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Metamorphosis of a Gringa

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Metamorphosis of a Gringa

On a Fulbright grant to study and teach in Chile, Rachel Slough '07 discovered a new way to relate to the world and to herself.

Story by Rachel Slough '07



Slough (above) looks back on the variety of her experiences in Chile with a mix of awe and gratitude.

universities?

As an Illinois Wesleyan sophomore, I took a class in which I read my first novel entirely in a foreign language. Beyond the thrill of accomplishing something I never thought I could do, reading *Clandestine in Chile: The Adventures of Miguel Littín* in Spanish sparked a new love for the language, a fascination with Hispanic cultures and an appreciation for a country and people I had never known.

The book, by Gabriel García Márquez, documents Chilean filmmaker Miguel Littín's secret visit to his home country after 12 years in exile. I was struck by Littín's obvious love of Chile, so much that he would risk his life to return during a dangerous period of the Pinochet regime. Though I couldn't see how it would be possible, I dreamed of living in Chile and coming to better understand this country and its people.

At my professors' encouragement, I applied for a Fulbright grant in my senior year to both live and teach in Chile. But, given my skeptical nature, I honestly didn't think I'd be given the opportunity. Me? A teacher? The student who blushes and shakes when required to speak in front of others? And with a Fulbright? Weren't those only given to academically perfect scholars from Ivy League

To my shock and delight, I received a phone call shortly after graduation inviting me to live my dream. In March 2008, I arrived in Chile to study and teach for 10 months on a grant through the Fulbright English Teaching Assistantship Program.

If someone had told me in advance what I would actually be doing in Chile, my inner skeptic would have again chimed in with a simple: "Yeah, right." I co-taught six different university courses as a primary professor, gathered data for two research projects, founded and led a student magazine and book club, and catalogued a department library over the course of a year. These are all experiences that I still barely believe I'm writing on my resume two years after

graduation. But unless I'm speaking with a potential employer, those aren't the experiences in Chile I'd likely mention first.

Even now, several months after returning, I don't know what would be of most interest to others. Do I mention my travels to the desert north, with its Inca ruins; to the ends of the earth to one of the world's most southern cities or to the island that inspired the story of *Moby Dick*? Perhaps I'd describe the year's most dramatic moment, when my students went on strike, and how I watched from my office window as they threw rocks at armed police tanks. Or maybe I'd share my most embarrassing moment, when I confused the word for "preservatives" (*preservantes*) with "condoms" (*preservativos*) during dinner with my host family.

These all make for great stories, but I'm finding the seemingly mundane moments are the ones I most treasure and miss: evening chats with my flatmate over tea and fresh bread smeared with avocado, playing dominos and watching U.S. cartoons dubbed in Spanish with my host-family "nephews," and cramming into an overcrowded bus to go to the market with Chilean friends. In short, it's the complete integration into a foreign culture, and the naturalness of that process, that seems most precious in hindsight.

For Chileans, there's no holiday more exciting or important than September's two-day *Fiestas Patrias* (National Holidays). These holidays commemorate Chile's independence and celebrate its culture, heritage and the very essence of being Chilean. *Fiestas Patrias*, and the days surrounding them, are filled with flags, traditional foods, folk songs and many performances of the *cueca*, Chile's national dance.

I was first introduced to the *cueca* in 2005 at Illinois Wesleyan when I took the May Term course "Song and Dance of Latin America." Although I find all dancing difficult, the *cueca* proved to be a particular challenge. I struggled to move my hands and feet in different ways at the same time, all without tripping over my own feet or a nearby dancing couple. I admired how beautiful and natural this dance looked when performed by our professor, Cecilia Sanchez, and cursed myself for *bailando como una gringa* (a Chilean saying for dancing like a white foreigner, i.e., dancing poorly).



Slough (at center) poses with classmates from a Latin American folk dance course she took while living and teaching in Chile.



A print from 1885 depicts a couple dancing the *cueca*, which is Chile's official national dance.

In the days leading up to *Fiestas Patrias*, my Chilean friends asked me if I liked the *cueca* and would be willing to dance it. I always responded that I have a fondness for their dance, just as for the country and people — but that I dance like a *gringa*. Of course I would be willing to dance, but would they be able to tolerate seeing their national dance in an almost unrecognizable form?

At my first of several *Fiestas Patrias* celebrations, I was asked to assist with preparations. Alongside my friends, I decorated a gym with patriotic streamers of red, white and blue, helped fry *sopaipillas* (a pastry made from a pumpkin- or squash-based dough) and prepared platters of *ensalada chilena* (a simple tomato and onion salad) for the group of well over one

hundred. After the feast came a beautiful demonstration of traditional dances from all regions of Chile, accompanied by live music. Throughout the show, my friends elbowed me, asking if I'd be willing to perform the *cueca*, the finale of the performance. In fact, I had been secretly practicing my *cueca* skills, asking my students for help during breaks between classes and mentally preparing myself in the event that I tripped and fell. I nodded, assuming that everyone would be dancing together.

To my surprise, just minutes later I found myself a contestant in a *cueca* competition. Since it was too late to tactfully bow out, I grinned at my partner as we approached the stage arm in arm. My nervousness was replaced with delight as I focused on the rhythms and relished the opportunity to perform a dance so important to Chileans among friends who had become so important to me. I forgot about the audience and about being foreign, concentrating on the music and steps and the joy of the *cueca*.

When the music ended, I was startled by the applause and astounded when my partner and I were chosen for the next round, then the next — eventually taking the championship. Despite my less than graceful dancing, my friends showed through their support that they accepted me and appreciated my efforts to celebrate their culture. Though I will never be Chilean, I will treasure this spirit of *chilenidad*, of national pride, that I found through dancing the *cueca*, and of the warm welcome given to even the most *gringa* of foreigners.

As I look back, those *cueca* dances seem to hold the essence of my Fulbright experience in Chile. Just as I doubted my ability to perform the dance, I applied for the grant believing I would have little chance of being selected. I'm now living proof that such doubts can be premature.

I still believe that skepticism can be handy, but only to the degree that it expands opportunities and proposes useful questions, rather than limiting them. That said, my instinctive reaction to

seemingly out-of-reach possibilities has changed since my time in Chile. After conquering my shyness to teach university classes and my *gringa* gawkishness to win a dance competition, my response to such possibilities has evolved, from “No way” to “Why not?”

The author, Rachel Slough, is pursuing a master’s degree in library science at Indiana University, Bloomington. A Charleston, Ill., native, she double-majored in English and Hispanic studies at Illinois Wesleyan.