

Julia Gardner

### Photo Assignment Reflection

The classwide photo workshop was an interesting way to get more insight into my classmates' intercultural immersion experiences, while also challenging my own ability to make assumptions about cultural context from a single photograph. While I was able to get the gist of some of the pictures, I surprised myself with how off my guesses were on others, even when I hadn't doubted myself on the meaning of the picture at all.

One of the pictures of which my understanding was the most different from the true context was Adriana's photo of a Portuguese bakery in Miami. I had assumed that the picture was taken in Portugal, due to the Portuguese spelling of "Lisboa," but that the bakery was catered towards tourists because of its English-language signage. I was basing this assumption off of my own experiences at bakeries and cafes in Spain, some of which had menus or signs in English, marking them as aimed at tourists or "digital nomad" expats. However, I discovered that there was much more to the photo than the guess I had made based off of my past experiences; in a way, it was an inversion of my assumptions, as it really was a small pocket of Portuguese culture existing within the United States (rather than an establishment existing inside of Portugal that catered to people from elsewhere.)

Beyond revelations about place and language, however, Adriana's essay also revealed to me histories about diaspora and intercultural connections that I hadn't known about before. I was interested to learn that a wave of Portuguese immigration to Venezuela had established Portuguese culinary influences in Venezuela's bakeries and cafes. The result of this influence was brought to the U.S. by Venezuelan immigrants who established Portuguese bakeries. Adriana had discovered that this bakery was Venezuelan-owned, and was frequented by Venezuelan immigrants as a hub for community and connection.

In the U.S., many people tend to think of Latin America as a mixture of Spanish (in most countries; Portuguese in the case of Brazil only), Indigenous, and African influences only. However, the

more that I learn about the region through my own Spanish study and elsewhere (including discussions with lovely classmates such as this one!), the more I learn that Latin America has historically been a hub for immigration from every corner of the world, who all contribute to the cultures of their new home countries. As Adriana wrote in her essay, many U.S. Americans tend to stereotype European influences in Latin America as black-and-white negatives, solely sorting them into histories of violent colonization that aim to suppress Indigenous cultures. However, this viewpoint erases the legacies of more recent waves of immigration, which, while always complex in nature, have contributed to Latin American cultures in very different ways. It's interesting to me that dominant U.S. American narratives of Latin America (at risk of generalizing!) mostly think of the "melting pot" type of cultural formation in terms of histories of colonization and slavery, when it's much more complex than that. Indeed, my own extended family includes Ashkenazi Jews that immigrated to Brazil for a full generation after the Holocaust! While the United States is quick to think of its own "melting pot" as core to its national identity, U.S. centric attitudes seem to hinder the same complex understanding of other nations.

Another "misunderstood" photo that especially struck me was Lyla's picture of the sakura blossoms. I had genuinely thought that the photo was meant to show people enjoying moments together in beautiful outside weather, enjoying the arrival of spring, and perhaps served as a commentary on experiencing "outsiderness" while abroad. The darker history behind the sakura blossom in Japanese culture that I learned from Lyla's essay shocked me. While it's easy to comprehend on an intellectual level, I often find myself forgetting (or surprised by the fact) that different cultures can have such different interpretations of the same symbols. When looking at sakura blossoms, I think of the joys that come with the arrival of spring, and an appreciation of visual beauty. Their fleeting nature rarely crosses my mind, and when it does, it usually provokes a surface-level bittersweet feeling. However, in Japan, this fleeting nature has been used as a symbol over time by the government to encourage military participation and accept the risk of death that comes with it. Ironically, while this makes it such a significant national symbol with a specific connotation inside of Japan, sakura blossoms have more or less become a symbol of Japan in the U.S. in a very different one; one that is associated with beauty and

serenity. My experience with this picture serves as a reminder that symbolism is deeply culturally-specific. Even when I think that associations such as “spring” and “beauty” could universally steer something towards being a symbol of a certain kind, there is no true way to guess or generalize what something may mean in one place or another because cultural meaning is generated through such a complex web of contextual factors.