero esto es lo que vi.

Al reflexionar sobre ello, me pareció interesante especializar la educación con tanto cuidado para canalizarla hacia un campo profesional y no definir a las personas por su carrera. Al principio me pareció indicativo de un cambio cultural hacia lo que yo conocía, pero podría no ser así. Como en el caso de mi hermano de acogida, que trabajaba sin descanso muchas horas en el supermercado, y el respeto que vi que se otorgaba a los trabajadores de los servicios y a los funcionarios públicos, puede que esta especialización no tuviera tanto que ver con obtener una educación para conseguir más para uno mismo -lo que yo habría visto como la búsqueda de una posición más respetada en la sociedad-, sino para maximizar el valor que uno podía aportar a su

familia y a su comunidad. Cuando se respeta a las personas independientemente de su trabajo, trabajar se convierte menos en una cuestión de estatus personal y más en aportar valor a la sociedad, a la comunidad, para la familia. Incluso con variaciones en el sentido de la obligación que tiene cada persona, un sistema y una cultura que permiten múltiples visiones del éxito y promueven el valor de la comunidad hacen que las personas sean más libres para vivir y llevar su vida con un propósito independiente de su éxito profesional.

Esto se manifestó también en las formas en que vi a la gente relajarse. Era habitual ver cafeterías llenas durante todo el día, gente disfrutando del sol en asientos al aire libre, bancos del parque, sentados en plazas y junto al río. Paseando por parques cuidadosamente ajardinados de toda la ciudad, a menudo veía a gente tumbada en la hierba, en parejas y en grupos. Disfrutaban de aperitivos, vino y queso y reían a carcajadas. Los veía tumbados abrazados, pasándose los dedos por el pelo, besándose y tumbándose unos sobre otros en la hierba. Algunos de los adultos más jóvenes que vi lo hacían por toda la ciudad. Vi a jóvenes enamorados sentados en el regazo del otro y besándose en estaciones de autobús, en el autobús, en el tren. La mayoría de la gente parecía ignorarlos, a menos que se pusieran especialmente agresivos.

Yo no me quedaba mirando, lo sabía muy bien, pero tenía que reprimir una carcajada. A veces me resultaba tan ridículo que no podía creer que fueran tan desenfrenados en público. Me di cuenta de que no me afectaba en absoluto y que nadie tenía por qué interrumpirles, y nadie lo hizo. Al igual que con los dos besos al saludar, el cómodo contacto físico al hablar y el apasionado estilo de bailar, el afecto parecía demostrarse con reglas diferentes, las expectativas de lo que eran interacciones sociales aceptables se desviaban de lo que yo conocía.

Mi madre anfitriona me explicó que el saludo de dos besos no era tan frecuente desde la pandemia de Covid, pero yo seguía viéndolo entre familiares, amigos íntimos y entre los desconocidos más extrovertidos. Me alegré de que me incluyeran en el saludo, aunque dudé un poco en iniciarlo. Al principio me resultaba bastante difícil conversar, incluso a medida que mejoraba mi español. Era fácil hablar de tú a tú, pero en grupo me veía superado. No creía que fuera un problema de mi español, sino de mi velocidad. Durante un debate rápido en clase o al salir con un grupo de amigos, me encontré con gente hablando alto, apasionadamente, hablando por encima de los demás y manteniendo múltiples conversaciones a través de otras conversaciones. Me di cuenta de que no hablaba demasiado despacio, sino con demasiada timidez. Yo paraba cuando me interrumpían, pero no veía que ellos pararan cuando se

interrumpían entre sí. Me di cuenta de que su conversación era simplemente diferente, quizá sentían que seguían escuchando mientras hablaban.

No empecé a hablar por encima de mis amigos, ni a abrazarme y enrollarme en público, pero sí me di cuenta de que la forma en que me habían condicionado era sólo eso, condicionamiento. Al sumergirme en la cultura española, estas cosas dejaron rápidamente de parecerme raras. Llegué a apreciar el saludo «dos besos» y la conversación se hizo mucho más animada y atractiva. El contacto rompió inmediatamente las barreras sociales y me hizo sentir más conectado con la gente con la que hablaba. Lo que de otro modo habría considerado coqueteo se desenmascaró como auténtica amabilidad, comodidad y conexión, un nivel de presencia en la conversación al que no estaba acostumbrado de ese modo. Para mí, el contacto físico comunicaba un nivel de confianza, incluso con alguien a quien acababa de conocer. Era una muestra de humanidad, un reconocimiento de la presencia física, una comunicación inmediata de inclusión y unión.

La burbuja de espacio personal que me habían enseñado a respetar se desvaneció, la presunción de soledad física se desplazó. Fui plenamente consciente de cómo las normas sociales con las que había crecido me limitaban en mis interacciones con otros españoles. Me di cuenta de que les resultaba fundamentalmente incómodo porque no me había adaptado a su estilo de comunicación. Me pregunté cómo podría repercutir esto en mi vida a mi regreso a Estados Unidos.

Hablé con algunos compañeros españoles que me dijeron que habían estudiado en el extranjero. Me contaron que a menudo se sentían incómodos o juzgados por su estilo de comunicación, inseguros de si podían comunicarse de forma adecuada o apropiada, inseguros de si estaban incomodando a la gente. Me contaron que la gente se apartaba, les miraba raro e incluso les pedía que no les tocaran. Entendí perfectamente lo que querían decir: algunas expectativas culturales están tan arraigadas que, cuando se rompen, pueden hacer que la gente se sienta muy incómoda. Al igual que yo me había sentido incómodo al principio al adaptarme a las normas culturales, ellos se habían sentido demasiado cómodos demasiado pronto, sin haberse ganado el nivel de familiaridad necesario para relacionarse de la forma que les resultaba habitual.

Fui voluntaria durante un par de semanas en un colegio bilingüe de Nervión, un barrio al este del centro de la ciudad. Hablaba con los alumnos por parejas, de cinco a diez minutos cada vez, para que practicasen inglés. Algunos eran muy tímidos y otros no. Me gustaba hacerles

preguntas sencillas para que se sintieran cómodos. La pregunta clásica era «¿Sevilla o Betis?», una elección entre los clubes de fútbol rivales de la ciudad. Históricamente, el Sevilla era apoyado por los residentes al este del río, el Guadalquivir, y los seguidores del Betis eran de Triana, el barrio al oeste. Cuando les preguntaba por qué elegían a su equipo, siempre era por sus padres, que seguían la tradición, e insistían en que era la única respuesta. Había muy pocos estudiantes sin preferencias marcadas.

También me gustaba preguntarles qué hacían para divertirse. Hice esta misma pregunta a chicos de 12 a 18 años. Me hablaron de sus clubes privados de fútbol, los equipos nunca estaban organizados por las escuelas. La música también era una actividad independiente, había que organizar las clases fuera de la escuela. Muchos de los chicos dijeron que les gustaba ver vídeos en youtube o jugar a videojuegos. Casi todos dijeron que les gustaba salir. Les preguntaba qué significaba eso y casi siempre se mostraban un poco confusos, inseguros de cómo responder. «Salgo con mis amigos». decían casi todos. «¿Sólo por la calle?». Les pedía que me lo aclararan y parecían más confusos. «Sí». Me decían que sólo salían a pasear por el barrio, a explorar la ciudad, a montar en bici, en patinete o a patinar. No sabían explicar qué más hacían. Se limitaban a salir con sus amigos. Aprendí rápidamente que los niños no iban a casa de los demás de la misma manera que yo conocía. Iban a los parques, al centro comercial, incluso simplemente a la calle. Esto me resultaba extraño porque en las calles de mi casa nunca pasaba nada. Podía caminar media hora antes de encontrar a alguien de mi edad -en su casa. Cuando salí del apartamento de Sevilla, ya había actividad por todas partes. Los chicos no sabían explicar qué hacían en la calle porque siempre era lo que pasaba: con quién se cruzaban, lo que veían o pensaban por el camino, lo que les parecía bien.

Esto se extendió también a los adultos. Era muy raro que viera a alguien en el apartamento que no fuera de la familia. Casi nunca. Cuando los adultos querían ver a sus amigos, salían. Mis profesores de español en los Estados Unidos siempre han tenido problemas para traducir la palabra «tapas», no porque sea difícil de describir, sino porque es difícil de entender. «Pequeños platos para compartir». Siempre decían, y eso es lo que son. Pero eso no es una comida, si yo saliera a cenar querría una comida, ¿no? Es un platito para compartir, te lo comes para seguir el ritmo de las copas, vas de bar en bar para probar diferentes platos; para pasar la noche hablando, bebiendo, comiendo platitos de bocado en bocado. El centro de la actividad social no era la casa, sino las calles, la ciudad misma. De este modo, la ciudad se sentía viva.

Sentado y comiendo tapas vi a amigos reunirse, vi a hinchas de fútbol abuchear a sus rivales, vi a grupos reunirse para encontrar la siguiente parada de la noche.

Me uní a un club de ultimate frisbee en Sevilla y conocí a algunas de las personas más amables e integradoras. Más de la mitad del club era de Sevilla y había un núcleo que llevaba años jugando juntos. Normalmente salían por la noche después de los entrenamientos y nos invitaban a mí y a los demás jugadores estadounidenses. El bar estaba a poca distancia, era un local pequeño con asientos fuera. No sabría decir si nunca antes habían estado allí; enseguida charlaron con los dueños. Un miembro del equipo pidió tapas para todos nosotros, más de una docena de atletas hambrientos, y otro amigo estuvo encantado de pedir más. Las bebidas iban pasando mientras empujábamos las mesas todos juntos.

Estábamos hablando y bromeando en cuestión de minutos, se aseguraron de incluir a los más nuevos en la conversación. Una vez que todo el mundo estaba acomodado, a la hora de una segunda ronda, alguien sacó una tarta. Era una tarta de cumpleaños, para dos de los jugadores del equipo, estaban sorprendidos, avergonzados, alegres. El camarero nos dio un cuchillo y platos extra al oírnos cantar. Todo el mundo cogió un trozo, viejos amigos, nuevos amigos, nuevos jugadores. Compartimos la tarta de chocolate como celebración de dos cumpleaños y por un tercer compañero que se mudaba a otra ciudad antes de nuestro siguiente entrenamiento.

Después, la multitud se dispersó lentamente, las parejas se alejaron en busca de sus bicicletas; un grupo se dirigió a la parada de autobús. Caminé con mis amigos hasta una estación del sistema público de bicicletas, Sevici. Un abono anual me permitía utilizar infinitamente las pesadísimas y lentas bicicletas, siempre que las devolviera en otra estación antes de llegar a casa. Volvía a casa con mis amigos por la ciudad, circulando despacio por aceras y carriles bici, hablando hasta que teníamos que separarnos, tomando calles diferentes para llegar a casa.

Al igual que las interacciones sociales tenían sus propias normas, la cultura de salir era completamente nueva para mí. Iba a pie, en bici o en autobús para reunirme con mis amigos, o ya estaba con ellos desde antes. Salir por la noche solía significar ir a un bar o dos y luego salir de marcha hasta tarde con nuestros amigos españoles. Después, la gente se iba a casa o se relajaba un rato en un parque o junto al río. Aunque la bebida era una parte importante de la cultura, se esperaba un cierto nivel de decoro durante toda la noche. Cuando veían que yo era estadounidense, a los españoles les gustaba contarme su opinión sobre el comportamiento de los norteamericanos. No veían con buenos ojos beber y emborracharse, vestir demasiado informal y

querer ser el centro de atención. Sabían antes de que yo les explicara que no todos los estadounidenses eran así, pero aun así me sorprendió ver las actitudes reflejadas entre muchos españoles. Gran parte del problema parecía estar en los turistas estadounidenses que no respetaban las normas sociales.

Los clubes rechazaban a los hombres que llevaban pantalones cortos, que estaban despeinados o que estaban desordenados. La cultura de los clubes también era nueva para mí, los clubes de mi ciudad eran de caza y pesca. Había un club en particular que, según me dijeron, era para un público algo más joven, lo que significaba que los jóvenes de 16-17 años se colaban y los adultos mayores lo evitaban. La pista de baile estaba en su mayor parte estancada, ya que los grupos de amigos estaban apiñados con la música a todo volumen. Yo estaba allí con un par de otros estudiantes estadounidenses y un par de amigos españoles. Entre la multitud, la energía era diferente de lo que esperaba. La gente parecía especialmente apegada a sus grupos, y las personas que conocimos y con las que bailamos eran en su mayoría de otros países. Incluso intentar adentrarnos en la multitud nos trajo miradas de desaprobación y resistencia. Chocar con la gente -incluso bailando- estaba mal visto. Para mí estaba claro que asumían que nuestra energía de grupo se debía al exceso de alcohol y que estábamos demasiado borrachos para controlarnos. Esto me sorprendió incluso cuando me estaba acostumbrando a las normas españolas. Me parecía que todo el mundo iba a bailar y que en una multitud abarrotada se esperaba cierto contacto físico. Algunas personas gritaron por encima de la música o chocaron para dejar claro que querían espacio para su grupo, que pensaban que estábamos fuera de control.

No era la primera vez que me trataban y veían como a un extranjero, un visitante. Como estadounidense, cargaba con todas las suposiciones y prejuicios que albergaba la gente. Como tal, mi experiencia y el trato que recibí se vieron influidos por las expectativas que la gente tenía de mí. Muchas veces, la gente asumía que yo sólo hablaba inglés. Incluso cuando hablaba exclusivamente en español, algunos seguían respondiendo en inglés. Conversábamos eficazmente, así que no era un problema de comunicación, sino que lo veían como una oportunidad para practicar su inglés o simplemente se negaban a hablar conmigo en español.

Los españoles que hablaban de ello estaban orgullosos de que los españoles no fueran racistas. Parte de esto está en la población históricamente variada, y otra parte se basa simplemente en lo que se percibe como racista. Como mi profesor de historia explicó seriamente a la clase, la palabra «n» no tenía las mismas implicaciones para ellos que para los americanos de

su clase. Nos dijo que la gente la utilizaba de forma descriptiva, yo ya sabía que era la palabra para el color en español pero dijo algo que sorprendió a toda la clase. Sentí la incomodidad en el aula cuando nuestro profesor blanco demostró cómo contestaba al teléfono con «Hola, mi negro», cuando le llamaban sus amigos negros. Insistió en que a su amigo no le parecería ofensivo y que nadie pestañearía, y eso puede ser tan cierto como sea necesario. Para mi sensibilidad, aunque puede que nadie se sintiera ofendido, la base racial del saludo ponía en entredicho la afirmación de que no era racista.

Esto se manifestó aún más directamente en el término coloquial para la clásica tienda de la esquina, a la que llamaban «Chino» porque normalmente sus propietarios eran chinos. No distinguían entre chinos, japoneses, coreanos o cualquier otra etnia del sur de Asia, y daba igual que la tienda fuera propiedad de un español europeo. «Voy al Chino», voy a la tienda, era perfectamente común. Vi mensajes en las redes sociales y pintadas protestando el uso de la palabra Chino para referirse a estas tiendas, a medida que las generaciones más jóvenes se daban cuenta de la hipocresía y la insensibilidad del término.

Las formas más directas de racismo se manifestaban en las advertencias más genuinas. Me dijeron que evitara ciertos mercados por los marroquíes que se reunían en la zona. Oí generalizaciones sobre la ética laboral y las inclinaciones delictivas de «los negros», y en el socarrón «ya sabes cómo son». Asentí con la cabeza. No estaba seguro de qué pensar, pero el sentimiento que había detrás de la advertencia parecía genuinamente favorable a mi experiencia. Me preguntaba si pensaban que esos inmigrantes en concreto no representaban a su país como ellos querían, o si esa actitud era general.

En mis clases en España aprendí rápidamente que los alumnos rara vez hacían preguntas al profesor, incluso cuando no entendían. Aprendí que hacer preguntas se consideraba como socavar la autoridad del profesor. Implicaba que el alumno no creía al profesor, o que éste no lo había enseñado suficientemente bien la primera vez. Cuando les pregunté qué hacían cuando algo no estaba claro, me dijeron que seguía sin estarlo y que se enseñaban a sí mismos después de clase o acudían al despacho.

La clase tenía incluso un aire de competición. El profesor ofrecía puntos extra a los alumnos por demostrar soluciones delante de la clase, retando a cualquiera a responderla. Ofrecía puntos extra a toda la clase si conseguíamos responder correctamente a las preguntas de desafío

antes del examen. Daba a la clase la opción de apostar puntos en otras preguntas para tener la oportunidad de ganar más. La colaboración era ruidosa y concurrida, las voces más altas eran escuchadas primero y en todo momento. No se exigía la participación en el debate, una respuesta final correcta significaba la victoria para toda la clase. A menudo, el profesor no especificaba si habíamos contestado correctamente hasta que se devolvían las notas.

También pude asistir a una clase de bailes españoles con otros estudiantes. Tenía lugar en un pequeño estudio de baile en el sótano, limpio y bien iluminado. El profesor era un hombre barbudo que se movía con una gracia increíble. Intentó enseñarnos a bailar flamenco, salsa, sevillanas y un par más que no puedo nombrar. Nos dispuso en círculo para que pudiéramos practicar nuestro juego de pies unos junto a otros, bailábamos hacia delante y hacia atrás, achicando y agrandando el círculo. La música era alta y desconocida, y teníamos que aprender a seguir el ritmo. El profesor tenía que animarnos a que nos cogiéramos de la mano, a que giráramos unos sobre otros, a que nos sintiéramos cómodos estando cerca. Una vez hizo una demostración con una chica de nuestro grupo, la llevó de un lado a otro en el baile, guiándola con los pies, las caderas, las manos; ella parecía un poco nerviosa. La sumergió y ella se rió, exultante y aturrida, mientras volvía al círculo.

Ninguno de nuestro grupo de estudiantes americanos tenía la confianza o la capacidad de emular sus movimientos, su seguridad o su convicción, de bailar entre ellos como él había demostrado. Me di cuenta de que existía un escudo de formalidad incómoda entre todos nosotros, lo que habíamos interiorizado como una distancia respetuosa necesaria. Nos impedía comprometernos con la danza, alcanzar el nivel de comodidad que yo veía en el instructor. Parecíamos compartir una cierta expectativa heredada de lo que estaba permitido en cuanto a bailar unos con otros y al contacto físico entre personas que veíamos como compañeros de clase.

Paseando una noche por las calles de Sevilla me encontré con una gran multitud reunida. Las calles son muy estrechas en el centro, influenciadas por la antigua planificación establecida por el anterior imperio musulmán. Al principio el centro de la multitud estaba oscurecido, indiscernible, había un movimiento rítmico y lento. Algunas personas tomaban vídeos y fotos con sus teléfonos, otras llevaban toallas enrolladas alrededor de la cabeza con un rollo dispuesto sobre los hombros. Me acerqué y vi un extraño artilugio con decenas de patas. Era un almacén de metal con bloques de hormigón dispuestos encima. Bajo el almacén cabían filas y filas de

hombres con las toallas en la cabeza. El armazón descansaba sobre sus hombros y sus brazos en alto. Los vi caminar al compás de los demás para maniobrar lentamente por las estrechas calles. Los curiosos tenían que apretarse contra las paredes o abrirse paso. La mayoría de los hombres eran adultos, incluso canosos; los niños se quedaban mirando esperanzados, unos pocos llevaban sus toallas envueltas.

Pregunté a un hombre entre la multitud qué estaban haciendo y me dijo que estaban practicando para la Semana Santa. Ya había oído hablar un poco de ella. Practicaban para llevar grandes carrozas con estatuas y escenas religiosas. Las sacaban de una iglesia histórica y las llevaban a través de la multitud que siempre abarrota el centro de la ciudad. La Semana Santa es una de las celebraciones más importantes del año en Sevilla y la gente viaja de todas partes del país y del mundo para ver la procesión y la celebración. Mientras los observaba ensayar, tenían una destreza silenciosa, casi mecánica, la tarea era increíblemente seria.

Incluso en el aire fresco de la noche pude ver a los hombres sudando por el esfuerzo. A veces, uno de los hombres salía con cuidado de las filas y se escondía debajo de la carroza. Sin mediar palabra, otro hombre salía de entre la multitud y ocupaba el lugar vacío bajo el yugo, ajustando su postura a la altura de la carroza y utilizando la toalla enrollada para amortiguarse contra la viga de madera que descansaba sobre sus hombros. La parte más impresionante del proceso llegó al final, cuando tuvieron que girar en una curva cerrada y maniobrar para entrar en un garaje en el que apenas cabía la carroza. Llegaron a la curva y me pareció que el progreso se había detenido, era imposible girar toda la carroza para orientarla hacia la nueva calle más estrecha.

No sé si alguien en particular dirigió el movimiento, no hubo instrucciones orales evidentes. La carroza empezó a balancearse hacia delante y hacia atrás con movimientos cortos y lentos. A medida que avanzaban, las filas de pies se arrastraban para girar un poco con cada oscilación. El público observaba embelesado la cooperación. Parecía un milagro cuando terminaron de girar la carroza y encararon la nueva calle. Fue entonces cuando vi la puerta del garaje al que apuntaban. Fue otra hazaña de cooperación, sincronización y persistencia que finalmente giraron y encajaron la carroza por la estrecha entrada.

Los colegios tienen toda la semana libre por Semana Santa mientras la ciudad lo celebra. Es una celebración de la pasión y muerte de Jesucristo y muchos me dijeron que es su fiesta más importante. Cada año se celebra un concurso entre artistas para crear un cartel representativo de

la Semana. Este año el artista elegido representó a su propio hijo como un tierno y joven Jesucristo para representar la celebración. Oí a españoles mayores cuestionar si era el mejor diseño, si la representación era apropiada y la validez de que el hijo del artista fuera el modelo de Jesús.

La otra gran fiesta de la primavera es La Feria de Abril. No tuve que preguntar dónde encontrarla. Nuestro grupo había planeado reunirse en la orilla oeste del Guadalquivir para caminar juntos hasta el recinto ferial. En cuanto nos acercamos al río, un flujo aparentemente interminable de gente creó una inconfundible marea creciente. Era imposible no seguir la corriente. Casi todos los hombres iban vestidos de traje. La mayoría de las mujeres llevaban caros vestidos elegantes del estilo que marcaba que era un vestido de Feria. Me enteré de que las que podían permitírselo compraban un vestido nuevo cada año para coleccionarlo y atesorarlo como recuerdo de la Feria. Otras mujeres seguían teniendo varios vestidos de años anteriores para no llevar el mismo atuendo todas las noches de la semana.

La Feria comienza oficialmente a medianoche, cuando el gran arco y el recinto ferial se iluminan a la vez. Cientos, si no miles, de personas se reúnen ante él para esperar a que se enciendan las luces. La gente sacaba fotos del arco, de los vestidos y de sus amigos. La multitud prorrumpió en vítores cuando el arco se iluminó. Las puertas se abrieron y la gente entró en tropel en el recinto ferial. Una mitad era similar a lo que había visto antes: comida frita, juegos de habilidad, atracciones vertiginosas. Niños pequeños y adolescentes correteaban con caramelos y churros. No pasé mucho tiempo en esa sección, salvo para encontrar una mezcla más barata de Rebujiito, la clásica bebida de Manzanilla mezclada con 7-up y hielo.

La otra mitad era el lado tradicional, el más interesante para mí. Consistía en calles de tierra bien iluminadas bordeadas de casas con forma de tienda de campaña llamadas casetas. Algunas de ellas eran públicas, es decir, cualquiera podía entrar si iba bien vestido y estaba dispuesto a hacer cola. Las casetas públicas eran las que representaban a los barrios de la ciudad y a determinados partidos políticos. En estas casetas públicas había gente sentada en mesas y muchos más bailando. Tenían un bar en la parte de atrás que vendía cervezas o jarras de rebujito a cualquiera que tuviera un par de euros. La música era para bailar, alta y rítmica. Algunos grupos bailaban más que otros, algunos conocían o practicaban bailes clásicos como las sevillanas, el baile local. La diversión de la Feria procedía de la vestimenta hiperformal, la

energía festiva, los horarios tardíos y el movimiento casi constante de la gente entre las distintas casetas.

Las casetas privadas eran diferentes. Algunas estaban dedicadas a los servicios públicos, como la policía, los bomberos y los trabajadores médicos y sanitarios. La mayoría de las casetas privadas parecían pertenecer a familias concretas. Sólo admitían invitados y amigos, y se instalaban en ellas como querían. Las casetas más grandes estaban llenas de mesas, comida, bebida y familiares. La familia de acogida de mi amigo tenía derechos sobre una caseta y estaban increíblemente orgullosos, rozando la vanidad. Decían que había una lista de espera de años para alquilar una caseta y que las familias la conservaban mientras podían permitírsela. Que una caseta durara generaciones era una hazaña increíble porque significaba que la familia tenía suficiente éxito y estaba lo bastante unida como para mantener su posición y su influencia.

Aunque la perspectiva de tener una caseta familiar conllevaba naturalmente la exclusión de los demás, esto no significaba que fueran poco amistosos. Invitaron a mi amigo a entrar para ver a más miembros de la familia que no conocía. Esperé fuera de la caseta con mis otros amigos, pero no tardamos en asomarnos a la barandilla metálica y bromear con un hombre sentado en la caseta. Era simpático y charlaba alegremente con nosotros. No tardó mucho en ofrecernos y servirnos vasos de plástico del rebujito de la jarra que tenía sobre la mesa. Para mí fue una interesante combinación del orgullo de poseer la caseta y la alegría subyacente del acontecimiento y la energía de la gente.

Al volver a casa, me pregunté si sería diferente, si realmente podría elegir cómo quería ser, cómo quería vivir. Pensé que tal vez sería irrevocablemente diferente, que no encajaría donde había estado. Me preocupaba no sentirme cómoda volviendo a las costumbres y a la comunidad que había conocido antes. También me preguntaba si realmente quería volver a la misma vida de antes; no estaba segura de lo que significaba volver a aprender a conformarme. Al mismo tiempo, resultaba increíblemente difícil nadar a contracorriente aquí, porque no parece que se esté moviendo cuando estás en él. Rápidamente olvidé cómo era exactamente la vida cuando estaba en España. Cuando les oí decir que Estados Unidos les parecía una locura, estuve de acuerdo; me parecía una locura haberme dejado atrapar por la forma de vida en Estados Unidos; la ideología estadounidense. Ahora que he vuelto, no puedo explicar exactamente a qué me refería cuando estaba de acuerdo. No puedo explicar exactamente cómo me sentí, porque he

vuelto a un sistema en el que todo el mundo está de acuerdo, y ese acuerdo forma la realidad social más que cualquier verdad objetiva. Al darme cuenta de esto, me di cuenta de que todo lo que parecía diferente -la forma en que la vida parecía tener una definición diferente, una sintonía diferente- estaba determinado por la gente que me rodeaba, y su comprensión. Durante el solsticio de invierno, el día más corto del año, mis padres me invitaron con ellos a la casa de un vecino en Pumpkin Hollow. El vecino celebra una fiesta todos los años e invita a todo el vecindario. Estaba lo bastante cerca como para ir andando, pero hacía un frío que pelaba, así que mis padres se pusieron sus abrigos de lana y yo me puse uno que compré en España. Bajamos la colina, pasamos por delante de la casa de Mark y llegamos al otro extremo del valle. Yo estaba un poco aprensiva ante la puerta porque la última vez que los había visto no era mayor de edad. Pensé que no conocería a la gente que había allí. Tenía razón, a algunos no los conocía, pero otros me reconocieron. Pude conocer y hablar con algunos vecinos que no sabía que vivían cerca, y me di cuenta de que muchos de ellos tampoco se conocían entre sí. El evento era un potluck así que todo el mundo trajo comida para compartir, nosotros trajimos una hogaza de buen pan. Pude hablar con algunos de los miembros más mayores de la comunidad y, al escuchar mi experiencia en España, me contaron que habían vivido y trabajado en Perú como antropólogos durante décadas. Me hablaron de su casa y se ofrecieron a dibujarme un mapa de los mejores lugares para vivir y visitar en Perú. Me dijeron que siempre volvían a Conway porque les encantaba estar aquí y se estaban haciendo mayores. También pude hablar con algunos de mis vecinos más jóvenes. Les pregunté por los profesores que recordaba de la escuela primaria y me contaron nuevas historias y nuevos nombres. Una me dijo que quería aprender español y viajar a España algún día y yo la animé a perseguir ese sueño. Mientras hablábamos, la llamaron para que leyera un poema con el anfitrión de la fiesta. La pequeña banda de música de la esquina se detuvo. Había pequeños recortes del sol y la luna en palos que se balanceaban sobre ella mientras leía el poema con el anfitrión. Era un poema sobre finales y principios, sobre el cambio de las estaciones y sobre la oportunidad. Hablaban de la comunidad reunida ahora, en la noche más larga del invierno, para compartir comida, bebida y jolgorio, para encender el fuego para ahuyentar el frío de la noche. Me pareció un poema que ya había oído antes, pero que ahora tenía más significado para mí, porque no es así en todas partes. Y todos dimos las gracias, porque el poema había llegado a su fin.

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