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A Worldview Seen Through Pronouns

They are so common that they have become mundane and rarely notable, but pronouns are a moving force of humanity. LGBTQA issues consider preferred pronouns, and the concept of gender is now at the forefront of debate. Wars have been started over xenophobia and pronouns – 'us' versus 'them.' Even the unanswered questions of the universe are rooted in these little words. Who am 'I'? Why do 'we' exist?

It's all about the pronouns, and my personal journey is no different. I came to study at Kingston University in London, England with no strings attached, or so I thought. In reality, I will always have my resolute American roots. However, as the months passed and the seasons changed, so did my identity and the way I viewed the world. I have come to understand these changes through pronouns. I never thought these inconspicuous parts of speech would hold so much value.

I did not expect anything in particular from England as far as cultural rifts are concerned, but when I first arrived in London I certainly didn't feel like an outsider. It wasn't quite home, but nothing seemed truly alien. Yet there I was, left alone in an unknown city, on an unknown continent, across the ocean from anything that I could call 'mine.' This comfortable strangeness was a confusing concept, but it has helped me to find myself and observe the world.

During the first couple weeks, before school started in force, the international students took day trips and attended orientations and tours together. The study abroad office clearly wanted to create a sense of 'us.' Yet I didn't want to be a part of that pronoun, easily marked as an outsider. I wanted to be with 'them,' the British. I wanted to experience English culture and see 'mine' through their eyes. I stopped attending international events and joined instead the Kingston fencing club.

Again and again I would refer to experiences I had in "my' club back home" in attempts to join the niche as a fencer. Over time, a strange thing happened. References to "my' home school" and "my' old club" ceased to be as important, and became gradually unneeded as I formed independent friendships. Instead, my focus became Kingston, 'our' club, and 'its' members. I found a sense of belonging. With these friends, 'I' as a foreigner became simply 'us,' and it is through these friends that I have learned much about different cultures and the way my own is perceived by others.

First, the most exasperating (though regrettably expected) view of America held by the rest of the world is that of gun-toting, erratic citizens. My new friends were surprised, almost stunned, to learn that my family in fact does not own guns. "But doesn't everyone in the South have guns? Do you even need a permit? Can't anyone buy firearms?" they asked. They still poke fun at me as though I'm a gator-huntin' Louisianan. Unfortunately, on the whole we are seen as violent and assertive by the world. Hopefully students like me will change this by sharing ourselves with the world as we travel.

The differences between American and European politics certainly don't end with the gun debate. I'm taking a module on consumerism, and capitalism is blatantly flamed by a multitude of theorists and even my classmates. At first it was shocking to see capitalism vilified, turned into the evil "other" while select socialist policies are lauded. The general attitude towards capitalism is enough to make one second-guess its benevolence. It is one thing to laugh at the redneck stereotypes placed on Americans, but it is another to be forced to reconsider entire economic and political systems that oppose the ones you have grown up with. It all hinges on perspective.

However, the eye-opening lessons of studying abroad haven't all been so heavy-handed as these political debates. Observing the world yields many life lessons as well as lessons about cultures: exploration is absolutely never fruitless, an experience is always better lived than read about, the money doesn't matter, and anything can be solved by a drink with friends.

I have been on this journey of discovery for seven months, and while my worldview has developed already, it definitely isn't finished doing so. These changes will continue to manifest themselves through pronouns while I am in London, and even afterwards. 'I,' that girl from the States, became, for a brief but blessed time, one of 'them.' When 'us' became the British and others different from myself, instead of exclusively Americans, my understanding of the world broadened in exciting ways.

The most profound event of my international adventure was New Year's Eve. An estimated quarter of a million people turned out to watch the explosive, multi-sensory fireworks display held at the Millennium Eye on the south bank of the Thames. Thousands, myself included, stood waiting for seven hours or more on Victoria Embankment, claiming whatever patch of land we could, vying for the best spots. When the minute countdown to midnight finally started, the cramped quarters, sore legs, and cranky tourists were all forgotten. Big Ben chimed twelve thunderous times, and the mind-blowingly mesmerizing show began. At its conclusion, the fifty-thousand along Embankment and Westminster Bridge all joined hands to sing "Auld Lang Syne," accompanied by millions across the world. Never in my life have I experienced such solidarity, and I doubt I will again. I couldn't even sing for the emotion I felt. That moment, and my global experience as a whole, has taught me about the greater kinship of the human race and how to appreciate it. Despite our differences, the 'we' of humankind will always find the unity of 'us.'