Migrating From U.S. to Morocco and Back Again: Indulging in the Unfamiliar

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It seems like just yesterday when I arrived in Rabat Morocco. Last spring semester, I was immersed into the traditional quarters of the “Medina Kedima” or the “Old City” in Rabat, Morocco. My studies revolved around transnational identity and migration under the umbrella of the SIT program. The program was structured for a total of twelve weeks: eight weeks living and studying with a non-English speaking host-family and four weeks traveling and conducting independent research in Southern Morocco. The study abroad experience incited new interests in an area of study I was previously unfamiliar with and fostered long-lasting multicultural relationships that will forever be a fond memory and an integral part of my personal and professional development.

When I arrived to Morocco, I had this romanticized vision of embarking on this exotic, but beautiful adventure, full of challenges that easily could be overcome with persistent efforts towards learning and understanding the language and culture. This notion quickly fled as I squeezed my way through the crowded, dirty, and smelly Mohammed V Avenue to what would become my home for the next eight weeks. I arrived at the numberless tall brown door. I knocked and my host mother greeted me, “Salam Aleykoum.” I replied accordingly, “Aleykoum wa Salam.” This was largely the only exchange that comprised our dialogue over the next few weeks. I had studied Arabic for the past two years at Cornell, but, like most American students, I was only taught the formal language that is written and not commonly spoken. So when I attempted to say a few words to my host mother, the words would spill out of my mouth in a Shakespearian tongue. I felt like a blonde-hair, blue-eyed alien.
As a new student and family member in Morocco, I not only felt like an ancient figure and an outcast, but also like a child. I felt as if I regressed back to my early stages of development when I was learning how to talk, interact, dress, shower, go to the restroom, buy things, and perform those daily activities that usually are undertaken unconsciously. It was no simple adjustment. All of my senses were heightened. I didn’t navigate Morocco by maps, since they don’t really exist there anyway, but by following the contours of my senses. I listened, observed, and practiced bargaining tactics to purchase necessities at a reasonable price. I mastered the Turkish toilet, a small hole in the ground near a bucket of water, for not only restroom duties but also for showering purposes. The call to prayer became my new alarm clock, and the late-night smell of snails was my cue to return home by curfew. I found that a few miming gestures says more than a 1,000 words, and a smile really can go a long way. By the end of the eight weeks, I had surpassed the early stages of my development process; the unfamiliar became the familiar.

Learning how to cushion and balance the ups and downs, or the unfamiliar and the familiar, is an important skill for any individual and is one that I’m sure almost every U.S. student is subjected to while studying abroad. The environment that I immersed into was completely defined by how I chose to perceive it. My early expectations of my Moroccan experience—the beautiful calming exotic—were constructed within an American setting and came with an inherent bias that were initially embedded in my opinions and perspectives of Morocco. The barriers and boundaries formed through the American lens were challenged and slowly broken down as I tried to assimilate into the local Moroccan traditions. There were even hygiene norms that I confronted. Who ever said that everyone must wear deodorant? And why is it that you must shower after a good run—sweat dries right?
Living in a different culture teaches you how to alter your perceptions, stereotypes, and recent strongholds to fit a new environment that can be equally beneficial to your well-being if navigated and approached properly. In Morocco, those unconscious daily activities were now conscious. And the absent conscious activities that were previously performed as a student in the U.S. were replaced with new experiences and new sounds, sights, tastes, and feelings.

While my abroad experience transgressed my personal and psychological boundaries, it also traversed the academic landscape providing refreshing academic perspectives distinct from those informed by the U.S. educational system. The coursework in the beginning of the program served as a platform for my research that I would later conduct at the end of my home-stay experience. After speaking to a professor in the agriculture dependent city of Beni Mellal, I became interested in working with rural migrants. Several discussions later, I found that it was not economic incentives that were motivating individuals to move. Rather, individuals had a higher propensity to migrate because of the romanticized notions they hold of their destination country, similar to those romanticized notions I had of Morocco.

As I studied the movement of people across borders, it dawned on me that I too had similar feelings to the migrants. I was a person moving to another country in hopes to submerge into a different culture. I too developed these unrealistic, romanticized perceptions of the culture I was moving into based off of conversations with previous American travelers, media, and an accumulation of readings. Through my research—surveys, interviews, and discussions—I found that socially and culturally Moroccans are motivated to migrate to obtain those values and ideals that are supposedly absent in their own society. However, I found that politically most Moroccan youth were less motivated to migrate because they felt empowered to incite change domestically, rather than seeking it elsewhere. This paradoxical push and pull of migrants based on their socio-
cultural and political motivations became particularly apparent with the unsought of social media technologies. I was able to quantitatively analyze my research and compose a 50-page paper along with a presentation to the rest of my program and advisors. This research went beyond just satisfying any academic requirement, it enabled me to look at a widespread phenomenon—migration—from a country specific perspective and in doing so, I was able to challenge my own actions, thoughts, and expectations as a “migrating student”.

The independent research project provided me with the analytical and interpersonal communication skills on a global level that I could not have received elsewhere. I attribute my profound personal development and academic growth to my study abroad experience. I immersed into Morocco and challenged myself to assimilate quickly by just merely walking down my street and into the Arab Spring protests, speaking with youth, Moroccan friends, and street vendors. I indulged in the infamous Moroccan cuisine—tajine, couscous, mint tea, and, my ultimate favorite, pigeon bastille (tastes like meat baklava!). I dedicated myself to understanding the subtle cultural nuances of the different regions in Morocco, grasping the unique distinctions between the Amazigh and the Berber. I took up belly dancing and surfing. I became the most out-going person I had ever been in my entire life. Study-abroad experience shocked me, challenged me, pushed me, scared me, inspired me, and invigorated me. For those looking to go abroad, surprise yourself—relish in the unfamiliar.