

Christina Tran

## Crossing Borders

They say that Paris is the city of love, lights, and inspiration. And although that's one of the most stereotypical, cliché beliefs about Paris... it's where my perspective of the world changed. Ironically, I was leaving this *ville de l'amour* by myself when it happened. My friends had purchased their train tickets before me, so we weren't assigned in the same car, nonetheless the same seats.

For the next two hours, I was going to be the lonely foreigner. Don't fret, I had my earphones in one hand, and Shakira's playlist in the other. As the engine started, an older couple boarded the train and sat across from me. While I was settling in, the woman asked, en français, if there was an outlet on my side to charge her camera. I assumed they were fellow tourists as well. "Non, j'suis désolée", I responded. The woman turned to her husband, and started speaking another foreign language, one that I had also understood, but a little too well. Vietnamese. It had been half-way through the semester and I had yet to hear *my* native language in this foreign country. Immediately, I turned to them and suggested they check below the seats, but this time, in Vietnamese. The look on their faces made my entire week. It seemed like their excitement matched mine once I discovered that they were also Vietnamese, because we instantly sprung into conversation in our native tongues. Shakira was going to have to wait.

I explained that I was an American student studying abroad to improve my French, and everytime I forgot how to say a certain word in Vietnamese, I knew the French word and used French to replace that word. We often switched between French and Vietnamese. He complimented my Vietnamese speaking proficiency, and she appreciated my ambition for

multilingualism. My sentence flow never broke. We chatted as if we knew each other from awhile back, when in reality, they were complete strangers who just so happen to be on their way back to Lyon with me.

The train rolled to a complete stop and the conductor welcomed us back to our city. With my bags in hand, I got up to leave, but before I could, the couple handed me their business card. She told me to stop by sometime for a free meal whenever I missed mom's home-cooked meals. Turns out, they owned an authentic Vietnamese restaurant in my host city, Lyon. They treated me as if I were one of their own children. I thought culture-shock would get the best of me, but after that day, I never felt so unalienable. I belonged.

Here in Charlotte, North Carolina, I'm a Vietnamese-American. In Vietnam, locals view me as the 'rich American'. Although, in France, at that moment in Paris, I wasn't defined by my ethnicity. I felt *at home*, because for once, I wasn't being judged based on how I looked or how I spoke. Crossing borders shouldn't be such a controversial topic. There's a quote that stuck with me after discovering my curiosity for foreign languages that roughly translates to "thanks to languages, we are at home, anywhere." This quote depicts what I discovered that day: we cannot be ignorant to those who wish to learn and understand another's language and culture, but we must welcome them with an eager attitude to accept and teach. With that being said, foreign languages should be more prioritized in our education system. As a French Major and a Foreign Language Education Minor, I will always advocate for international education and how it can change your view of the world and yourself. Afterall, with each language learned, the world feels a little smaller, no matter where you are.