The *Djembe* team would like to sincerely thank all contributors as well as faculty who utilize our journal in the classroom.

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- English
- Global Studies
- Intercultural Affairs

These departments were crucial for the establishment of *Djembe*.

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Poster, cover, and layout design by
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# Table of Contents

Introduction  
*Djembe Team*  

Lost in Florence:  
Communicating Beyond Language Barriers  
*Kelly Pflaum*  

Violation of a Social Norm  
*Aaliyah Mohamed*  

Creative Compassion, Heroic Children,  
and Irish Travelers in Sheridan’s *Into the West*  
*Dr. Dawn Duncan*  

Life Drawing I:  
Florence, Italy  
*Becca Hovland*
Some Things cannot be Taught, Only Experienced

*Stephanie Brolsma*

Invalidation of African Countries’ Independence: Cunning and Credulity

*Dr. Zacharie Petnkeu*

To Admire

*Bryn Homuth*

A Venetian Victory

*Matthew Gantz*

Mentor

*Dr. Edward Schmoll*

The Moment I Met Nathan: Adopting from China

*Matthew Bergquist*

City of Kites:

*Agra, India*

*Kelly Pflaum*

A Touch of Europe:

*Intercultural Travel Through Blind Eyes*

*Dr. Shawn Carruth & Dr. Roy Hammerling*
With the creation of a new publication comes the necessity of deciding on a name. In 2010 we settled on *Djembe*, a word with an important and multicultural significance which also has been the name of previous Concordia publications. The word *djembe* comes initially from Bamanankan, a language originating in Mali, West Africa, meaning “everyone gather together.” A drum shares the same name. Drums are found in cultures all over the world, serving a variety of purposes such as the performance of music, the call to war, and the initiation of a community gathering.

This publication aims to replicate these actions. By using “*Djembe*” as our title, we aim to create a place for members of the Concordia community, faculty and students alike, to bring a variety of cultures and backgrounds together in one meeting place. The articles’ purposes vary widely, some seeking to provide an explanation of one culture by one of its members, while others may be an account of a culture with which the author is unfamiliar. It may even be a call to action, an attempt to advocate for potentially overlooked issues.

Now in its third year, the cover of *Djembe* is graced by the Earth. It serves as a reminder that this is our planet, and regardless of how many thousands of miles and differences separate our cities, cultures, and peoples, Earth binds us all. The articles featured in *Djembe* are a call for connection, a reminder that though we may look different, sound different, and come from different places, this planet is our home.

-2012 *Djembe* Team
Lost in Florence: Communicating Beyond Language Barriers

Two American girls in their early twenties, alone in Florence, Italy, lost. Neither of us spoke Italian, we were far beyond the edges of our map, and our train to Rome that cost us ten Euros each to reserve a seat was leaving in less than an hour. With no time left to panic, we needed to enter survival mode – or at least “think rationally” mode.

I think it’s safe to say that one of the most highly advertised and sought-after benefits of studying abroad is the freedom to explore a foreign place on one’s own terms – to gain the confidence to understand a new culture and navigate within a way of life different than one’s own. But it also has its challenges.

My story starts in Norway, where I studied abroad for a semester with Concordia College’s Scandinavia and the Baltic program. In this particular program, we studied with a group of ten students from Concordia and Luther College, as well as a faculty leader from Concordia. All of the American students lived together, and we often traveled as an entire group. Now, there were definitely advantages to having this sort of security, such as having planned excursions and not having to worry about the logistics of travel, but it also made it more challenging to really gain the freedom and confidence to be on our own in a foreign country.

I got a small taste of this, though, during our two week Easter holidays from school. Since we were already on that side of the Atlantic, it was the perfect opportunity to explore other parts of Europe. But we were on our own. On our own to plan, to travel, and to make it back to Norway safe before final exams. I realize that many study abroad programs are like this from the beginning, but during our semester abroad, everything had been planned for us. Sure, I took a few weekend trips away from Norway, but two weeks was a long time to plan for. Nevertheless, I took on the challenge.

I made plans to travel with another girl who was studying abroad with me. We decided to explore Germany, the Czech Republic, Austria, and Italy before heading back to Norway. Four countries in two weeks. It would be quick, so everything had to be carefully planned in order to fit in all that we wanted to do and see. We bought Eurail passes so that we could travel by train. During the weeks before we left, I spent time planning train routes and timing, researching, and booking hostels, learning about public transportation in each city, deciding what sites we would be sure to hit, and printing out tons of maps that would help us get safely from train station to hostel to tourist sites and back each day. I had confirmation emails, directions, and a detailed schedule that we would follow to make sure everything went smoothly.
And it did. For the most part. We spent only a day or two in each city, but we made the most of it. From Germany’s capital full of World War II history, to Easter Markets in Prague; from Vienna, the cultural center of Austria, to Innsbruck, a quiet town in the Alps; from the canals and bridges of Venice, to Florence, the birthplace of the renaissance; from Rome, the great Eternal City, back up to Munich, the Bavarian home of Oktoberfest. We moved from city to city by train, walked miles with luggage to hostels, and saw everything that our short amount of time would allow. With each step, we were gaining confidence in our ability to navigate a foreign place. And each day that we arrived in a new city, we would reserve seats on the trains we would need to take next. I knew exactly which times and train numbers we needed to take in order to follow our plans.

When we arrived in Venice, we decided to book seats through Trenitalia for each of the trains we would need to take while we were in Italy. This meant a train from Venice to Florence, a train from Florence to Rome, and an overnight train from Rome up to Munich. I explained to the man at the ticket window, in the simplest English, which trains we would like to take and then paid a few Euros for the reservations. We got our tickets, and we went off to explore Venice – the bustling Ponte de Rialto, Piazza San Marco, gondolas on the winding canals. Two days later, we used our first reservation to make it safely to Florence, and we had another whirlwind tour of an amazing city. The Piazza della Signoria, the Ponte Vecchio over the River Arno, and, of course, real Italian pizza all made the cut of things we had time for. When we were too tired to walk any farther, we made our way to the campsite where we stayed the night.

The morning that we were to take a train from Florence down through the rolling hills of Tuscany to Rome, we caught a ride on a public bus that took us from our campsite near Piazzale Michelangelo to the train station. During the half hour ride, we wound down the hill on the south side of the River Arno, a panoramic view of Firenze, the burnt orange dome of the Santa Maria del Fiore, and the single brick tower of the Palazzo Vecchio passed by the window. I knew the train wasn’t supposed to leave for two more hours, but as we descended towards the center of town, I took my folder of scheduling, maps, and information out of the front pocket of my too full backpack and found our seat reservation ticket for the train. I examined it, double checking that everything I had planned was still on schedule. It was printed in Italian so I knew I couldn’t be too careful. I don’t know if it was luck or if my instincts had kicked in and told me to take out the ticket, but sure enough, I noticed an error.

Apparently Florence has multiple train stations. We had arrived at the main, central station, Stazione di Firenze Santa Maria Novella, the day before, but our ticket listed our departure from Stazione di Firenze Rifredi, and we had no idea where that was. Even though the train left at the same time as the one we had planned for and went to Rome, it was a different route than we had intended to take, and I hadn’t specified from which train station we wanted to leave when we had reserved our seats in Venice. My planning had failed us, and I didn’t have my trusty laptop or Google Maps to help me out.
Panic ensued. We had two hours to figure out where this other train station was in order to make our train. We got off the bus at the central train station and walked across the street to the nearest tourist information center. Travelers lined up, waiting to be called to one of seven or eight windows, behind which local representatives stood to answer any questions asked of them. We waited in line for nearly fifteen minutes before a gentleman in a navy blue uniform called us to his open window. He greeted us in Italian, and already I doubted his helpfulness. Using simple English once again, I asked him for directions to Firenze Rifredi. He handed us a tourist map of the city, one that highlighted all of the sites we had seen the previous day, and pointed to the space above the map. The train station that we needed to get to didn’t even make the cut for their map, so we wouldn’t have any sort of visual help in finding where we needed to be. It would be a blind search. The representative did suggest that we could take one of two city buses in order to get there, though he wasn’t sure which one, so he told us to ask the bus driver before we got on if that was the correct bus.

So we ran back to the central station, at which all buses stopped, backpacks and duffel bags weighing us down. We found one of the buses the gentleman had mentioned, and we stepped on. Looking at the driver, a large Italian man focused entirely on his cell phone and not on whether or not patrons paid the fare or scanned their bus passes, I took the tourist information man’s advice and interrupted the bus driver, asking if the bus would go to the station we needed to get to. Good thing, too, because it did not in fact go there. The driver did tell us, though, which bus we should take. So we stepped off, and I sat on my duffel bag, waiting for the other bus to arrive. When it did, I again asked the driver if this route would go to Firenze Rifredi. It did. I asked him if he could tell me at which stop we needed to get off. He said he would just tell me when we got there.

Great. We had to trust this guy. He couldn’t have been older than twenty-five, a scruffy beard on his chin, his hair shaved, the gray-blue shirt of his uniform untucked. I guessed that driving city buses day after day was only a temporary job for him. So although I was happy to be on the right bus, I was not comforted by the fact that I had to trust this man that I had never met and would probably never see again in my life.

Still a little wary of the situation, I sat in the first seat behind the driver, my friend behind me. I piled my duffel bag and backpack near the window and sat half in the aisle, leaning forward, making sure to keep watch on him in the large rear-view mirror as he drove. We were down to only an hour before the train left, but if this bus brought us where we needed to be, we wouldn’t have any problem being on time. As we continued through the stops on the route, I kept glaring at the driver, but I also saw, out the window, traffic signs on the side of the road for the train station we needed to get to. A moment of relaxation, but still waiting. I knew we had to be getting close, so I fixed my eyes on the driver’s through the mirror, waiting for him to tell me when to get off.

Soon, though, I stopped seeing the signs. Looking around the bus, I had no idea what to do next. I turned to my friend and knew she was thinking the same thing. We needed to do whatever was necessary in order to get on that train and to move on with our plans. Having no knowledge of the Italian language other than simple greetings, I turned to an elderly woman – white hair atop a round olive face, a pastel pink cardigan over a gray dress – sitting across from me and said, “Scusi, Stazione Rifredi?” She shouted in quick Italian and waved her arms, pointing behind the bus. Other locals joined in with her Italian jabber, and I knew something was wrong. My few years of Spanish classes from high school helped me guess that she said we passed the train station three stops ago – and, of course, the bus driver never told me. I thanked the woman and stood up, exiting.
the bus at the next stop. The driver apologized and said he forgot. He told us to go back in the
direction we came, taking a left, a right, but not giving us any street names for reference.

We were lost in a city, in a country that was foreign to us. We didn’t speak the language,
and we didn’t have a map. With only forty minutes to get to the train station, and absolutely no idea
where we were or where we needed to be, we ran back in the direction we came from, hoping to
see any sign that might direct us. There was one, so we followed, but soon we saw no more signs.
We looked for any sort of shop where we could ask directions, but this was a strictly residential
neighborhood. Multi-story apartment buildings, fences, and closely parked cars lined the streets,
but no people. So we kept running, looking, hoping that we would turn a corner and see the station.

Time was running out, and, planning to be riding on a comfortable train for most of the
day, I had worn a warm sweater, a scarf, and sandals. With all of this running with my backpack
and duffel bag slung over my shoulder, I was sweating and my feet hurt. Combine that with my
worrying about catching our train and forever being lost in this foreign city, it was difficult to be
optimistic.

That’s when we saw an Italian couple walking down the street in our direction – the man
in a dark suit, the woman in a dress with a blue and red floral pattern; they were probably close
to sixty years old. I knew this might be our only chance to ask for directions. So when they got
close, I stopped them. I pleaded, again with my nonexistent Italian skills, for directions to Stazione
Rifredi. The gentleman just grunted, showing his mouth of missing teeth, and waved his hand as
if to follow them. I looked at my friend, questioning whether this was a good decision, but I also
knew that on the off chance this man was leading us in the right direction, it would probably be
our best option for finding the station. We followed a few paces behind them, wondering if we had
correctly interpreted his gesture, since neither of them once turned to look at us.

Then they stopped walking. The woman began talking in Italian and pointed left towards
the cross street at the next intersection. They turned right, and we thanked them. And when we
turned left, there it was, Stazione di Firenze Rifredi.

We hurried down the street, into the station and onto the platform just minutes before
the train arrived. We made it, thanks to some quick thinking and troubleshooting in broken Italian.
But as we sat on that train bound for Rome, I couldn’t help but wonder what we would have done
if we had never made it to the station on time. If I had never stepped out and tried to communicate
with all of these helpful people who spoke little to no English, and if they, in return, had not taken
the time to help us. After all of our wandering we would have had no idea how to make it back to
the center of the city, the part that was actually on our map. We were completely on our own, two
young women in a foreign country where we didn’t speak the language.

Luckily, this was our only mishap during our two-week tour of Europe, but it sure taught
me that traveling as part of a group from an institution like we had done all semester is a very
different experience from traveling on one’s own. It takes confidence, willingness to deal with
challenges and changes to plans, and an ability to think for and rely on oneself. In this case, I had
to find a way around the language barrier. I had no choice. Had I not, we may never have made it
out of Florence – although I really wouldn’t have minded staying a few more days immersed in the
Renaissance art and architecture of the capital and cultural center of Tuscany.
The Violation of a Social Norm

Breaking the norms is not the same as breaking the law, and there is no specific set of rules and regulations that need to be followed. However, violating the norms makes us feel uncomfortable even though we know it is not the same as committing a crime. Why is this so? Norms are shared expectations that are practiced by social communities; everyone is assumed to be aware of the acceptable behaviors within their society. Usually, social behaviors, like any other rules, need to be adopted, developed, and practiced at an early age. The potential persuaders of these norms are family units and educational systems. Parents and teachers start socializing children according to the norms of their society, so children just pick up these norms and put them into practice until it becomes normal to them. In other words, it is easy to do the things we are taught, and the moment we try something different, it does not feel normal, so the easiest way is to avoid doing these things that are out of our comfort zones. Therefore, everyone should keenly take time and try to be conscious of their negative reactions towards norms because it can emotionally damage individuals.

I find breaking the norms interesting and educational because it helps us experiment with what it means to be doing something different from the usual things we go through in everyday life. Therefore, I wanted to know the reaction of people if they see someone wearing traditional Somali clothing to class. I wore a traditional wrap to class, which is called a guntino. The garment is basically a cloth tied over the shoulder and draped around the waist, with beautiful eye-catching combinations of orange and yellow stripes. Wearing it during winter is not the best thing to do as it is light and long. Traditionally, the Somali women wear it only to special occasions such as weddings, Independence Day, and other events that are appropriate for the dress code. Besides that, I have never seen any students going to class dressed in their cultural attire, so I decided to be the first to do it. When I entered my accounting class wearing a guntino, my lecturer loudly said, in a surprised voice, “Oh, you look nice.” Three of my friends from Nigeria, Ghana, and Cameroon in West Africa started giggling the moment they saw me. The one from Ghana asked me if I had gone mad! She could not imagine why anyone would do that. I asked her, “What is wrong with it? After all, it is considered a piece of clothing, so why is it crazy to wear it to class?” She mumbled, “I just think it is not appropriate for you to wear it to school.” On top of that, I
could feel the tension the moment I walked in; the whole class looked at me until I sat down, and even though most of the students did not say anything verbally, they showed expressions such as frowning, eyes wide open, and some stared and whispered to their friends. This awkward moment made me feel self-conscious despite the fact that I was doing it to see the reaction of others.

I also went to Anderson Commons to eat, and many people asked me if I was going to present or going to an event. Some American students told me they liked what I was wearing but did not know or even care to know what it was for. But, two of my other African friends were delighted and proud to see me wear my traditional clothes, and they suggested that we should have a day when everyone wears their traditional attire. The funniest part was when my other friend from Africa asked, laughing so loud, if I was looking for a husband and offered to help me look for one. While crossing the road to my apartment, a lady screamed out of her car, “I like your dress.” Others also asked me if I was feeling cold, even though I was wearing a jacket with it to keep me warm. This shows that people wear different clothing styles for different seasons.

Norms are continuous practices that develop from time to time and breaking them becomes very difficult. Even though it was a deliberate act breaching the norm, I didn’t feel completely comfortable wearing traditional clothes to class or even walking around with them on campus. This may be because no one wears traditional clothes to class, at least not at Concordia College, and traditional clothes are usually worn for specific occasions according to the norms. The attention I was getting from people alone made me feel so nervous and uneasy. Some of the negative and provoking reactions also made me feel angry. However, the few positive comments neutralized the bad and negative silent and verbal reactions, which helped me to cool down. I know if I did this experiment in Somalia or Kenya, there would be more verbal reactions than the silent responses I got from the Concordia community. It was surprising that only one person from my political philosophy class commented. I guess to some people it is easier to ignore than to question.

After my interesting research, I realized that if norms are not fully internalized by the majority of the society, people find it hard to relate to them. We all live by examples and things we learn or see from our elders’ interactions or the social agents that influence us. Since wearing cultural attire to class is not something that people usually do, it becomes foreign to many, so it is viewed as weird and uncomfortable behavior. At times, having a different view or being deviant can put individuals under a lot of stress, leading the person into anomie (Robert Merton’s theory). According to Dalton Conley, a sociologist, anomie is aimlessness or despair that arises when we can no longer reasonably expect life to be predictable (Conley, 23). Other sociologists, including Durkheim, argue anomie results from the limited creations of social arrangements within societies (Conley, 23). Just imagine if I went to school every day and all I got were negative reactions from people, whether through silent, behavioral, or verbal reactions from students and lecturers. That would have damaged me emotionally and could even have forced me into anomie. So I now have a clue of why many people end up taking their lives when they feel rejected by their community. People should be educated about these social matters that occur because most of the time we do not take these small issues into account, and when horrible things crop up, we often do not know how to find a solution.

In conclusion, social norms are considered wrong, but it is not the same as committing serious crimes such as murder, stealing, bribing, and rape that require punishment. When one breaks the norms, the society or sociological agents remind them through silent and verbal reactions. People usually get laughed at, gossiped about, and showed negative signs. For example, when we speak loudly in the library, the librarian or other people studying near us will tell us to shush, which means to be quiet. This explains that in everything we do, there are some sorts of rules involved
that are expected to be followed, and if these rules are broken, there are consequences to be faced. However, negative response from the society is the punishment for breaching the norms. This type of punishment can impact and lead someone into anomie simply because they feel rejected, useless, and ignored by their own societies. My suggestion is that people should be aware of what norms are, and why we value norms so much, even when they do not make any sense. Something so simple such as wearing traditional clothes should not be unconsciously strange because it is different and unusual.

Works Cited

Creative Compassion, Heroic Children, and Irish Travelers in Sheridan’s Into the West

Just as Europe has the Romani people, a nomadic culture that has suffered much oppression at the hands of those who deem them less civilized in comparison to those who long for a piece of land and the security of the settled life, Ireland has its Travelers. The Travelers, disparagingly called Tinkers or Gypsies, share much in common with their continental counterparts: a nomadic life, a close connection to Catholicism, a clannish closeness and life full of ritual and tradition, as well as a continual battle to maintain their way of life against oppression both personal and governmental. In Colum McCann’s Zoli, the Romani way of life is revealed both starkly and compassionately, but most of all heroically in the single person of the titular character, as we watch her grow from childhood to mature adulthood. Similarly, though much earlier (1992), the Irish writer Jim Sheridan and director Mike Newell created a compassionate portrait of Irish Travelers in the heroic film story of two children who journey across Ireland in an adventure that will ultimately save their family from long-dwelling grief and bring them back to an identity and way of life that provides healing and home as the settled tenements never could.

A number of psychologists, from Freud and Jung to more contemporary practitioners, have stipulated the path children take to individuation and responsible adulthood. However, in Into
the West, the children have been portrayed as making this heroic journey in compressed time and in what ultimately becomes a reversal of the child-adult roles since their father has abandoned his responsibilities, giving in to a sense of displacement in the face of intimate grief. Papa Murphy (Gabriel Byrne) has fled from the place that was home and retains the memory of the lost beloved, his wife Mary. However, such displacement has led to a downward spiral both psychically and economically. His two young boys, Tito and Ossie, take it upon themselves to return their father to his place in the world, while at the same time achieving individuation and responsible adulthood long before most adults, including psychologists, might ever imagine.

In the very few mentions of Into the West in book length studies of Irish film, it has generally been dismissed as regressive and nostalgic. In Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema, Martin McLoone claims that the film “vindicating(s) the authentic experience of the west at the expense of the alienating character of the city” (20). In his study of “Film and Politics” in Modernization, Crisis and Culture in Ireland, 1969-1992, Conor McCarthy confirms McLoone’s position with regard to Into the West, going as far as to lament that “the project of critical modernism is thrown out in blind critique of the results of uneven modernization, a kind of replay of Yeatsian geopolitics, with its nostalgia for ‘Romantic Ireland’ in the face of the ‘greasy till’” (172). While McLoone briefly notes that the film attempts to integrate “aspects of Irish mythological tradition,” he insists, without any expansion of his claim with regard to the mythology, that the attempt “in no way vitiated” what he sees as “essentially regressive ideologies” with regard to rural versus urban. Indeed, in discussions of the mythical or fantastic elements, the purpose of the mythical framework has been virtually ignored while scholars continually focus on the false dichotomy of rural vs. urban or modern vs. traditional. What they fail to recognize is that the critique is not of the urban, but of the settled life for an essentially nomadic culture. One cannot argue that the government block housing on the margins of Dublin provides a lovely urban setting, though much of Dublin is not only lovely but full of the wondrous energy of an international city. What needs attention here is not rural vs. urban or east vs. west, but the contrast between a static, stale way of life for a nomadic culture and the journey that matches the mythical to the cultural character. Doing so allows the film to reach universally while speaking locally.

When we look to a universal mythical level, certainly Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell have established the framework others follow. In The World of Myth, which provides a comparative study of world myths, David Adams Leeming summarizes the Jungian notion of myth’s purpose as the “search for identity in the context of the universal struggle between order and chaos” (8). Joseph Campbell, in The Power of Myth, explains the journey of the hero as integrally linked to moving from childhood to adulthood, gaining along the way “the courage of self-responsibility and assurance” (152). However, to make such gains “requires a death and a resurrection” (152). Into the West sets up a specific narrative that calls for a mythical reading: floundering father subsumed in grief, a pair of children
fighting to bring back hope and create a new life, a journey that suggests universal and specific connections. *Into the West* focuses on the Reilly family, Travelers who have relocated to urban housing near Dublin airport following the death seven years earlier of Papa’s wife in childbirth that resulted in young Ossie. The difficulty of dealing with death and learning how to live sends Ossie (Ciarán Fitzgerald) and his older brother, Tito (Rúaidhrí Conroy), on a heroic journey. Philosopher Thomas Attig, an internationally recognized expert on death, dying and bereavement, emphasizes the difficulty involved: “Ordinarily, grieving involves nothing less complicated than relearning the world, including our physical and social surroundings, our place in the greater scheme of things, our selves, and our relationship with the one who has died” (7). When we consider how the children experience death and seek resurrection, the heroic purpose of the film becomes clear: the construction of identity as the children embrace the journey to self-responsibility and assurance, and the boon of helping heal their grieving parental figures.

Ordinarily, when children experience the death of someone close to them, surviving parental figures are expected to help the children understand and cope. However, Papa Murphy is incapable of helping the children since he cannot cope with the death himself, but instead represses his painful memories and stumbles through life in a haze. Attig’s description of bereavement reflects exactly Papa’s experience:

> When we are bereaved, we suffer a shattering loss of wholeness. The patterns of connections to things, places, other people, experiences, activities, and projects in our daily lives are in tatters. Our individual, family, and community life histories are disrupted and cannot follow the courses we expected them to follow had our loved one lived. Line of connection to larger wholes and our sense of place in the larger scheme of things within which we find and make meaning are broken, undermined, or threatened. We feel undone, at a loss as to how to go on, anxious, insecure, unsafe, vulnerable. (10)

Papa can no longer live as a Traveler and lead his former community in the way of life that he had shared with his dead wife. He retreats to the urban decay of government housing where he can bring up his two boys with at least some government support, the very kind of support denied to his wife when they were turned away from the hospital. Yet he is lost in this environment, a broken man who cannot find his way, much less make a way for his children. While Papa Reilly is prompting the children to scam the government man who has come to check on the large Murphy family, a family in dire need of assistance, the seriousness of what he says underlies the comedic scene: “I’m not your father. You understand me. The other man is your father” (Newell). Indeed, he isn’t behaving as the father or man he once was. While Ossie does not understand the comment on either level, having never known his father prior to his mother’s death at his own birth, his elder brother Tito knows only too well that the man he lives with now is not the father he once knew. Grandpa Ward (David Kelly) tells Papa, “You’re a fallen man.” He insists that he come back to the West, to the Old Ways, to which Papa responds “The old ways is dead.” The singular might be understood as a natural reflex of his class and lack of education, or it might also be directly connected to Papa’s understanding that the old way of life died when Mary died, that she and the Traveler way are one. He heads for the bar, turning his back on Grandpa and any hint of that old life that the old man carries.

From the beginning, the theme of journey is visually created through a central symbol that metaphorically will gain power across the arc of the narrative. *Into the West* opens on a clear, dark night on the pristine sands of Dog Bay in Connemara, a lone, wild, white horse galloping across the surf. The midnight blue of the sky and sea and the gleaming white horse is stunning, with an extreme close-up on the horse’s eye giving us a sense of wild mystery, of being held in
the gaze of this creature. The shot splits to morning and to the grandfather on the beach with his caravan and wolfhound. He and the horse behold one another in silence. Then the grandfather begins the journey from west to east, to see his grandsons, the horse of its own free will keeping always in sight of the caravan. It is this white horse that will mysteriously bond with young Ossie and carry both boys from east to west to encounter the meaning of death and resurrection, and in the process to achieve a sense of self. According to J. E. Cirlot, famed symbologist, the function of white is derived from that of the sun: from mystic illumination. It comes to signify intuition in general, and, in its affirmative and spiritual aspect, intuition of the Beyond. That is why the sacred horses of Greek, Roman, Celtic, and Germanic cultures were white (58). Cirlot notes that the symbolism of the horse is extremely complex, and beyond a certain point not very clearly defined. It has been associated with burial-rites in Ancient Greek chthonian cults, as well as an ancient symbol of the cyclic movement of the world of phenomena. In Germany and England, to dream of a white horse was thought to be an omen of death. However, in the form of a pair of horses, one white and one black, they respectively represent life and death. Cirlot adds, “On account of his fleetness, the horse can also signify the wind and sea-foam, as well as fire and light” (152). The white horse in this instance clearly represents the dead mother whose spirit will only rest if she acts as a guide to her sons in the journey they must take to achieve wholeness and resurrection.

Significantly, the horse emerges from the sea, returns to the sea, and is last seen behind the flames that burn away the family grief as their mother’s caravan wagon is ritually burned. It is fitting that the horse carries the maternal spirit since, as Sean Kane notes in *Wisdom of the Mythtellers*, “For the matriarchal Celts, the world of the gods—the Otherworld—is decidedly feminine, its color white, its location beneath the physical world or across the sea to the west” (173). Yet the horse that serves as the bridge between death and life is not without its danger to those who encounter it. Equine-behaviorist Chris Irwin, in his essay “Horses Help with Human Psychotherapy,” explains the Jungian horse symbol as ““the flesh-and-blood incarnation of powerful forces bottled up within us…. These are the forces that Jung called the shadow self. We know those forces could take us to our dreams and turn us into our best selves. We also know those forces could destroy us…. Horses force us to face our shadow selves. Once we do that, we discover much greater freedom, exhilaration and inspiration as we go forward in life.” Both Ossie and Papa Reilly will have to face their shadows if they are to live and be whole. When the boys reach the west and are trapped between the ocean and a police force bearing down on them, Ossie is taken beneath the waves by the horse set on escape. Visually the horse’s mane becomes his mother’s hair, her hand reaching down to pull Ossie to the surface and into his father’s arms; Ossie is resurrected. His seeming death makes his father face the fact that he cannot control death, and Ossie’s return to the living heals them both. The boy knows who he is, and the Papa is once again a living, functioning man and father.
Though there is much more that could be said about both mythical moments and magical touches, as well as practical means the children use to achieve responsibility, let us consider what the use of this universal myth to the particular Irish story might mean. When the children bring Papa home, they reconnect him with the Traveler community from which his repressed grief had severed him. Papa learns from his boys how to start anew. The children help Papa express his grief and let go of his inability to control life. They also teach him again the lessons of hope for the future, faith in the on-going nature of life, and joy in the moments of living and loving in the present. In short, these children bring Papa home again, mooring his soul so that he can return to who he is and resume the life of the Traveler. Let me suggest three conclusions that we might reach as we look at the film. At the Jungian universal level, the narrative may be seen as a heroic journey, in which the boys achieve individuation and move toward adulthood. At the level of practical reality, this film is a story about grief set in the context of today’s world in which all too often children are forced to grow up fast yet adults often behave like children. At the particular contextual level of Irish Travelers, the narrative does not allow the older generation to remain static in a nostalgic grief over a past dead and gone. Instead, the children help Papa and Grandpa Ward both let go and honor that past, keeping it alive in healthy ways for the present and the future. The Irish Travelers, like the arc of this film, are on a never-ending journey that will hold both sorrow and joy—for it is the human condition. Once we all accept that much, we can feel at home on this earth and in our own skin, no matter where we journey.

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She steps from her robe. Easels surround her in a half moon – a dozen of us watch, graphite poised above clean pages. She folds her torso to her legs, wraps her arms around her calves. Then she straightens, reaching for the studio ceiling, breasts flattening as she stretches, ribcage defined. I make a line down my paper, cross it with another – a faint grid like scaffolding to position her, shape her. She’s young, early twenties. The outline of a watch circles her wrist – white skin bright against tan. Dark hair is twisted up and pinned, short pieces curling at the base of her neck, echoed by the patches under her arms and between her legs. Knees bend and unbend, feeling for a pose. Palms press flat to the back of a chair, one leg bends in a step forward, the other extends straight behind – calves primed like a runner’s, eyes focused ahead. I sketch her rounded thighs and slight belly, ghosting contours to shade later. Her face is not quite still – eyes rest on easels, watching us study her, lips pinch together for moisture. Yet the corners of her mouth remain firm, aloof. Only the soft etch of pencils flecks the silence. Silence that dims time as we dim the dents under her eyes, the dip below the curl of her lips, the shadowed shelf beneath her chin. But time shows when she starts to tremble, and she breaks the pose, lifts shoulders up and down, shaking out cramping legs. Folding arms over her breasts, she steps between the easels, heels not touching the floor. Her eyebrows are raised, curious to see how we see her. She stops at some to examine, to murmur bravo – for others, she narrows her eyes, hardly pausing. She weaves towards mine – steps to my side, leans to look. Oh! she says, her face opening into a smile. She inflates her cheeks, hands forming large curved cups around her breasts in the air. Grande, she says, laughs as she exhales. I like it.
Some Things cannot be Taught, Only Experienced

“You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself in any direction you choose. You’re on your own. And you know what you know. You are the guy who’ll decide where to go.” – Dr. Seuss

Once I graduated high school, I think this quote became the foundation of who I wanted to be as I pursued the next journey in my life. At this point, I knew that traveling the world was not only something I dreamed of doing, but also something I believed in. I felt that exposing myself to new experiences and immersing myself into other cultures would make me a more responsible individual and someone who recognized the endless possibilities the world can offer a person. I would gain new perspectives that would shape and change my values and I would learn to appreciate others for their differences, strengthening my respect for the world’s diversity.

In the spring of my freshman year of college, I began to inquire about studying abroad options through Concordia’s Office of Global Education. The program offered in Australia was immediately of interest to me and I took the initial steps to determine if taking a semester in Australia would be a possibility. However, the path I had chosen to take, in terms of my education at Concordia, prevented me from taking any action beyond those initial steps. With a major in biology and double minors in chemistry and neuroscience, the available classes offered at the university would not satisfy the classes I needed to take as a sophomore the following year. The school I was looking into was better suited for business students rather than students pursuing careers in science, and as I was required to take a full year of organic chemistry the next year, I regretfully realized I would not be able to go to Australia. After making this decision, I became afraid that the educational path I had chosen to follow was going to prevent me from taking advantage of Concordia’s study abroad programs. However, that following autumn, I nervously decided to try again. This time, I chose to look into a different program, one that would better fit my particular educational situation. After considerable investigation, the National University of Ireland-Galway (NUIG) caught my eye. The university had its own medical school, which meant it had an extensive array of science classes that I would hopefully be able to take. Furthermore, classes were taught in English—a very important factor for me, as I wasn’t sure I was capable of taking physics in Spanish.

Despite this initial, positive outlook, my final decision was not an easy one to make. In fact, I spent almost the entire school year debating if I should, and could, go to Ireland or not. The decision making experience was a rollercoaster of emotions. It felt like I faced disappointment and excitement every other week. The logistics for me were not easy and this meant that I had what seemed like endless factors to look into before making my final decision. With my chosen majors and minors and plans for medical school after Concordia, there were multiple technical pieces I
had to figure out. A big problem was making sure I could get into the physics class offered at NUIG even though it was not offered to visiting students, and that the lab associated with that class would transfer back for credit at Concordia. If not, I would need to take a separate lab course at one of the nearby schools when I returned. It was also necessary that I had other options for taking biochemistry if I chose not to take it the fall semester of my junior year. Although NUIG offered biochemistry to visiting students, taking both physics and biochemistry would require that I pay around three thousand dollars more in tuition. This was an expense I did not think I could afford on top of the initial expenses I was responsible for in studying abroad. I was climbing an endless ladder. Every time I felt I was nearing the top, I would slip back down and have to rework my strategy. I made many disheartening calls to my parents during those months informing them that Ireland wasn’t going to work for me, only to call them a few days later with a new sense of hope.

During this difficult time, I was presented with another opportunity for global exploration. A friend of mine informed me of a group of Concordia students and local community members who were traveling to Ecuador over Concordia’s spring break to work in an orphanage called La Casa de Fe (The House of Faith). This orphanage resides in Shell, Ecuador: a small, jungle town established in the 1950s after a team of Christian missionaries were murdered by members of an indigenous tribe from the Ecuadorian rainforest. An American woman, Patti Sue, started the orphanage years ago. After falling in love with Ecuador, she chose to make it her home and has continued to dedicate her life to saving the “unwanted children” of the rainforest. Just last year, Patti Sue moved her orphanage, comprised of approximately fifty children and ten staff members, from a tiny, four bedroom home to a newly constructed building on the outskirts of town. The difference between these two buildings was incredible! Walking to this new building, you could see its immensity and liveliness from afar, with its bright green siding and vivid orange windows. Although this new building was temporarily housing all the children as well as being used as a kitchen, a place for physical therapy, and a church, the size of the building in comparison had tripled. However, the most amazing part was that Patti Sue’s vision went beyond this one building. Eventually, the building would strictly be used as a multi-purpose building. Patti Sue was, and still is, in the process of creating her own little village for the children, complete with a school and “little homes” that would house five to seven children each. Our team’s job was to build the foundation for the school that Patti Sue would be using to educate the children.

Signing up for the mission’s trip, I was under the impression that I would be making an impact on the lives of the people I encountered while in Ecuador. Although I know I made a difference to those I helped and am so proud of the work
my team members and I accomplished, I feel it was I who was impacted so immensely by the amazing adults and the children I was surrounded by. The way of life that the Ecuadorian people are accustomed to is so different from my own familiar culture, and I learned so much about life in these differences. The Ecuadorians live a far more carefree lifestyle than we do back in the States. They survive each day because of their faith in tomorrow, their love for their family, and their trust in each other. They depend on their own courage to fight for their survival and because of this, gratefulness is permanent in their lives. They do not have much, and yet, they seem to have it all, a reminder that happiness does not come from tangible items, but from the attitude with which we choose to face our realities.

Looking back, this trip was a blessing in even more ways than I could realize at the time. The experience alone was an unforgettable one, but I think my trip to Ecuador gave me the encouragement and the determination to pursue Ireland even more. When I returned from Ecuador, I had a very short amount of time before I needed to make my final decision about whether or not I would be studying abroad the following fall. Ecuador made me hunger for more traveling of the world and crave for another learning experience such as the one I’d had in Shell. This hunger persuaded me to chase down my dream of studying abroad despite the difficulties I could encounter in the future as a result. Even though I was straying from the traditional educational path that I had been following with my peers, I finally made my decision and confirmed my attendance at the National University of Ireland-Galway for the following fall semester.

Those endless ups and downs brought me here. I have now been living in Galway, Ireland for two and a half months and will remain here for another month and a half. Although cliché, being here has been an experience of a lifetime. Living in another country is a very different experience from a short visit or even an extended vacation. Rather than simply viewing the Irish culture as I would on holiday, I have become a part of it. I carry myself more as a citizen of the country than a tourist because I feel I have the responsibility to do so.

Completely immersing myself into the Irish culture has given me the chance to develop and strengthen the person I hope to become. Frequent reflections on my experiences have given me a better ability to dissect their culture as well as the American culture, and I can appreciate the positives and the negatives that each country offers. I have learned that success does not exist without disappointments and that struggles, whether personal or nation-wide, are created and defeated each day around the world. I’ve learned that we are all human. We are simultaneously similar and completely different at the same time. We all fight for what we believe in and defend the places and people we love. We all strive for happiness and we all face frequent frustrations that make us fight even harder for the things we desire. However, within each person, whether Irish, American, or Ecuadorian, is a personal story that distinguishes us from one another. I think that life is about loving people, knowing that they have their own personal story and respecting how their story has shaped who they are. It is about recognizing and acknowledging differences among people and supporting each other when those differences hurt us. Letting go of assumptions and prejudices allows us to move forward, to face problems together, and to exponentially increase what we are capable of accomplishing.
Taking a semester to study in another country has been such a blessing to me. Pursuing an education in a setting so unfamiliar to the setting I was familiar with was initially very frightening. However, I quickly became adjusted and realized that what I would be learning in Ireland would far exceed what I could get out of any lecture here or back at home. The majority of my education this semester has come from my experiences outside of the classroom setting. It is this educational experience that I am so grateful for and will forever remember. As I started this reflection with a quote, I will similarly conclude with a quote from Jane Eyre, a character I deeply admire for her love of education and personal growth.

As Charlotte Brontë wrote in Jane Eyre, “Prejudices, it is well known, are most difficult to eradicate from the heart whose soil has never been loosened or fertilised by education: they grow there, firm as weeds among stones.” What I have learned from these recent experiences has loosened the soils of my heart and helped to rid it of prejudices, and I hope that my experiences in college thus far are just the beginning of a lifetime of opportunities.

What is going on in the political scenery of Africa? In April 2011, French Special Forces equipped with tanks backed forces loyal to Ouattara to capture Ivory Coast President, Laurent Gbagbo, who had been struggling for more than four months to stay in power after losing the presidential elections in his country. He was thus ousted in favor of his opponent. In March 2011, a coalition of countries led by major superpowers such as the United States, France, and England launched a military intervention in Libya so as to protect civilian-populated areas and civilians who were being massacred by late Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi. This came as the result of a civil war known as the Libyan revolution, emulating insurrection that had already toppled long term presidents in Tunisia and Egypt. These are the most obvious and recent cases of direct action of Western countries in Africa, in addition to many other secret or indirect intrusions in the affairs of the continent.

In both above-mentioned instances, the raison d’être of the intervention is United Nations resolutions, namely resolution 1975 on Ivory Coast, and resolution 1973 on Libya that gave a green light to external forces to authoritatively take “all necessary” measures to protect civilians from violence. Though the military intervention has been implemented time and again on humanitarian grounds, the omnipresence of a country like France, whose colonial history in Africa is well-known, is symptomatic. One may therefore ask this simple question: What is behind the maneuver of powerful countries flagging the UN approval and humanitarian motive as the rationale of their military action in Africa? Neocolonialism emerges from possible answers. Beyond this, I shall argue that Western mischievous intervention repeats the historical disrespect of people of young
countries in Africa and ends up in the obliteration of people’s nation-building efforts, as well as the invalidation of their independence. The process which relies upon cunning and credulity is so far successful. Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and Albert Memmi provide the backbone of my theoretical lens, whereas the US and France’s intervention policies will serve as my supporting evidence.

I. HISTORY AS AN ENDLESS REPETITION

Like other superpowers, much of France’s appetite for violence and brutality directed towards other territories and people is originated in its colonial history. Prior to the year 1960, by and large considered as the milestone of political independence in Africa, many territories on the continent were under colonial rule from European nations. From the seventeenth century to 1960, France had conquered large territories and reinforced its position in North, West, Central, and East Africa. France held the lion’s share of all the European countries’ possessions in Africa. Assimilation lay at the base of France’s colonial policy, with the aim of making the territories a part of France. Though the tiny islands of Mayotte and La Reunion around Madagascar in the Indian Ocean are French territories today, the venture didn’t fully pay off in Africa because of the strong and sustained resistance from the African people. Nevertheless, the practice of violence and brutality allowed France to control a large empire, causing serious wounds and scars to occupied territories and people. The Martinican poet and thinker Aimé Césaire equates “colonization” to “thingification” and provides the following inventory that accounts for the aftermath of the colonial process as a destructive force:

I see clearly what colonization has destroyed..., I see clearly, the civilizations, condemned to perish at a future date, into which it has introduced the principle of ruin; … I look around and wherever there are colonizers and colonized face to face, I see force, brutality, cruelty, sadism, conflict, and, in a parody of education, the hasty manufacture of a few thousand subordinate functionaries, “boys,” artisans, office clerks, and interprets [sic] necessary for the smooth operation of business.1

In many respects, Césaire’s assessment is really topical with regard to the current situation in Iraq as the result of the US military, or in Ivory Coast, and most recently in Libya after the military action led by France and England. In Iraq, for instance, the US created and trained a 200,000 member Iraqi colonial puppet army, says James Petras who upholds that the US war against Iraq was the destruction of a civilization. He goes on by emphasizing that with their puppets in power, the US policies and long-term colonial presence in Iraq would consist in using Iraq as a launching platform for its strategic pursuit of other targets like Syria, Iran, Central Asian Republics…. He concludes that with the assassination of hundreds of Iraqi intellectual, scientists, and scholars, the bombing of universities
and other research institutes, “The US imperial conquest of Iraq is built on the destruction of a modern secular republic.”

As for Ivory Coast, Alassane Ouattara, who is considered as the West’s puppet, took control of the country with the assistance of the French military forces. It should be recalled that before winning their independence in 1960, Ivory Coast was a French colony and was governed as such for 73 years.

Concerning Libya in the colonial context, the territory was formerly an Italian colony. British and French troops occupied Libya in 1942. It became independent in 1951. In 2011, England and France stood for Libyan war. France took the lead of the NATO coalition and sided with Libyan rebels to take up the fight against Muammar Gaddafi’s troops. The operation was successful. Gaddafi was killed. Today, the National Transitional Council’s officials in charge in Libya are regarded by many as the West’s puppets.

At this point, one may ask whether or not Africa is not on the brink of another disaster similar to the Scramble for Africa and the crumbling of the continent in 1884. Events in Ivory Coast and Libya, not to mention Tunisia or Egypt where the West military intervention was not direct, may be viewed as a part of what is considered as the Arab spring, but the parallel with historical events is uncanny: the 1884-1885 Berlin Conference divided the African continent into spheres of influence between the major European powers. Ivory Coast was taken by France, and Libya by Italy. Today, the U.S. and all the major former European colonial NATO member states, among which are France, Britain, Belgium, Germany, Italy and the rest, are again “planning to establish dominance over what has become the world’s second most populous continent.”

Oddly enough, let us note how striking the evidence is that the replication of history is happening before our eyes. So was colonization, with the same European powers craving for the same continent. But today, Europe and the US are cunningly duping and numbing their peoples and the international opinion with a treacherous rhetoric. This is the way the president of France, Nicolas Sarkozy, tried to rationalize the military action in Libya: “We do this to protect civilians from the murderous mandate of a regime that, by murdering its own people, has lost all legitimacy. In addition to its Arab, European and North American partners, France is committed to playing its role, its role before history.” The president was comfortable with his speech, since France’s intervention was backed up by the United Nations’ mandate. The Secretary General of the World Organization, Ban Ki-moon, could declare after overthrowing Laurent Gbagbo in Ivory Coast: “This is an end of a chapter that should never have been. We have to help them to restore stability, rule of law, and address all humanitarian and security issues.”

It’s a pity how credulous a large part of the opinion is in the US, in France and other major powers. Many succumb easily to the perfidious justification. The truth, as Peter Dryer notes, is that:
Three major powers invoked the United Nations Charter in order to violate it. The United States, the United Kingdom and France engineered a ‘humanitarian’ intervention that was in reality an unprovoked act of war against a sovereign state… Although the imperialists claimed that their motivations in Libya are designed to protect civilians, many of the victims of their airstrikes and financial backing for the National Transitional Council (NTC) resulted in the removal, injury, persecution and death of innocent civilians.  

Isn’t it dishonest and treacherous in trying to justify violent and brutal invasion by invoking humanitarian reasons? Above and beyond the number of the civilian victims, countries like Ivory Coast and Libya will face and suffer from long-term adverse consequences of planned violence and brutality, the same way colonized countries had suffered in the past.

II. OBLITERATION OF NATION-BUILDING EFFORTS AND ANNIHILATION OF FREEDOM

As I stated above, by 1960, many French colonies in West and Central Africa had achieved independence, but only to find out that the gap between freedom and nation-building requirements was immense, and with good reason. In hopes of keeping a strong control on its former colonies, France left after destabilizing and fragmenting territories, cultures and people. Aimé Césaire harshly criticizes the disastrous effects of colonization in the following lines:

I am talking about societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary possibilities wiped out… , millions of men torn from their gods, their land, their habits, from life, from the dance, from wisdom. I am talking about millions of men in whom fear has been cunningly instilled, who have been taught to have an inferiority complex, to tremble, kneel, despair, and behave like flunkeys… I am talking about natural economies that have been disrupted, harmonious and viable economies adapted to the indigenous population – about food crops destroyed, malnutrition permanently introduced, agriculture development oriented solely toward the benefit of the metropolitan countries, about the looting of products, the looting of raw materials.

Césaire’s blunt depiction is merely the severe panorama that engulfs many postcolonial societies today.
After 1960, the newly independent states were faced with difficult challenges, but had nothing to draw upon in their desire to build and develop stable nations. The era of colonization had led them to economic subjugation and cultural destruction. Without any solid cultural heritage or genuine education system, the nations would turn to their former masters for help. In so doing, many leaders have been trapped, as Cesaire asserts in *Discourse on Colonialism*: “Europe has gotten on very well indeed with all local feudal lords who agreed to serve, woven a villainous complicity with them, rendered their tyranny more effective and more efficient; it has actually tended to prolong artificially the survival of local pasts in their most pernicious aspects.”

Thus, it’s no secret that France’s interest in its former African colonies continues to this day. But it’s amazing to notice that after the era of colonial looting and ransacking that precipitated the decline of traditional cultures, the very leaders who were supposed to help their countries emerge from the economic stagnation are operating as French representatives; as such, they maintain the rape of their own nations. Why? As power mongers, leaders are in the good graces of France, whose army would not hesitate to intervene fiercely in the event of people’s anger against their leaders. France usually supports any rigged elections as long as the process is in favor of their puppets. The examples of Togo, Gabon, Congo, or Ivory Coast and Cameroon are of a recent date and therefore, fresh in our memories.

One good example of African leaders’ involvement in the pillage of their own countries is their support to the ongoing debate about a possible devaluation of the CFA franc. This is the common currency used in some fourteen countries of West and Central Africa, most of them being the former French colonies. The currency (which is currently pegged to euro at the rate of 1 euro for 655 CFA francs) was established in 1945 in the era of colonization. In 1994, the currency was devalued by 50% with disastrous consequences on populations. Another devaluation is on the brink to take place in January 2012. Dr Gary K. Busch writes:

> French wars in Ivory Coast and, especially Libya, have cut a major hole in the French pocket. Their tame African partners, the presidents of francophone African states, are complicit in this plan for devaluation and continue to follow the lead of their protectors, the French Army, in whatever they suggest. This relationship is long-standing and a paradigm of neo-colonial enterprise.

The emasculation of the economy in former French colonies goes hand in hand with an unprecedented brainwashing that has left sociological and psychological scars detrimental to people’s efforts to achieve any form of development story and success on their own. People’s inertia results from trauma that the colonizers took time to fabricate and cunningly instill in millions of minds. As Césaire points out, and as Frantz Fanon details in this way:

> If the colonized asks the question whether he is a man, it’s because his reality as a man has been challenged. In other words, I start suffering from not being a white man insofar as the white man discriminates against me; turns me into a colonized subject; robs me of any value or originality; tells me I am a parasite in the world, that I should toe the line of the white world as quickly as possible, and that we are brute beasts, that we are a walking manure… that I have no place in the world. So I will try quite simply to make myself white; in other words, I will force the white to acknowledge my humanity.
Albert Memmi on his part echoes Fanon and Césaire on how colonization works to depersonalize the colonized. He calls the stubborn effort to dehumanize the colonized the “mark of the plural”. He writes: “The colonized is never characterized in an individual manner; he is entitled only to drown in an anonymous collectivity (“They are this.” “They are all the same.”).”

In the long run, and by dint of repetition, the process becomes extraordinarily efficient: the colonized internalizes many of the labels invented by the colonizer. “Constant repetition carries conviction.” People’s indolence in postcolonial societies in Africa results partly from decades of propaganda and disinformation. No wonder leaders and many people, including some intellectuals, are skeptical about their own ability to stand up for their rights and answers to development challenges without imitating Western models or getting their approval. An article in South Asian Voice Review is by far unambiguous about this malaise:

Robbed of any measure of self-confidence, the colonized (and even post-colonial) intelligentsia looked upon its heritage with skepticism or disdain, or conversely, sought refuge in fundamentalism, obscurantism, or idealistic myth-making. When a native tradition had the stamp of approval from a ‘respected’ Western ‘authority’, it attracted excited and flattering attention. But rarely and only in relatively isolated cases, was it possible for the colonized cultural intelligentsia to rise above the cultural stereotypes, and critically explore and examine its cultural legacy for any intrinsic (or sustainable) merit.

Following the analysis above, one may wonder about the fate of freedom and independence in African postcolonial countries. Freedom many leaders of the liberation movements shed their blood in seeking becomes meaningless. Obviously, many impediments skillfully set by former colonial masters and approved by their puppets render independence futile or simply invalidate it. What shall we then characterize African countries? Are they independent or postcolonial dependent entities? Anyhow, history of colonization is repeating itself; wrapped up in its humanitarian garments, neocolonialism is so effective today that one would wonder if colonization ever ended. What a utopian idea to imagine the advent of a whole new world. Césaire, for instance, was dreaming at such a world with the overthrow of the old colonialist system. Robin D. G. Kelley writes: “As the true radicals of postcolonial theory will tell you, we are hardly in a postcolonial moment. The official apparatus might have been removed, but the political, economic, and cultural links established by colonial domination still remain with some alterations.” It’s sad to notice how the aggression of sovereign countries is carried out for fallacious or fabricated reasons with the help of the United Nations, which is supposed to stand guarantor for justice and equity, freedom and peace in the world.

The West would like to flatten the world not so as to explain it, like Thomas Friedman does in his acclaimed book, but to dominate it. And yet, the world is bigger and more diverse than their interests. Postcolonial citizens are improving their access to knowledge through education that helps them grow stronger and prepares them for genuine freedom. This reminds me of the famous poem, I too, Langston Hughes wrote to express his will and readiness for equality, despite the subjugation of his body in the days of racial segregation in America. The excerpt of the poem reads:
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I’ll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody’ll dare
Say to me,
“Eat in the kitchen,”17

Langston Hughes’s poem stands as a metaphor for struggling for freedom. Since the years of colonization, the world we live in has been very much controlled by the former colonial powers, with no respect to the sovereignty of the so-called independent, but weak countries. The poem speaks of hope of growing strength for equality in a changing world. To this end, we may say no matter the West’s efforts to reproduce the past in postcolonial societies, people’s awareness of lies is growing, for a lie cannot last ad vitam aeternam: “repetition does not transform a lie into a truth.”18 Unless Europe turns to tolerance and understanding to undertake “a new policy founded on respect for people and cultures, it will have deprived itself of its last chance and, with its own hands, drawn up over itself the pall of mortal darkness,” Césaire concludes.19

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17 Langston Hughes wrote his poem in 1932, a time racial discrimination in the United States of America was reinforced by racist laws.
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19 Césaire 77-78.
She comes to English class at eight-thirty – prompt – holding a stack of papers to her chest, hair draped behind in a ponytail, free of a headscarf. Ekbal – Iraqi refugee, mother, wife, ten months from Baghdad. We read together, her voice following mine, my sound barely released before she starts her own, drawing confidence from my speech.

When we take breaks, we talk about her husband, a colonel training troops back home, waiting to join her. She asks for things too: driver’s training, a stop at the M&H, an eye doctor – nothing I can give. But I try. Open a phone book to write an address, a number, directions, hoping she’ll hand them to a bus or taxi driver. Her eyes are in bad shape, too. She stops to rub them, her slender knuckles digging at the ache that must be there, fist opening and closing to motion the pain in her head. I know that pain too, but it’s in my stomach, my heart even – every time she apologizes for a missed word or phrase. She doesn’t know that I’m impressed by her courage. Courage to learn a new language, to use what’s natural to another, to be exposed, alone, like a shell washed ashore on rocks. Then we’ll start again, some words not in her dictionary, and she’ll thank me, nod as I explain a word without words, like charades.

And the time we studied customs, when she paused at ‘Subway doors.’ Like restaurant? she said, two hands as C’s to mimic a sandwich. Oh, no, I said. It’s an underground train. But as soon as I did I wished I hadn’t, the pride in her posture, the smile, the speed she moved to jab at the word ran out like yolk from a punctured egg. Our time is up then, and she asks if I’ll be there tomorrow. I wish I could be, if only to watch her pencil in the elegant loops and fishhooks of Arabic letters. But I just say, Next week, remember?
In every direction I see masses of bodies moving about and large suitcases with foreign markings rolling around carousels; it must be a display for a multinational store promoting used travel baggage. This illustration is quite obviously an airport, but in this instance one significant detail is the lack of English being spoken or used in any form. Instead, German dialects are pervasive among the many people and advertisements. Fitting, since this particular airport is located in Munich, one of Germany’s largest cities. Leaving North America for the first time is clearly having profound effects on my point of view.

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I was in Germany for only one day while my tour bus was making its way steadfastly to Italy. The bus passengers consisted of my high school band members; it was spring break and we had crossed the pond to perform at various churches and parks across Europe. New experiences materialized quite literally around every corner for me and my friends: gondola taxi services, open-air markets, and street vendors with every possible European trinket available for sale. I was a shy traveler but incredibly determined to not identify with the groups I had come to know as American tourists. The American tourist stereotype, in my mind, meant to be grossly large, ignorant of other cultures, and above all, to possess a round superiority complex over other peoples. After all, look at America! It is truly the land of success and every nation should follow suit because everything we do is perfect and righteous and necessary for the advancement of the world! This idea is exactly what I was intent on destroying during my week of European immersion.

Unfortunately, as we entered the Italian city of Florence, I was thrown into the stereotypical position that Americans assume when they enter large, historical cities. I was enveloped into an amoeba of sightseers gawking at a large golden door or an overtly gigantic basilica—admittedly Brunelleschi’s finest creation, to be sure. This amoeba followed me around the city for nearly two hours, each individual within it straining to hear the guide sputter facts in their direction. Every now and then someone would muster up the nerve to whisper a complaint to a partner. “Why doesn’t he speak better English?” or “can you understand anything he’s saying?” were two phrases I remember without particular fondness.

This was not the trip I had been looking forward to for several months. This was a mockery, a true testament to the minute cultural threshold some Americans maintain. It was unfortunate to affirm that some traveling Americans rapidly and happily lock themselves into stereotypes: t-shirts and shorts, camera flaunted in hand, and unnecessary quantities of food. I must admit that I contributed to the last stereotype after several hours of sightseeing and stomach grumbling.
Where was the immersion? There was simply no attempt to reach out to the Italian culture. In a global give-and-take relationship, some Americans, including myself at times, have an impeccable ability to take all they can, leaving visited lands feeling nothing but abused.

Arriving at our hotel to get some rest with my band-mates, I vowed that we would emancipate ourselves from the blatant tourism that was thrust upon us by the organizing officials and band directors. We came to Europe to learn not just about the architecture and history, but about the people with whom we directly and indirectly interacted.

We roused ourselves early the next morning and boarded a small tourism boat that was destined for Venice, the City of Water. Hopping off the boat we, again, amassed as a large cloud that slowly gravitated toward a central speaker. But I had a different plan in mind. My friends and I were not going to take part in the tourist activities planned for that day. Like condensing rain, we built up courage and dropped away gracefully from our cloud of tourism to be immediately engrossed by Italians. As we proceeded through the endless alleyways, I could tell this was the start of something beautiful.

We broke as many stereotypes as we could, attempting to speak with the people as often as possible. Having taken a few years of French, I used the language as my main means of communication. A surprising amount of people were able to glean messages from my broken, half-learned tongue, and we managed to have a few laughs with locals. One such instance was with a man of about twenty years with whom we shared an affection for aviator sunglasses. We managed to connect not solely with language, but through other similarities like clothing, accessories, and sports. A simple observation or shared feature, followed by a smile demonstrating our commonalities, was the only means of communication necessary to develop our bonds.

After numerous hours of wandering the side streets and unable to pinpoint our location on any maps, we stumbled upon a small pizzeria. We feasted on various types of fresh Italian pies and attempted weak conversation with our waiter. He surprised us with his comprehension of foreign languages, speaking in no less than six different tongues. My ability to speak in broken French phrases was no longer deemed impressive. Even though this waiter was completely fluent in English, we were persistent in our efforts to speak other languages with him. This was the culture, the experience, the entire idea I had been waiting for throughout the whole trip. Just because we were American did not mean we had to do things the American way. Through our snippets of banter with this man, we were disproving the stereotypes affiliated with American tourists worldwide.

With satisfyingly full stomachs, we walked around the city like local inhabitants. We became lost in a matter of minutes due to so many alleys and so few accurate maps. After about an hour of aimless meandering we came across a body of water. This sight of endless blue, which one of my friends so markedly claimed was the ocean, was evidence that we had indeed travelled across the entire island of Venice. High-fives were exchanged,
and photos were taken to document the momentous occasion. However, this achievement came with a bit of an ugly tinge: we had to be back at the central plaza in thirty minutes.

We hustled our way through the walkways, over the bridges, and past the people, all the while breaking out in a nervous sweat, fearing that our tour group would leave us stranded. Just as the bell tower of St. Mark’s Campanile was signaling our group’s time of departure, we stumbled into the open plaza. Fortunately, we found our amoeba of picture takers and t-shirts and quickly assimilated back into it before boats were boarded.

A relaxing feeling sunk into our fluttery stomachs once we knew we were safe and part of the tour group again. We watched as the bell tower vanished from view, along with the rest of Venice, but knew we had left a lasting impression. We had submerged ourselves headfirst into a foreign culture and learned much from our experiences throughout the floating city. The events that took place during that day were the results of straying from stereotypical norms and attempting to truly connect with people in another culture.

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Our nine-day excursion through Europe ended. It was insignificant with respect to time, but not meaning. Back in a foreign airport full of unfamiliar people and objects, I already began to reminisce while waiting for a flight toward home. Soon my plane took off, disconnecting from the ground, the country that I had been a part of for a brief moment. I watched as the Italian cars and buildings became smaller and smaller until they were indistinguishable. Unable to make out the thousands of objects passing below, my eyes drooped, and my head filled with thoughts pertaining to how the deviation from the typical tourist role would leave a lasting impression on me.
This is the first of what I hope will be a series of brief, occasional essays on the classical and mythical origins of ordinary English words. The word “mentor,” usually defined as a guide, counselor, or giver of sage advice has its origin in Homer’s epic tale The Odyssey.

The first five books of The Odyssey are called “The Telemachia,” or “All about Telemachus,” the young son of Odysseus. When we first encounter him, he is little more than a twenty-year old nursling who serves as consolation for his mother, Penelope, and is the subject of scorn and derision for the 108 suitors who relentlessly press their claim to marry this supposed relict. The problem with Telemachus is that he has no father present to instruct him in the ways of manhood. The storm-tossed Odysseus is currently adrift in a world of witches and monsters.

While Telemachus finds himself without a parental model for emulation and deterrence, he is not without resource or support. In book II, he summons the Greeks to an assembly wherein he speaks his mind to the rapacious suitors and divulges his immediate plans to go in search of word of his father. At this point, Mentor, an old friend of Odysseus, who has been entrusted to keep all things at the estate safe and sound, rises to praise God-like Odysseus who ruled his people with a father’s loving care. He also sternly reproves the suitors for their outrageous behavior. At the very least, from Mentor’s words Telemachus gets an inkling of what sort of man his father was and learns in part what sort of honorable and upright behavior is expected of himself.

Prior to his departure, Telemachus addresses the goddess Athene, who appears to the boy disguised as Mentor. Among other things, she says:

Few sons indeed are like their fathers. Generally they are worse, but just a few are better. And since you are by no means lacking in Odysseus’ resourcefulness, and since you will be no fool or coward in the future, you can hope to succeed in this undertaking. [Bk. II, 276-280]

Further, Telemachus learns that a crew has been conscripted for his ship and the craft itself has been fully provisioned. Thus, with this sort of “mentoring,” Telemachus, newly encouraged and resolute, is prepared to undertake his first act of maturity: to go in search of news of his father. It simply took a mentor to speed him on his way.

Despite its ancient pedigree, mentoring continues to be an invaluable, if informal, educational institution. Here at Concordia, students often avail themselves of the wisdom and experience of their faculty members, who guide them through the labyrinthine ways of undergraduate education.
The Moment I Met Nathan: 
Adopting from China

It was twelve-thirty in Hohhot, China, the desert wind tossing my hair in bundles under the overcast sky. My parents and I had just landed there, about a hundred miles south of the China-Mongolia border. We had come partly as tourists, having already visited Beijing and its signature sites: Tiananmen Square, the Forbidden City, the Great Wall, the ancient Hutong district – the overcrowded downtown area where traffic lights are recommendations instead of enforced law. But we hadn’t come just to enjoy the country’s high-rises and ancient relics. We came to adopt a child, a boy that we would eventually raise as a member of our family.

As soon as we boarded the minivan to our hotel, questions started bombarding me, appearing and vanishing with each building and pedestrian that passed in and out of sight: Would he be fond of me? Would he want to play with me? How would he react to us, his new family? I had always wanted a younger brother, someone to tackle, a little buckaroo with whom I could share my Legos. But still, I did not know the answers – no one did. Nor could I until I got to hold him at the hotel, calling him by his new name: Nathan – Nathan Jia Chao Bergquist – or his nickname, “Chao Chao.”

I kept asking these questions silently to myself as I watched office buildings and Mandarin signs pass us on the highway. I tried to watch closely for pedestrians, for more Mandarin inscriptions; I tried listening periodically to our guide, Kaige, talk about the region and answer any questions that my parents had. I learned that the city of Hohhot recognized four languages on their signage: English, Mandarin, Arabic, and Mongolian. I had also found out that the region had forty-four recognized ethnic groups, including Han, which is the dominant ethnicity in China. But no facts could answer or even preclude the questions I had about Nathan. My struggle would ensue for the entire ride, not stopping until the moment I met him.

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In mid-January of 2006, we got word from the agency that we had been matched to a child – Qian Jia Chao, one of the boys we were asked about two months prior. Pictures came, along with full descriptions of his condition. Mom and Dad even let us look at them! His fat-cheeked face blushed red against his orange overalls, his jet-black, paper-thin hair twisted and scraggly on his round head. In one picture, he was holding his favorite stuffed animal, stained and torn from dirt and overuse, his legs straight out in front of him – unprepared for a photo shoot. In another one he was standing, leaning up against a low stool from the side, straining with his eyes to maintain balance on his pudgy legs. Also, his defected right ear – folded and sealed closed from birth – was hidden from the camera, head turned to conceal it from viewers.
My parents then gave us his bio from the adoption agency. Fortunately for him, they said, his biological parents had obviously left him in good condition: they had put him in a car seat and bundled him up in a thick jacket and blankets, with a bottle full of milk for nourishment. They had left him next to a sport stadium the day after he was born – a public place where anyone could see him and report him to the authorities. Apparently, his parents wanted him to be found, to stay warm and healthy; they probably hoped somebody who could afford to care for him would find him and take him in to someplace safe, probably an orphanage. Many abandoned infants in China die due to undernourishment or exposure, and still others are taken by gangs or beggars and used for dealing. Luckily, he was picked up that very day by orphanage officials in Hohhot, and he would stay in their care for the next two years, nourished and protected from any physical harm or dealings for money.

Still, that begged the question of why they would abandon him. If they really cared about him, wouldn’t they have just kept him as their son instead of risking him harm by abandoning him in a public venue? Well, for one thing, his parents may not have had the resources to give him the care he needed for his defect. They also may have abandoned him because it was considered bad fortune to take in an unhealthy son, or at least a child with a noticeable defect. This social taboo runs to the very core of Chinese culture. Because of the one-child policy enacted in 1979 and China’s condescension toward girls and disabled children, Chinese couples prefer healthy boys when the woman gives birth. Thus, if someone gives birth to a girl or a disabled child (regardless of gender), it’s considered bad luck. For that reason, some abandon their “undesired” children to the streets, not wanting to be associated with such a social taboo of misfortune.

That said, the fact that Nathan was found so soon after he had been abandoned is providential. He could have easily been aborted or prevented through birth control, granted that they had found out his gender beforehand through ultrasound or some other technology. Or he could have been stolen by a gang wanting to deal for profit or a beggar demanding money on the street. In any case, his given Chinese name (“Jia” means longevity; “Chao” means good fortune) could be dubbed a self-fulfilling prophecy: not only did his parents leave him with loving care – he’d also live to see an orphanage the next day.

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It was four o’clock when we arrived at the New City Hotel, the five-star plaza towering thirteen stories into the arid, polluted sky. In spite of the pollution, however, I was excited to meet my soon-to-be legal little brother – chubby legs, brown eyes, puffed up Asian cheeks. Suddenly, a
strong gale ripped the grin off of my face, making me squint my eyes for protection, the thick, sand-polluted air scraping my face as sandpaper on clean-cut wood. *No one should ever have to endure this*, I thought to myself as the wind cut across my face once again. And right away I wondered to myself how any little boy left on the street – a newborn, no less – could ever live to see another day in such miserable conditions. Good thing his parents had given him so much care when they left him at the stadium – and that the orphanage found him before anyone else did.

Once we got inside and checked in to our room, we found that the orphanage was running late due to other stops it had to make in the area. Great, I thought, eyes rolling. How much longer would it take? But two hours quickly became two minutes. Soon three officials, one older gentleman and two women, walked into our room, sporting semi-formal attire with their advanced age. And then Nathan came in, resting in the arms of his female caretaker. He looked exactly as I had remembered from the pictures: thin hair all twisted and mangled, small round face trying to force a smile at me and my parents. Mom then walked forward, holding out her arms to take him. Smirking, he quietly uttered his first words: “ma-ma.” Laughter filled the room, Nathan’s face beaming with pleasure. Then it was Dad’s turn: going to Dad, Nathan uttered his next word: “ba-ba.” Nathan, his grin growing ever wider, loved making people smile, though by now he had said no more than a simple “ba-ba” and “ma-ma.” A quiet comedian. A humble entertainer. His reputation was already starting to shine.

Now it was my turn to make my move. “Hey, Chao Chao!”

He giggled, his brown eyes looking directly at mine and flashing under his eyelids. I stroked his paper-thin hair, hands crawling along his tender scalp. I panned out for a better look at his face: a perfect circle, baby cheeks on both sides. And his legs: so muscular, though he couldn’t quite walk yet. I asked him if he wanted to play on the table, offering him the wind-up mouse toy we had bought for him. He grinned at me, and I motioned for the table, winding up the toy to let it move around on the wooden surface. His hands quietly folded at his chin as he watched it spin.

It was then that I saw his right ear, folded closed underneath his hair line, just a line of skin protruding from his chubby round head. Then I remembered the pictures, with his head turned sideways to hide the folded ear. I remembered his bio, the description of him when he was found – in a car seat, wrapped in blankets, dressed in thick clothes, at a sports stadium where everyone could see him. And, I remembered his name – longevity and good fortune – my new little brother, adopted, legally ours.
I sit on the rooftop terrace, watch the fading daylight—
onpressive air polluted, thick gray clouding the burnt sky.
Through the haze, patches of color emerge and climb, kites
in ruby, indigo, pink. The summer breeze must be just right—
every child in the ancient city guiding tethered fabrics to fly
from countless apartment rooftops into the fading light.

A boy on the closest building, bold against the stained white
brick—he unfolds nylon, struggles with a knotted string, tries
to raise the toy to greet the colors of a thousand soaring kites.

He runs forward, propelling a worn yellow diamond into flight.
I follow the swinging shape, watch it mingle with others until I
strain to see beyond the rooftop as the sun sets into twilight.

I think of these children, wonder what flying these kites might
mean if they were the children begging at the Taj Mahal—my
few donated rupees could have bought these colorful kites
that fly above the city, above locals and tourists who fight
their way down dusty streets. A car horn blasts through dry
air. I leave the rooftop terrace as twilight gives way to night,
as darkness overwhelms colors in the maze of soaring kites.
When it comes to international education and intercultural education, the blind are not so much handicapped by their lack of sight as they are hindered by the narrow vision of others towards them.

When a blind student (hereafter “Claire”) at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota decided to travel overseas to Europe for one month with the Religion/Women Studies May Seminar, her instructors were both delighted and apprehensive about their ability to make the trip meaningful for her. They wondered, “How do the blind learn in an educational setting where visual stimulus is often the primary mode of learning?” International education in particular takes students to sights (or should we say “sights”) to see and learn about the wonders of the world. But how do instructors convey the visual awe of a cathedral, for example, to one whose primary means of making memories comes through the four non-visual senses? This article offers some humble insights of hope and cautions concerning these questions and examines that intercultural education can be a meaningful experience for the seeing impaired, but it requires work, creativity, and most of all, compassion for both instructors and students to be successful.

I. Preparation for Taking the Blind Abroad: A Rocky Start Concerning Logistics and Assumptions

A key component of the May Seminar at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota is the requirement of a class, which prepares students for the month-long May cultural encounter. Claire’s instructors had no concerns with her intellectual abilities; Claire was an excellent student because she was intelligent, articulate, and able to express herself in oral and written forms with passion and beauty. She was, however, the first blind student to choose to travel abroad in the history of the Concordia College, and thus her presence in the program was uncharted territory for her instructors and the school in general.
Her instructors had some logistical concerns. How would Claire handle the mechanics of travel? The trip, which traveled to Iceland, Germany, France, Ireland, Wales, and England, focused on Medieval Europe and therefore included some treacherous terrain. How would Claire negotiate the looming rocky cliffs of Ireland, steep spiral staircases, crumbling walls, and muddy narrow secret passageways of castles, not to mention the awkward room accommodations of some hotels where toilets and bathrooms lie at the end of labyrinthine hallways? With a group of about twenty students to look after, the teachers also wondered about their ability to give Claire the attention that they assumed she might require. All of these fears were unfounded.

A narrow vision of how the blind deal with safety issues in everyday life limited the instructors’ ability to see the truth about how adept the seeing impaired are. The presupposition was that the blind handle familiar surroundings safely, but that unfamiliar settings are more of a danger to them than to sighted students. They falsely believed that Claire simply would have more difficulty than the others with the ever-changing schedule and landscape of their European journey. The instructors were completely misguided by their lack of experience and knowledge of how the blind are able to cope with everyday life, whether it be in the US, Europe, or anywhere else in the world. In fact, Claire, like the blind in general, and any sighted person for that matter, faces obstacles related to her own safety on a regular basis, even in familiar settings.

This is not to say safety was not a concern while traveling. On the contrary, it was. The focus on safety, however, was a constant issue for all students, not just for Claire. By singling out Claire, thinking that she needed a different kind of help from the others, the instructors unwittingly marginalized her in a way that was inappropriate. Both the blind and the sighted have to learn how to deal with the physical and cultural landscape of new countries. Likewise, everyone has to do it in their own way. Fortunately, the teachers came to this realization with the help of an honest and compassionately direct Claire even before the sojourn began. In the end, instructors and students always must work together to make sure all are safe when navigating new environs. As a matter of fact, Claire proved to be one of the more adventurous members of the group. She scaled the walls of Mt. St. Michel, climbed the towers of Chartres and Salisbury Cathedrals, and enjoyed spelunking through secret passages under Germany’s Castle Rheinfels and Ireland’s Knowth burial mounds, all with a broad smile of absolute wonder, while some sighted students stayed behind and watched with agoraphobic and/or claustrophobic concern.

A related example of shortsightedness on the part of the instructors also occurred early on. The teachers heard that Sasha, a close friend of Claire’s, desired to come on the trip. The instructors approached Sasha and asked her if she would be able to “help” them “look after” Claire. The aforementioned perceived “problem” concerning Claire’s safety was the instructor’s primary concern. Nevertheless, when Claire heard of this she immediately went to one instructor to complain. “Why do you think I need help?” she wondered. The stunned instructor slowly realized that his assumptions concerning Claire were wanting at best and prejudice at worst. Claire, in fact, required no more aid than any other students, and was as fully capable of dealing with Europe as the others were, and as had been noted, was even more willing to take risks that most of the students avoided. The idea, namely that Claire’s blindness meant that she needed special assistance beyond what the instructors might be able to offer her, was nothing less than misguided insensitivity on the instructor’s part.

Claire was equally concerned that the request by the instructors to “help” her might actually affect her relationship with Sasha and other students. Claire questioned, “Would Sasha and she always be roommates? Would Sasha feel obligated to stay with Claire if the two of them wanted to see or be involved in different historic or cultural sites or events?” And so on...
instructors had unknowingly created a situation, which ignored Claire’s needs and abilities and feelings. Likewise, it put Sasha on the spot. In the end, the friendship of Claire and Sasha admirably survived their instructor’s meddling.

Before leaving for Europe, one instructor, a creative and compassionate campus counselor, and Claire met to explore the question, “How do we make this trip as memorable as possible for Claire?” Or to put it another way, “What can we do to make traveling to Europe a more tactile, auditory, tasteful, fragrant, and less visual experience in which she truly encountered the culture to the best of her abilities?” The one piece of invaluable insight the counselor gave was both simple and direct: “Claire is the expert. She knows how she has created memories in the past and she knows how she wants to make her own memories now and in the future. Ask Claire and encourage her to be honest and frank with you throughout the trip.” Had Claire been reserved, this would have been difficult. Fortunately for her instructors, her healthy confidence was a great help in this regard. Together they had many fruitful conversations and an eventual strategy developed for getting in touch with Europe; the well-traveled instructors benefited at least as much as Claire did from making Europe a more sensual, albeit less visual, and culturally enriching experience.

II. Abroad: Getting in Touch with Europe

The trip, unfortunately, was not without mishaps. While taking in a magnificent view and eating a wonderful group dinner on the Eiffel Tower, one remarkably insensitive student had the gall to wonder out loud to her instructors, “I don’t see why Claire came along on this trip. After all she can’t see anything. I don’t think this trip would be worth it if I couldn’t see things like this tower.” Others may have wondered the same thing, but they at least had the decency to keep their thoughts to themselves. Nevertheless, comments and thoughts like these flow out of a number of erroneous assumptions that unfortunately too many people hold. Some others are as follows. First, seeing is the primary, if not the only way, people make memories. Second, without sight, one’s experiences of the world are worth little or nothing. Third, people can only truly value any grand setting if they can encounter it visually. Fourth, the blind might as well stay in familiar surroundings, like their own homes, because they cannot really appreciate the world to its fullest anyway. Finally, the most insidious of all, the blind are handicapped, and the sighted are not.

The teachers knew very early on that they desired to translate the normally visual international and cultural class experiences into more non-visual encounters for Claire, and ultimately all their students. The question was how? By the end of the trip, the teachers developed – with Claire’s considerable help – a few principles, which aided all (especially the instructors) in getting in touch with Europe more completely.

The first principle is to describe one’s surroundings, i.e. especially whatever is primarily accessible only to sight, to the entire group in as rich a descriptive language as possible. When traveling on a plane, train, bus or boat, the view is often the only way to encounter the scenery. Therefore, teachers must be ready to describe in accessible and creative terms whatever happens to be streaming by. For this reason, the teachers asked Claire to sit close by them when traveling, if she so desired. This allowed for spontaneous conversations with her if the instructors did not have access to a microphone with which they could talk to the whole group.
Vivid descriptions aid all students who travel. Even though sighted students can see objects whizzing by windows for themselves, if they are awake, the descriptions help students process more fully what they are seeing and also give them a vocabulary for relating their trip upon their return. Teachers, however, need to be cautious not to talk too much. A good rule of thumb is to name and describe whatever students cannot fully understand by simply looking. For example, when passing a forest it does not help to note that there are a lot of trees outside. It is useful, however, to point out what type of trees there are as you give the characteristics of the foliage, etc. Information concerning the cultural significance of forests, e.g. issues concerning acid rain, medieval livestock practices, and other facts can also be useful. Likewise any historical data, e.g. an explanation of the name of the forest or famous historical events that took place there, makes the forest even more memorable. Names and historical or cultural information about castles, cathedrals, buildings, areas, cities, mountains, and the like all can be very enlightening. When one encounters long stretches of similar scenery, this can be a good time to discuss other cultural and historical information about the country you are passing through, and how the terrain of a particular place is reflected in the identity of a nation. For example, Iceland’s cultural identity as a nation is profoundly affected by its geography, namely as a barren and ruggedly beautiful island in the cold north Atlantic, as is Germany with it’s lush green forests and castle laden countryside.

At times a helpful exercise can be to have students describe to each other what they are seeing. This forces them to think about a historic and cultural objects or pieces of breathtaking scenery in a new way and takes the burden off instructors to keep this up for a month. In preparation for our trip, students had to pick a country and cultural area and an historical site to give presentations on. Students were at times encouraged to keep in mind non-visual ways of describing their sites. Descriptive language requires creativity and not all people are equally adept at it; it takes work and creative energy.

Even when the group is not traveling, visually descriptive language is essential. Descriptions should include size, shape, texture, a sense of the surroundings, and a language of concrete comparison to familiar objects. For example, when the students first saw an Irish monastic tower, one instructor described it as a fat pencil with the eraser end planted in the ground and the sharp point sticking up into the sky about 100’. The instructor continued, “The tower is made up of rough hewn rectangular rocks, with each block being slightly curved and 2’ by 4’.” At this point, the teacher had Claire touch the blocks in order to feel its size and texture. Without further prompting, most, if not all, of the other students did the same. Then he walked Claire around the tower counterclockwise, having her put her left hand on the tower itself in order to give her a sense of its circumference, which was roughly 100’ or so; other students followed suit without prompting. Claire immediately noticed one of the features of such towers with this exercise, “But where’s the door?” The instructional moment had occurred without sight. The instructor explained that the towers have no doors at ground level. Rather the lowest door first appears about 20’ up. The reason for this is twofold. First, some scholars think that a door at the bottom would have been structurally unsound and it would contribute to the early collapse of the tower. Second, monks and nuns, when attacked by Vikings, would put a ladder up to the door and they, along with all their valuables and food, would climb up into the tower and pull the ladder up after them, bolting the door securely behind them. Hence they and their belongings were safe inside from the raiders. Then the instructor could also point out that the towers were freestanding, generally a good distance away from other buildings and hills.

Some realities, however, are not so easy to explain. For people who have been blind from birth or early childhood, the notion of color, light, and shadows are harder to grasp. While offering Claire a hands-on walking tour description of the construction and function of Stonehenge,
she noticed that one instructor who was leading her around stopped frequently to take pictures. “Haven’t you been here before?” she asked. “Yes, many times,” said the instructor. “Then why are you taking more pictures?” she wondered. “Well, every time I come here the shadows are different, and it gives a new look to the place.” At this point Claire asked one of the most difficult and profound questions of the trip, “What’s a shadow? I’ve heard people talk about them, and the basic concept is in my head, but to be truthful I’ve never really understood what they are.”

A few points need to be noted at this juncture. First, notice the trust that Claire had in her instructor. Her trust developed over the semester of preparation and the three weeks prior to their visit to Stonehenge. Second, notice Claire’s willingness to risk a basic question. A less courageous student in her position might not have asked such a question for fear of looking ignorant. After all, Claire herself knew that the question was silly for a sighted person, still in the spirit of curiosity she asked.

The instructor struggled to come up with an analogy that would help her grasp the concept. After much discussion about how shadows are created by the blocking of light (another concept that Claire wondered about), the instructor offered this inadequate, but somewhat useful description: “Imagine yourself sitting in a large bath, and the water you are sitting in is cold. Your feet are up against the tub just under the spigot, and your knees are slightly bent. Then, you turn on the hot water. What happens next is that the cold water recedes in the wake of the hot water, which flows in to fill the space in front of you while the cool water is pushed out to the edges of the tub around you. That’s similar to a shadow. As the light flows down from the sky, like the hot water, objects, like your body, block it. Between you and the sun is the warmth of light, but behind you, where the light does not flow directly, a cool shadow is created. The more shadows the colder/darker it is. The more light the warmer/lighter it is.”

When traveling with the blind, some caution concerning the use of descriptive imagery is needed. Talking about color, light or shadows generally is not very productive or easy to convey, hence textured or tactile descriptions are essential in transmitting an in-depth sense of an object. The smooth straight and rather slender marble pillars inside of Chartres Cathedral in France stand in sharp contrast to the more rough and massive leaning pillars of St. David’s Cathedral in Wales. By contrasting similar structures, Claire was able to make distinctions between them in her mind more easily. Claire, for example, often asked about the roads that we walked upon. Never before had her instructors thought to mention in any depth this aspect of European life to their students, but Claire constantly noticed the difference between cobblestone, soft woodland paths, cement paths, and the like. In other words, “Don’t overlook the obvious.” Claire gave her instructors and fellow students a new appreciation for floors, which in many buildings, especially medieval ones, often have intricate designs and patterns. Claire, it is safe to say, has touched and examined more floors in Europe with her hands than other travelers have even noticed they tread upon.

Superficial examinations of objects lead to superficial analyses for all students. The instructors learned early on that they needed to make more pointed descriptive distinctions between one castle, cathedral, monastery, medieval city and the next in order to make their explanations more memorable for all students, but especially Claire. In other words, finding the distinctive in the common helps to distinguish places in one’s memory. The drawing of these distinctions benefited all of the students, who often thought that one cathedral resembled another. For example, Claire in particular appreciated knowing the cathedrals are often laid out in the shape of a cross. By telling Claire which part of the cross they were standing in, she was able to visualize the overall structure better. Variations on the cross theme also helped her to distinguish between cathedrals.
Likewise, making an effort to climb towers, stairs, and walking around both inside and outside the cathedral helped Claire begin to grasp the grandeur of these structures. After the trip, however, she still readily admits that such buildings remain a bit of a mystery to her.

Another principle we developed was to take advantage of whatever sense is the most available at any given moment in order to make a memory. In this regard, the sense of touch is perhaps the most versatile. When traveling through Europe, museums are both a blessing and a curse in this regard. In Paris, the Cluny Museum, which is the best medieval museum in the city, is wonderful. Having contacted the museum ahead of time we were given a guide who allowed Claire to touch many of the ancient exhibits, which the other students were not allowed to touch. Cluny even has some replicas of tapestries and other objects, which the blind can touch to get a better sense of the object. The Louvre of Paris, on the other hand, has security measures in place, such as laser beams, which make it impossible for most items to be felt. Hence, descriptive language once again must be employed.

Always tell museum personnel when you arrive that you have a blind student. Often they are very accommodating. Still, there are times when you will not be able to get a satisfactory response. The instructors generally encouraged Claire to touch objects in museums when it was not entirely obvious that doing so would be condoned. There was one instance where a museum guard came up to the instructor to discourage the feeling of a particular object, but before the guard said anything, he noticed that Claire was blind. At that point he smiled and went back to his seat. In almost every instance, we found that museums and their personnel were very understanding, unless you set off security alarms, which we did on occasion. Try to be aware if such devices are being used. This advice goes for places that act like museums, such as cathedrals and castles.

One technique that Claire and one instructor developed to inform her better about objects involved drawing in Claire’s hand. For example, when explaining the difference between a rounded Romanesque and pointed Gothic Arch the instructor drew the difference on Claire’s outstretched palm. On a few occasions, an instructor traced Claire’s hand over a map to give a sense of shape of landscape, distance, and topography. Likewise, as mentioned, in cathedrals the instructor might draw a cross shape and then point out where on the cross they were standing in the cathedral. This technique proved useful in a variety of settings.

Another principle is not to expect too much. One instructor, at times, placed Claire’s hands on small sculptures and asked her to guess what the object represented. Claire was rarely even able to venture a guess, and when she did it was always wrong. What the instructor thought might be a fun way of discovering an object turned out to be too difficult to be of use. It worked on rare occasions when the instructor said, “Here’s an animal sculpture. Can you guess what it is?” At least Claire had more of a chance to narrow down the possibilities, but in the end, it was always a guess. Hence, the instructor abandoned this idea early on. Rather he’d say something like, ‘Here’s a sculpture of a smiling angel. Can you find her smile, wings, etc...?’

Folklore often can be an aid in creating touching memories. Glendalough monastery in Ireland has a famous relic known as St. Kevin’s cross. Legend has it that if a person can reach around the large cross and touch their fingers on the other side the person will go to heaven. Claire’s arms, however, were about six inches too short. The local guide also informed us that, “If you can’t reach around yourself, a friend can help you find your way to heaven by completing the circle with you. Simply make a large circle around the cross, joining your hands together.” And so Claire and one of her instructors clasped hands and experienced a metaphorical image of little bit
of heaven on earth in which student and instructor both gained more than they could alone in this touching experience.

Claire and her instructors also set up some goals with regard to touch for the trip. Claire decided that one thing she wanted to do was to dip her hand into the great rivers and waterways they encountered. She placed her hand and sometimes her feet into the Rhine, Seine, Thames, English Channel, the holy well of St. Brigid, and much more. A concern for health, however, also led Claire and the instructors to make sure they had liquid alcohol washing solutions available to cleanse her hands thoroughly after splashing around. Sometimes this simple goal proved to be much more difficult than was originally conceived. For example, the River Thames is lined with tall concrete walls in London and access to the water is very hard to come by, but we did manage it with some adventure.

Touch also helped Claire with some cultural problems. Fortunately, the Euro has different sized denominational paper bills and the same is true of the coins. Hence, Claire was able to feel the difference between a ten and twenty Euro bill, which made it easier for her to pay for items when she went shopping.

Claire also collected objects; we might call them three-dimensional pictures. On the Hill of Tara where St. Patrick preached the sermon about the shamrock and the Trinity, Claire collected a shamrock. She often bought objects or collected stones and other memorable trinkets, which she can recognize by touch. All of these objects jog Claire’s memories in the same way a photograph reminds a sighted person of a particular place.

While touch is the most versatile of the senses, the other senses are not to be neglected. Sound, for example, is always present no matter where we are. Too often we have learned to block out sounds around us, and we ignore them. Still, sound can create powerful memories. There is a great difference between the sound of walking through a German forest and the bustle of the London underground. Claire noted that she gains a sense of the size of buildings by the sound of echoes that reverberated in them. The sound of different languages – take German and French for example – are unique. Claire speaks French, and so she was particularly attentive to it. Even the sound of English in Ireland, Wales, and England contrast sharply with the English spoken in the USA. Vocabulary and tonal inflections were especially interesting to take note of. The London Theatre and the wonderful music of the play was something that Claire, a fine musician herself, was able to appreciate more fully than others. It was helpful, however, to whisper judiciously during some productions to Claire about the visual aspects of the play, especially when the crowd was laughing at a sight gag.

Taste is perhaps one of the more enjoyable senses to be attentive to. Claire explored the differences between the cuisines of the various countries with a willing curiosity, and was richly rewarded. For example, merely exploring the contrast between different types of chocolate can be a worthy and enjoyable endeavor, but also noting what spices are unique to what culture, what dishes seem to be favored from place to place, and what drinks are preferred is an interesting thing to note.

Smell is an ever wafting experience, but often goes ignored. Claire has a particularly sensitive nose and was the first to notice if there was incense in a cathedral or flowers nearby. Often, since her instructors overlooked this sense more easily than others, Claire was the one who had to ask questions about aromas. Once on the crowded subway in London, Claire said to one instructor in a normal voice, “It smells like a toilet in here.” In fact, it did. What Claire could not
see was that the Londoners pressed close to her turned to stare when they heard the comment. Whether they were offended or in agreement could not be determined, but for the instructor it was a tense moment, which soon passed. It would have been better to warn Claire about making such comments in a public place, or at least work out a whispering protocol for such comments.

Another way to create memories is to discover what activities the blind student enjoys and make sure that she gets the opportunity to do them both in and outside of the group. Claire loved walking, climbing, and crawling through tunnels. Hence, Claire often climbed to the top of most of the highest places we visited and slipped through the lowest and smallest underground passages with delight.

Likewise, make sure the blind are not excluded from normal group activities — no matter what it may be. About half way through the trip the instructors realized that they had not given Claire the college digital camera. All students were required to take the camera for a day and record whatever pictures they wanted onto the web for families at home to see. So one day the instructors gave Claire the camera with which she took pictures, sometimes with, and sometimes without, the aid of others. She fulfilled the assignment with alacrity.

III. Conclusions

The blind indeed are not so much handicapped by their own lack of sight as they are hindered by the impoverished vision of others towards them. In every instance, whatever obstacles Claire faced, before and on the trip, were placed there by the shortsightedness of others. Fortunately, Claire is a remarkably patient and kind young woman. She was patient with her instructors, whose insensitivity often led to misunderstanding and confusion. She was kind with her fellow students, who were often unwittingly patronizing towards her. Claire often handled insults with humor and grace. Nevertheless, the fact remains that she shouldn’t have to endure such insensitivity. After Claire experienced one particularly egregious insult concerning her blindness from one of the other students in the group, the instructors agreed, against Claire’s wishes, that the student who made the extremely insensitive remark should be confronted by one of the instructors. Claire thought it was her problem and she should deal with it alone. Her instructors explained that such insensitivity is insulting to humanity and that the moment was a necessarily teachable one. In the end, we all have a responsibility to confront and correct prejudice as best we can. Instructors, in particular, have a responsibility to do so. Claire noted that, “It is important for me to act alone when I feel offended. Maybe some people need others to intervene on their behalf, but I speak out when I disagree with something. This is especially important because what you might think is offensive might not be offensive for me.”

In the end, Claire was an excellent co-teacher, if not the primary teacher on the trip. Her instructors had to learn how to teach in a less visual way in order to facilitate her memory making. The trip was rewarding for all parties involved because Claire had taught her friends and teachers how to see, that is touch, Europe in a new way. As one of Claire’s fellow students wrote in her journal, “One of the greatest experiences of this trip was learning from Claire. Claire showed me how to see things I would have otherwise passed by, such as the intricate textures on statues and buildings, and the subtle smells in the air. Most of all, she showed me what it really means to be brave.”
Faculty Advisor

Dr. Amy Watkin is an Assistant Professor of English and has been teaching at Concordia since 2005. She teaches courses in composition, American language and culture, introduction to literature, global literature, and British and American literature. In 2009 Amy traveled to Rwanda with a group from Concordia, and she looks forward to bringing more students there in May 2012. *Djembe* has been such an enriching experience for Amy, and she is proud to have a role in making all of these voices heard.

Editor in Chief

Chelsea Wilson is a senior psychology and English literature double major from Hill City, Minnesota. She has had several opportunities to go abroad, including a semester at Galway, Ireland, which helped shape her interest in intercultural experiences. Chelsea has greatly enjoyed working with *Djembe* for the last three years and seeing the journal grow with each year. Although her plans post-graduation are not definite, they will be influenced by her experience at Concordia and hopefully include the opportunity to continue encountering cultures other than her own.

Assistant Editor in Chief

Matthew Gantz is a sophomore currently studying finance in the Offutt School of Business at Concordia. He has had fantastic experiences with *Djembe* staffs over the past two years, and this year he has learned a tremendous amount, delving deeper into the managing and editing process. In 2012 Matt plans to further extend his intercultural experiences by completing a month-long ethnographic research project at a financial firm in Glasgow, Scotland. He hopes you enjoy the spectrum of articles selected for this year’s publication.
Production Coordinator

Dana Sloneker is a senior with majors in English writing and public relations and a minor in classical studies from Rochester, Minnesota. She enjoys writing fiction, and after graduating from Concordia, she will continue studying writing and literature in graduate school with hopes of eventually earning a PhD and becoming a college professor. She loves all things Greek, and spent May 2010 in Greece and Italy with the classical studies department. Having that experience abroad changed her life, and she encourages all Djembe readers to do more than just read our journal to learn about world affairs and culture—go experience it!

Copy Editor

Mike Bjork is a freshman from Bismarck, North Dakota, majoring in English writing and (tentatively) mass media communications. His goal for the future—God willing—is to become a novelist; but for now, he spends his time playing in four of Concordia’s music ensembles (trumpet and piano), working on his latest prose, and copy editing the occasional submission for Djembe, which he’s found to be an enlightening blast.

Copy Editor

Amie Hirrschoff is a junior global studies and political science major from Brookings, South Dakota. She spent her 2011 spring semester studying in Australia. She is a resident assistant in Brown Hall this year and after college plans to pursue a degree in international law and continue to travel and experience as many new parts of the world as possible. Amie has greatly enjoyed working with Djembe this year and reading all the fantastic pieces that students and faculty submitted.

Copy Editor

Jenny Morrow is a junior from Bismarck, North Dakota. She is majoring in English literature and minoring in psychology, with the hope of being a speech-language pathologist when she grows up. She has traveled to England through Concordia and will travel to Scotland in May for another Concordia travel opportunity.
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Kyle Thiele is a junior English writing and studio art double major with a minor in classical studies from Bismarck, North Dakota. She has always dreamed of exploring the world and this spring will be taking the first step by studying a semester abroad in Australia. After college, she plans to go to graduate school for writing and, with any luck, become an author one day. This is her first year as a copy editor for Djembe, and it’s been a great experience that she hopes to continue next year.

Rachel Wiinanen is a junior from Maple Grove, Minnesota, studying marketing, graphic design, and communication. She is a member of the Concordia Volleyball Team, Invisible Children United, and Djembe. After graduating from Concordia, she plans to work in the marketing field and hopes to be able to work more with graphic design as well. She loves being part of the team experience that Djembe offers as well as gaining further insight into the world.

Kourtney Holloway is a sophomore from Brainerd, Minnesota, and is currently studying graphic design and communication. She is a part of Djembe and Invisible Children United. Her favorite part of Djembe is being able to inform others about what is happening in other societies in the world.
Thank You

-The Djembe Staff