

CHRISTIAN ADAMS

Plastino Report: Examining the Ethnobiology of Maijuna Stingless Beekeeping

The rainforest felt particularly hot & humid as we bushwhacked our way through the never-ending foliage, along the way jumping over mossy logs, almost always lined with leafcutter ants, and being sure to not trip into the many spiny trees along the way. I was particularly worried about this latter aspect, when the rest of my expedition group had returned from their overnight camera trapping trip earlier in the week, more than one person had to sit for hours on end as a partner painstakingly pulled spines out of their skin. Most of the time these spines were nearly microscopic but I had seen ones on trees that were nearly 6 inches long. I shuddered, as I hopped over a small creek in the path, thinking of the pain and peril of falling into them. Of course, I had a few other pressures adding to the intensity of this hike. Besides the heat and avoidance of spines you had to always keep an eye out for venomous snakes, two of which (a coral snake and a bushmaster) I had close enough encounters with already, and there of course were also the bullet ants, whose sting is among the most painful in the world according to the famous Schmidt sting pain index. I counted myself lucky to not be studying any of these creatures, instead I chose to study stingless bees, which, in part thanks to the lack of their sting but also in part due to their general temperament, had turned out to be most pleasant creatures.

As I walked it only grew hotter and hotter, a sensation compounded by my desperation in trying to keep up with Shebaco, a Maijuna elder in Sucusari whose farm we were visiting. I had spent many long days in the village alongside him, walking at a snail's pace discussing stingless beekeeping and socializing with everyone that crossed our paths. Looking ahead at Shebaco in the forest I thought he seemed like a different man. He didn't utter more than a few words at a time as he blazed ahead at the speed of light. Walking, hurtling, and thinning foliage with a machete in motions that basically flowed into one another, I saw that Shebaco's knowledge of

the forest, and how to live and navigate it, was deeply ingrained. Soon I became used to the sight of him disappearing ahead, only to see him waiting around a bend for us to catch up. It comforted me that Rut, my translator and fellow stingless bee fan, was right alongside me in struggling to keep up with Shebaco.

Right when the heat felt like it was reaching its peak we came to our destination: a tree with a stingless bee nest around twenty feet up and affixed to the side of the trunk. According to Shebaco, this species of stingless bee was a calm, small, black bee that, despite the village managing somewhere between 10-15 species of stingless bees for honey production, no one else had. Shebaco took pride in this fact, knowing that he had something unique to show off to me, who had been incessantly questioning about stingless bees in the one week that I had been there. Shebaco turned to Rut to ask a question, and Rut relayed that Shebaco had asked if we would like for him to “annoy the bees” so that they may come out and we could observe them. I felt no rush in doing such a thing, for the moment I was caught up in the outward nest architecture of this species, and I asked Rut to tell Shebaco as such. Shebaco’s face soured in disappointment. It was clear that he was (uncharacteristically, I might add) bored with my patient observing of this nest. He began to kick the dirt around in his boredom, then I saw him look the tree up and down a few times, then before I knew it he was whacking the tree with his machete. A mere second or two later I saw Shebaco jerk back, then I began to also feel the quick pains on my legs, arms, and face. I reminded myself of one of the first things I learned about these creatures: the bees may be *stingless* but that does not mean that they won’t bite if annoyed! Shebaco turned and ran right into the thick of the jungle, and as I followed right behind him, getting bit along the way, I thought of the oddness of the situation: a village elder, a translator, and a student all the way from Delaware running through the jungle to escape a horde of biting bees. When we came out

of the forest we all caught our breath, looked at each other, and laughed at the ridiculousness of the whole experience. Humor, I came to learn, is the most powerful thing that can be shared despite a language barrier. It hit me then that it was the first time on this trip that I felt truly comfortable, that I felt I was adventuring and experiencing the Amazon like I had first set out to do.

You see, like every other David A. Plastino scholar before me I was ready to adventure from the very beginning, it felt like nothing in the world could stop my momentum of excitement. However, I soon learned that the beginning of my trip would play out differently than I had imagined. The very first day, July 10th, I left for Washington D.C. to depart from Reagan National Airport. This was the first stop in an entire planned series of travel: from D.C. to Miami, Miami to Lima, Lima to Iquitos, then (after an overnight stay in Iquitos) a three-hour boat ride to a lodge in the Amazon. Adding to the sense of excitement was that this was my first real travel opportunity, I have never even been past the Mississippi river, not to mention a whole separate continent in one of its most remote areas!

At the airport I met with a few members of the expedition group that I planned to travel with, their goals in the Amazon were to set camera traps to gather data on species in the Sucusari basin (ancestral lands of the Maijuna, an indigenous group that we would be working with) and, hopefully, analyze the population dynamics of certain endangered species there. I was a tag-along researcher, like a few others on the expedition, and my goals were to study ethnobiological aspects of stingless beekeeping, analyze the pollen diets of stingless bees, and, as an added project since you can never have too little to do in the Amazon, I decided to set out in an analysis of stingless bee morphology (in other words to analyze their anatomy and body features). I was worried as a “newbie” to the Amazon and as someone who wasn’t even part of the main research

group that I would feel like an outcast among these people. Luckily for me they felt the same things that I did: some weird mixture of social awkwardness, like it's the first day at a new school, with nervousness and keen excitement at the thought of exploring and discovering in the rainforest. Sadly, this feeling was not to last for long. We were not so fragile as to let the usual things bog us down, not the chaotic security screenings, nor the long lines and waits, nor the first delay of our flight due to a storm in Florida. No, it would be the second and third delays that would bog us down, now we had to reschedule all our flights to instead happen the following day, and more importantly that burgeoning excitement had withered. The rest of my group lived in DC and got to go home for the night. I obviously did not and, again by an odd stroke of unluckiness, I could not get my clothes back from the airport as I had already checked my bags. Thank goodness, then, that I had such quick friends in this group: I stayed at an expedition member's apartment overnight and the next day I went to the airport to repeat the process again. This time there were no delays, and leaving D.C. I could feel the excitement returning.

The flight from DC to Miami went well, as did Miami to Lima, but this is where the next bit of trouble began. We arrived in Lima late, around 11:00pm or so, and before making it to the customs line I was stopped by an agent who asked what was in the large conspicuous clamshell case I dragged behind me. I should have realized this would happen! Inside it I carried the absolute heart and soul of my trip: a dissecting microscope that, if I were to be without it, I would not be able to carry out the bulk of my research. I was taken to a special room for inspection and placed next to another man who had brought down 10 laptops with him. The agent interviewing him, I was later told, suspected he brought them to Peru without declaring them so that he could resell this tech, which is illegal. Were they considering that I might be doing the same? Before long they determined that I was a legitimate researcher, but that I must

pay a “tax” of sorts on the microscope to bring it into the country, and that this money would be returned to me if I show the receipt when leaving. The bad news is that the microscope was not intended to return with me, it was rather intended to stay at the Amazon research station I was traveling to so that future researchers could also use it. Besides, after lugging it along only for this much trouble to be had, there was no way I wanted it back anyways!

After leaving the customs office I tried for an optimistic outlook. Again, life had other plans. At this point it was around 1:00am, and we had been up for nearly 20 hours. Add this to the physical stresses of traveling, eating differently than normal, and working out research details, and we were all feeling the need for some respite. The thing about the Lima airport is that there isn't a single comfortable spot to rest. We tried every spot we could, first seeing if we could somehow enter a lounge, then laying on benches (all turned out to be taken), and eventually resorting to the floor with our bags as a pillow. Minutes after we laid down the airport started to test their fire alarm system, and it set the tone for the next hour of “sleep” if you can call it that. We didn't manage to get any more than this, we were right back in line to catch our flight to Iquitos.

Iquitos is the largest city in the world that is inaccessible by road, you can only get there by boat or plane. It has a thriving atmosphere reminiscent of the larger context of Peruvian culture, but also retains its own identity rooted in their section of the Amazon, partly isolated from the rest of the country. I did not get much of a chance to experience the city initially, since we had to delay our flights a day we had to skip the hotel and head almost straight away to our boat to get to our lodges (the good news is that I got to experience Iquitos on our way back!). The boat left on the astoundingly large Amazon river, seeing the trees far off on the shore line reminded me of growing up near the ocean and trying to make out the details of sailboats off in

the distance. We began a three-hour journey to our lodge, up the Amazon, transitioning to the Napo river, and then onto the Sucusari river whose namesake is Sucusari, one of four villages inhabited by the Maijuna. I must ashamedly admit that I wasn't awake for most of this boat ride: the fatigue was overwhelming so far and, I was later to learn, I was experiencing the first signs of sickness that would last throughout my first week. Before long we arrived at our research lodge, ate a meal, and hiked to the other lodge that we would be sleeping in (some 20 minutes or so away, on a trail that ran right through the forest).

The first week was an adjustment week, most days proceeded as follows: wake up around 5:30 am, about when the generators would turn on, then at 5:45 immediately hike 20 minutes to the research lodge. Around 6:30 we would eat breakfast, then it was time to get ready for a 10-minute boat ride to Sucusari, where I would be hands on with stingless bees and interviewing stingless beekeepers. From this time, around 7:15 am or so, until 5:00 pm I would conduct research in the village and then eventually return to the lodge on another boat ride back. Then I would do what microscope work I could until 7:00, the usual time for dinner, then fit more microscope work before our 8:15 hike back to the lodge that we were sleeping in. Around 8:35 when we returned, it was time to shower in cold water pumped straight from the river, take my daily malaria medication, then carefully climb under the mosquito net into bed. Add all of this onto the sickness and the odd feeling of being among a group of relative strangers, and I had no room to get comfortable for that first week. Eventually things began to get better and, with that forest experience alongside Rut and Shebaco, I began to settle into the Amazon.

My research, as mentioned, was essentially divided into two parts: one was essentially anthropological, where I would be surveying stingless bee culture in Sucusari and the many cultural, economic, and social facets that it had. The other aspect of my research was scientific, I

had set out to not only develop a pollen library of stingless bee flower resources, wherein I would stain and photograph pollen grains using my microscope, but also to painstakingly photograph the many fine anatomical features of stingless bees such as leg parts, wing venation, and the like. As mentioned, from the moment we finished breakfast until the late evening I would work on these pursuits, and honestly I never quite tired of it. Soon enough the thoughts of the stingless bees and their place in this wonderful, sometimes bizarre, and absolute awe-inspiring world would invade even my dreams. Many nights I would awake before the generators turned on, in the pitch-black understory of the Amazon where even the brightest moonlight is blocked by the canopy, thinking about what avenues my research would lead me to in the next few days.

My anthropological surveying went very well overall. Our interviews were structured and never dull, and while the overlapping answers were fascinating, it was where we heard differing opinions, perspectives, and facts about Maijuna stingless bee culture that my mind would alight with curiosity. While the data I gathered on this trip has yet to be processed and eventually returned to the Maijuna in the form of a cultural database, I did notice many intriguing trends. For example, one area of interest in my surveying was Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), the knowledge the Maijuna had about stingless bees in their natural environments. While everyone we surveyed, whether a stingless beekeeper or not, knew the essential facets of how a stingless bee nest works, I noticed an interesting culture divide based on age wherein the younger members of the community *only* knew these aspects whereas the elders of the community were intimately familiar with the finer details of stingless bee behavior and inter-species interactions within the forest as well. There were even mentions of some insect interactions that I had not read of in my literature reviews to this point which, as a scientist, makes me go crazy with interest. This finding may indicate a diminishing sense of TEK in the community, the effects of

which would be dramatic not only for researchers in the area but for the Maijuna as well whose livelihood is intrinsically tied to the forest.

My pollen and morphological research went well too, though with a much more difficult start. My initial plan in sample pollen from understory flowers, flowers in the canopy (thanks to an elevated canopy walkway nearby our lodge), and eventually sample directly from the nests of the stingless bees who partition and store pollen to later feed to their young. However, in the first week it became glaringly obvious that this plan would not work out as intended: to be frank, despite the overabundance of flowers worked by these stingless bees for their nectar, in the understory there was a considerable lack of flowers being worked for pollen. The same was true for the canopy (I did not altogether mind this too much, despite the overwhelming beauty of the canopy and being dismayed that my research was hindered, the height of the walkway did make me uncomfortable!). Eventually we resorted to sampling directly from the nests of stingless bees, before we discovered another curious trend: the pollen stores of these stingless bees were often minimal or nonexistent, there was little pollen anywhere! In science, many times unexpected results are the most frustrating but the most interesting, as they lead to more research questions. In this case, despite the assumptions of many that there is an eternal flowering season constantly supplying nectar/pollen in the Amazon, I was perhaps seeing signs of a possible “pollen dearth” of sorts. I hypothesize that there is in fact a pollen dearth and that what little pollen is taken is immediately allocated to their young, which would explain why we were not seeing stores of it despite the fact that young bees were still being raised. More research would have to be done on to test this hypothesis this, but as for my research I was still able to obtain a decent number of pollen samples (if with an inordinate amount of effort). Where pollen research was lacking, I would make up for it with morphological analyses of the stingless bees, on total I photographed

the body details of 11 different species which have very little accessible documentation otherwise.

By the end of the second week, I had reached a comfortable rhythm of research, but with consistent 12-13 hour days I had been missing out on so much. Eventually I had been told by my other expedition members, who also had been working equally as hard, that despite the rigors of research I should also leave room for personal experiences in the Amazon. My first inclination was to shake off this suggestion of leisure (especially given my limited left), but I eventually decided to defer to those more experienced than myself and listen to their advice, and I am glad that I did. We only had one week left and, in that time, I made sure to make room for the activities that made the most of being in such a unique and beautiful location. Despite my incessant detailing so far of my journey, I do have to say that I cannot possibly tell all my stories here of my adventures that week, it would take much too long. But, at a glimpse, in that week I saw sloths, scarlet macaws, and pink river dolphins, fished for piranha and Sabalo on the Napo river, saw the sun rise on the Amazon river and enjoyed a campfire on a sandbar there that same night, helped to harvest yucca, enjoyed a demonstration of how to make a boat paddle with a machete, and engaged with Shebaco in impromptu Maijiki lessons (the native language of the Maijuna. The most special activity, though, was when I received a Maijiki name: this is a special ceremony wherein someone that the community feels familiar with receives a name (in Maijiki of course) of an animal that the person reminds them of, before having achiote pigment drawn on the face to confirm this naming. Fittingly for me the name given was *Sísico ua*, the name of a stingless bee that nests high in the canopy, a reference to my constant questioning about bees and my height. Before I knew it the week was over, I bid Shebaco and my many other new friends “Sayjee” in Maijiki (roughly pronounced sai-ye, meaning “goodbye”) and was on a boat back to

Iquitos. Before long I came to understand, though it sounds melodramatic, that I was saying goodbye to many other things in that moment as well.

Being back in Iquitos after so much time in the forest was an interesting change of pace, neither good nor bad. The adventure continued in some ways, for example we went to a restaurant in the middle of the Amazon river to celebrate, and I could not resist ordering Suri (grilled palm weevil beetle grubs on a skewer) which turned out to be delicious! That said, returning to the hotel room that night and experiencing the luxuries of cold AC and the comfortable heat of the shower, I couldn't help but feel a return to normalcy. This might sound like a nice thing but starting then and continuing to even this very moment, I find that I am not altogether happy with the sense of comfort and banal, luxurious routine. There was something to be said about waking up and hiking for twenty minutes to get breakfast, to become acquainted with the consistent heat and intense moisture everywhere (which reached the point where my books had fungus growing on them, needless to say I did not enjoy that part), to basically endure these difficulties that served to contrast with and highlight the many wonderful things about this world. Sure, many times these things were a pain, but I learned that sometimes, in a way, it is nice to embrace the uncomfortable and test oneself in difficult environments.

Then there are the lingering questions that I have, the quiet moments of "If I had done this, then would I...?" or "Why do I think the stingless bees did...?" To be frank, I think a bit of myself has been left behind there, and the part that is back here has been permanently charged with an itch to see the world. For example, I came to UD to study the honey bee, but it has turned out, with the David A. Plastino program's help, that the stingless bees have instead ignited my passion and obsession. Even now, I have continued to look for funding to revisit Sucusari in

2024, to pursue those burning questions that continue to occupy nearly every free space in my mind.

I was told many times before this trip that my life would never be the same after traveling to Peru, a saying that verges on sounding like a platitude until you experience it and learn like I have just how amazing it is to not only think about your passion and pursue it but to actually live it unabashedly. I have learned that being a Plastino Scholar is not necessarily a one-time thing. Even now I commit myself to the Plastino Scholar ideal of giving back, I tell every single student that I can of how amazing it is to pursue your passions and how they, too, should live up to their best selves and apply to be a Plastino Scholar as well. Moreover, in this one act of receiving such generous aid from the Plastino Scholar committee, I seek any way that I can to give back to the Amazon and the people there through study and scientific research.

Despite what I have written so far, I feel it cannot possibly encapsulate everything that I feel about this experience. In my mind it is so intimately tied with my constant journeying towards self-actualization that it is difficult to be written and conveyed. I can only hope what I have described so far has provided a brief glimpse at my time in Peru. In lieu of continuing to try to communicate what is impossible to communicate, I must formally thank David A. Plastino and the Plastino Scholars committee for their commitment to my dream and continuing to support the dreams of others, the impact that these persons are having is incredibly influential and the meaning of this support is salient to the growth of compassionate academics and professionals.

Amy Ciminnisi
September 28, 2023
Plastino Report

Overview

When COVID-19 hit in 2020, I had just learned that I was awarded the Plastino Award for my project, “Malaysia’s Hopeful Youth.” Amidst all the emotional turmoil at the height of the pandemic, I quickly found myself grieving not only the rest of my in-person college education, but the project that had been my driving force through several semesters. I remember sitting on my living room couch, back in my parents’ home once more, when I realized I may never get to see the places, eat the food, and embrace the friends I had made over the past several years.

The reassurance from Patricia and the Plastino committee that the funds were still available for my use was a glimmer of hope. Over two and a half years after when I was originally supposed to embark on my project, I opened up my old proposal and started thinking.

This project ended up being quite different than how I had originally planned. For one, my current job at a start-up meant that my intended four-week project would be reduced to two. With less time in Malaysia, I decided to scrap formal research and interviews and spend more time on participant observation. I would have a few questions I planned to ask when the conversation naturally allowed it, but my time would be spent visiting cultural sites, talking with friends and locals, and carefully watching the spaces and people around me.

Another significant difference is the unpredictable political climate. In a truly indescribable series of events, there have been four prime ministers of Malaysia since the pandemic began three years ago. When I proposed my project, former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, who Malaysians of all ages had hoped would bring about change, had overturned the reigning political party of 63 years. With a crisis commonly referred to as the Sheraton Move (but as a coup to most members of the general public), hope for a less corrupt government and socioeconomic change has nearly vanished, especially among young people who had recently received the right to vote.

I faced a difficult question. How could I begin to understand the shift in the hopes and dreams of Malaysia’s youth, when I missed ethnographic fieldwork during such a critical politically transitional period? I decided to begin my project and simply listen: to the people and friends I met, to ideas about Malaysian nationalism and identity, and to the media and cultural narratives in the cities to which I traveled.

Akmal and Malay Influences

When I arrived in Malaysia, my old friend from Patricia’s class, Akmal Marzuqi, picked me up at the airport. It was a tearful and surreal meeting, and as he drove me to my hotel, we stumbled through our first in-person conversation in five years.

Throughout my trip, Akmal stood by my side, explaining various cultural and historic aspects of Malaysia, answering my many questions, and driving me from city to city. He served

as my documenter, persuading me to pose for pictures at various murals, museums, and cultural sites and taking videos of me trying various Malaysian dishes. He also introduced me to his friends, a fascinating group of young Malays in various stages of their lives.

In Malaysia, there are three main ethnic groups, commonly termed as “races”: Malay, Chinese Malaysian, and Indian Malaysian. “Malaysian” refers to anyone who identifies as being from Malaysia, while “Malay” is a specific ethnic group outlined within the Constitution. Article 160 requires that Malays are Muslim, and they are often afforded many institutionalized economic and social privileges over other races.

Akmal, my best friend in Malaysia, is Malay (and therefore Muslim), so my trip was largely influenced by the experiences of one ethnic group. It also meant that most of the food that I ate was halal, so I rarely had Chinese or Indian Malaysian food. But from my experience in Patricia’s class, it is clear that he is very self-aware of the benefits of his identity, as are his Malay friends. Several of them nearly were expelled from college after taking place in a politically satirical play, one was dating a Chinese Malaysian (which is rare due to differences in religion), and all were open and accepting of my sexuality when I mentioned my girlfriend. This diversity of experiences within Akmal’s circle of friends provided me with a more nuanced understanding of Malay youth, and it made my trip even more enriching.

Latah: A Unique Experience

Early on in my study of Malaysia, Patricia introduced me to the concept of *latah* — a profound example of what anthropologists call “culture-bound syndromes.” Latah primarily affects women, is developed at some point in life, and is only seen within the Malay ethnicity. During an instance of *latah*, something startles the *melatah* (latah person). This can include poking, shouting, an item falling on the ground, or other loud noises. The *melatah* might shout obscenities, mimic words or gestures of the people around them, and often obey commands others give them. Provoking an episode is often a source of amusement and entertainment among friends — which I experienced firsthand, with two of Akmal’s friends who are *melatah*.

On my first night in Malaysia, Akmal took me to his friends’ house, where they were gathering for dinner after one returned from East Malaysia. It had been so long since I learned about *latah* that, as we were chatting over laksa and satay, I didn’t realize that Akmal was provoking *latah* episodes in his two friends until they asked me, “Are people *melatah* in America?” From then on, I watched in fascination as Akmal surprised his friend by saying her name quickly, she froze temporarily, clicked her tongue in disapproval, and resumed what she was doing. At other points, he told her to take miniscule bites of her food like a rabbit or blink quickly, and all commands were instantly obeyed, sometimes faster than my brain could process, which eliminated any sneaking suspicion of deception.

After dinner, as “Aunt Amy” was chatting with the hosts and playing with their children, Akmal started a frenzy in the WhatsApp group chat that included my parents, Patricia, Sharon, and my partner. When he mentioned that I was experiencing *latah* for the first time, my parents and partner got an anthropology lesson from Patricia and Sharon on what it was. Patricia

couldn't believe it. "OMG I'm having an anthropological CRISIS," she typed. "So here's the deal. [I've traveled for] 30 years back and forth to Malaysia and Amy gets to see this within 24 hours - unfair."

On the car ride back to my hotel, I asked Akmal why he thinks *latah* happens, and how people develop it. Many Malays believe that women have less *semangat*, or soul substance, and therefore have weaker souls, but Akmal says differently. He believes that because both of his friends used to tease, or incite, *melatahs* before they developed it themselves, it was perhaps a sort of karma. Others believe it is a response to traumatic events. Patricia, myself, and many other anthropologists hold a feminist interpretation of *latah*. In highly proper and polite cultures, *latah* serves as a socially acceptable avenue through which women (and perhaps those with other marginalized identities) transgress norms and express oneself without limitations. Whether solely culturally-driven or psychiatric, *latah* remains unexplained and fascinates anthropologists to this day.

Suburban Malaysia, Youth, and Minority Realities

One day, when Akmal had to return to work, I took the MRT outside of Kuala Lumpur to Taman Paramount, where I met up with Sharon Wilson-Ramendran. Sharon is an Indian Malaysian professor who partners with Patricia to facilitate the course that sparked my passion in 2018. We headed to Klang to pick up her nephew, Zach, and drove an hour to the Mah Meri Cultural Village, a site run by members of the Mah Meri tribe, one of the smallest indigenous groups in Malaysia.

As we drove, I took the opportunity to ask questions about politics and youth activism, which are difficult topics for Malaysians to express opinions about when in public settings because the government's priority is to keep the peace. We spoke about the different government-defined economic groups, the college admission process that Zach was currently experiencing, and eventually, political figures. When I asked Zach if his friends were interested in politics, he gave the same answer as Akmal - no, because "things won't change." Sharon chimed in that there were a few students, who you would typically see on the Student Council, who get involved, but that most people feel that if they went into politics, they would be outnumbered. It appeared that much of the hope I saw after the 2018 General Election victory had been squandered by the political confusion and corruption that followed.

Passing palm oil estates, Sharon shared that many youth are leaving the estates that their families have worked and lived in for generations to live in Kuala Lumpur. When I mentioned that this is reminiscent of company towns in the United States, where one's salary ultimately returns to the company, Sharon agreed but pointed out that many young people can and do leave the estates for higher-paying jobs in Kuala Lumpur.

Prompted by my limited knowledge of palm oil, I asked whether or not young adults are concerned about climate change, a primary political topic within the United States. Sharon shared that it was not a priority. Especially within the Indian Malaysian community, the highest concerns are regarding discrimination in housing and employment.

Sharon's husband, Charles, echoed this sentiment later in the day as we were sitting in their local *mamak* stall. Young people, he said, are actively choosing to not learn Tamil and focus on perfecting English because many companies are Chinese-Malaysian (Malay/Islamic businesses nearly always hire only Malays). Sharon agreed, and said that colorism is rampant even within their own community. Because people often assume that Charles is Black, shopkeepers often follow and watch them in stores, and when they went to the bank to apply for a mortgage, employees assumed they were scammers.

In the midst of these complex challenges and social dynamics, where youth and minority groups are struggling to be heard and pessimism based on past experience prevails, it becomes clear that there's much community organizing and activism work to be done to create a more equitable future for all Malaysians.

Closing

It was difficult picking a select few topics to highlight in this report, and I still have so much to share, especially about my research topic. I could cry from happiness thinking about getting to eat kek lapis Sarawak, nasi lemak, teh tarik, and laksa nyonya (even if it was so spicy that I hiccupped). And the cultural experiences – I could have spent forever in the Baba & Nyonya Heritage Museum, captivated by the tiles under my feet and delving into the rich history of the Peranakan culture, or sipping tea at the Boh Tea Centre in the Cameron Highlands, surrounded by rolling hills of tea. Muzium Kraf, with shimmering *songket* (handwoven textiles), vibrant *wau* (kites), and intricate *wayang kulit* (shadow puppets), was another highlight that left me wanting to explore even more.

But as I sat at the very top of Penang Hill with Akmal on my second-to-last day, tears started to fill my eyes. Yes, I would miss Malaysia with all my heart, and the past two weeks had contained so many moments of both sheer joy and the growing pains of solo travel. But they were the most affirming and fulfilling two weeks of my 24 years. The journey had not only exposed me to Malaysia's beauty, the warmth of its people, and its captivating politics, but had also unwrapped a new layer of self-discovery. My adventure in Malaysia was not just about the places I had explored; it was about the personal growth and memories that had become an integral part of me. I knew that this was not the end but merely the closing chapter of my story. Since 2018, Malaysia had captured my heart, and I was leaving a piece of it behind, forever grateful for the opportunity to experience the transformation these two weeks had brought. With a hug and tearful smile, Akmal and I began the trek down Penang Hill and set off toward the future, ready to embrace the next chapter of my journey.

Clara Cvik
David A. Plastino Scholars Program

**Girls are from Saturn, Boys are from Jupiter, and Urban Planners are from Scandinavia:
A study on the practices, city plans, and culture of the most livable cities in the world**

Introduction

When trying to explain the impact this project has left on me, it's difficult to know where to start. On May 17th of 2023, I left for Copenhagen, Denmark where I stayed for seven days. On the 24th, I took a 38-minute train to Malmö, Sweden, just across the Øresund. After a five-day stay in Malmö, I traveled just under three hours North to Gothenburg Sweden. A short work-week later, I boarded my last train to Stockholm, where I would stay for a week before heading back to the U.S. During my trip, I had the opportunity to interview Mads Kjær Ravn, Architect and Project Manager at Gehl; Nilas Lätt, Landscape Architect at the Scandinavian Green Roof Institute; Lina Eriksson, Project Manager at Hoppet; Angélica Karlsson, Strategic Circular Construction Manager at Hoppet; Katarina Thorstensson, Head of Sustainability at Gothenburg and Co; and Nanna, the garden manager at ØsterGro. In addition to my interviews, I visited sites of green architectural innovation, such as Sankt Kjeld Square and Bryggervangen, SUND Nature Park, Hans Tavsens Park, and Ekostaden Augustenborg. Through research, observations, and lived experiences, I've come to understand cities as the solution to some of America's leading social, economic, and environmental issues. My conclusions can be divided into four areas of focus: transportation, third spaces, built infrastructure, and culture.

Transportation

When I arrived in Copenhagen, my first stop of the trip, I felt as though I'd entered a utopia. It's difficult to overstate how deeply biking is ingrained in Copenhagen's culture and lifestyle, and this all stems from its world-renowned transportation infrastructure. My Airbnb host kindly lent me a bike to use for the duration of my stay and just one short trip to the grocery store taught me that I needed to do some research before venturing out again. Riding a bike in Scandinavian cities is akin to driving a car in U.S. cities, and I felt like I was getting behind the wheel for the first time. The bike paths are extremely well developed, so much so that they mimic streets. Each intersection has traffic lights, turn lanes, and signage for cyclists. These cities have also designed transportation systems to make biking safer and more convenient. There are numerous bike highways and biking bridges that only allow cyclists and other micro-mobility alternatives that don't exceed 12.4 miles per hour. They have also implemented continuous sidewalks that cross intersections without a break in the footpath. This requires motorists to slow down as they rise to the level of the sidewalk and reminds them that they are now interacting with cyclists and pedestrians. One example of a simple infrastructure addition that drastically improves biker accessibility is a runnel. Runnels are straight steel guides on staircases that allow bikers to easily get their bikes up or down. Though bike parking infrastructure in Scandinavian cities is still in its infancy, the projects that have been completed to date show a great deal of innovation and promise for the future. Some projects, like Karen Blixens Plads in Copenhagen, serve as a site of social activity and flood mitigation while offering sheltered parking for hundreds to thousands of bicycles. Other, more traditional parking garages, have been implemented as well. In Gothenburg, the Gamlestad Square Parking Garage

is three floors and includes space for 600 bicycles, as well as room for special bikes and a service station.

To deepen my understanding of the public transportation infrastructure in Scandinavian cities, I swore off Übers and taxis at the beginning of my trip. I relied entirely on trains, buses, metros, bikes, and walking, trying to utilize Google Maps as little as possible. Given that I had only used public transportation a handful of times prior to arriving in Scandinavia, the overlapping maps filled with colors and symbols were incredibly overwhelming at first. Yet after a couple of days, I began paying less attention to memorizing street names and metro lines and was able to focus my attention on the culture living inside of the buses, trains, and stations. Individuals of all ages, races, and socioeconomic statuses frequent public transportation. Well-developed transportation infrastructure increases accessibility for all and offers social opportunities that help shape the urban fabric of a city. It also offers independence to children at a much younger age than in auto-dependent areas. Biking culture flourishes in Scandinavian cities because the infrastructure allows it to do so. We cannot expect people to act in a way that is inconvenient to them, therefore, city planners are responsible for making public transit and cycling accessible, quick, and safe.

Third Spaces

In a world where we have a first space, our home, and a second space, our work, we require another space that nurtures human connection and community. In the 1980s, Ray Oldenburg, an American sociologist, defined this as the “third space”. Third spaces – such as cafés, taverns, skateparks, libraries, and public parks – offer informal environments for social interaction. Given the nature of my trip, I spent a great deal of time not just observing, but experiencing third spaces. Nearly every day of my trip began in a coffee shop and ended in a public park. This allowed me to truly grasp the importance of third spaces for developing a sense of community and shared identity within cities. Even as an English-speaking tourist, I was able to partake in some thoughtful conversations while visiting Scandinavian coffee houses. I explained my project to a number of workers and customers and received recommendations, advice, and personal insight from residents of the cities I was researching.

The most easily accessible form of third spaces is public parks. In addition to offering various social benefits to urban communities through the “third space” concept, public parks offer numerous ecological and environmental benefits. Green spaces are effective in reducing air and water pollution, the urban heat island effect, and flooding. Studies have confirmed that separation from nature is detrimental to human development, health, and well-being. Living in an urban area does not have to be synonymous with decreased access to nature, and Scandinavian cities are a prime example of this. Kungsparken and Slottsparken in Malmö is a contiguous parkland that I spent a great deal of time observing. On the first day that I visited the 24.4-hectare park, I ate at the Garden Cafè, watching teenagers jump off of a small bridge into the water of the canals below them. The canal that runs through the park offers a place for residents to swim, kayak, and paddleboard. It’s also lined with floating docks that provide waterside seating. After my snack at Garden Cafè, I sat on one of the docks, reading my book with my feet in the water, till the sun began to set. The only indication of time passing was the exchange of people conversing, playing games, fishing, and laughing. During my second visit, I made it a point to explore more of the park. I explored Slottsträdgården, the windmill, and the

area surrounding Stora Dammen pond. Given that my trip took place in late May, I had the added fortune of watching mother geese, ducks, and swans teaching their babies. I was entirely engulfed in nature, feeling as connected as ever, all within the boundaries of the third-largest city in Sweden. There was seating offered throughout the park, some next to bodies of water and some nested away in the densely forested corners. By sunset, every inch of the meadows was filled with picnic blankets. Curious children chased after birds and elderly couples walked hand in hand around the Stora Dammen. The Danish landscape architect who was contracted to design Kungsparken and Slottsparken saw parks as an integral part of everyday life for all ages and social classes. This park, as well as every other park I visited on my trip, mimicked this view perfectly. However green third spaces offer more than just social benefits and opportunities. Hans Tavsens Park in Copenhagen, Denmark is a prime example of using landscape architecture as an environmental solution. In 2016, the City of Copenhagen hired SLA, a nature-based architecture firm, to transform the 8.5 hectare park into an added system of the city's rainwater management plan. The project included the implementation of a network of sunken basins and water-purifying plants. During cloudbursts, the park collects rainwater and leads excess water from the park, through a series of cleansing natural biotopes, to Peblinge Lake. Hans Tavsens is split into four squares by a path that allows pedestrians and bikes. The smaller paths that run throughout the park are reserved for foot traffic. Plants, bushes, and trees further section the park into small, private areas for tanning, picnics, reading, and games. These areas of the park exhibit a classic, European garden-like atmosphere with topiaries, sculptures, fountains, and flowers. Other areas offer more open space with more opportunities for play. There are designated sports courts and outdoor games like Kubbe, cornhole, and bocce. Despite the massive size of this park, it was difficult to find an unpopulated area. Individuals of all ages, genders, and races patronized this park, filling the air with laughter and excitement.

Built Infrastructure as a Solution

A majority of the interviews and site visits I completed during my three weeks in Scandinavia were regarding built infrastructure as a solution to environmental, social, and economic issues. My first interview was with Mads Kjær Ravn, an architect and project manager at Gehl. Mads pointed me toward a book written by one of the founders of Gehl, "Soft City" by David Sim. This book and interview offered innovative ways to accommodate density while simultaneously developing active ground floors, a sense of community, and safe outdoor spaces. The main concept we explored was enclosed blocks, as well as horizontal and vertical layering. Enclosed blocks create a better microclimate, protected acoustic space, protected air space, and a secure zone for building residents to develop a sort of shared backyard. Meanwhile, horizontal and vertical layering of buildings allows for different activities in accordance with the varying shapes and sizes of available spaces. A building that is both horizontally and vertically layered supports numerous types of occupants, from stores to residences to cafés to workspaces. Having different occupants also promotes safety and street culture. When tenants frequent the building at different hours of the day, there is a sense of twenty-four-hour surveillance. Different-sized spaces also result in different rent costs, further promoting the socio-economic diversity of an area. Mads also explained the impact of public transportation on urban sprawl and the different ways to minimize car dependency in expanding suburban regions. Since I grew up in the urban

sprawl of New York City, it's fascinating to see the ways suburbs can be reimagined without driveways or parking lots.

While in Malmö, I had the opportunity to meet with Nilas Lätt, a Landscape Architect for the Scandinavian Green Roof Institute. In addition to giving me a tour of the roof, Nilas showed me the Augustenborg neighborhood of Malmö and explained the work that has been done to manage the area's severe flooding issues. Augustenborg is a district of Malmö that became physically dilapidated and socially deprived in the years succeeding the early 1980s due to an inadequate drainage system that resulted in recurrent seasonal flooding. In 1998, the district initiated an extensive urban renovation program under the name Ekostaden. The first way Ekostaden sought to manage flooding was by introducing canals attached to the drainage pipes. The drainage system leads directly into a canal that leads the water through a system of increasingly large canals. The plants and grasses surrounding the canals serve as an additional level of security, functioning to absorb and retain water. The canals are all directed into two connected ponds. One of the ponds is shallower than the other so there's a constant flow of water. The down-sloped pond holds a pipe that is constantly filtering water back to the other side. This cycle prevents the water from becoming stagnant. The infrastructure was proven as a success in 2014 when a 150-year rain event hit Malmö and the neighborhood experienced no flooding. Ekostaden serves as proof that relatively simple stormwater management systems have the potential to transform a disadvantaged area. This idea can, and should, be replicated in areas facing similar issues.

When in Gothenburg, I had the opportunity to interview Lina Eriksson, Hoppet's project manager, and Angélica Karlsson, Hoppet's strategic circular construction manager. Hoppet is Sweden's first fossil-free preschool, constructed using the frame of an old office space in Backbol, Gothenburg. My conversation with Lina Eriksson formed a basic knowledge of the building process, as well as how the team managed to stay fossil fuel-free. She explained what aspects of the original building were saved for use and how cost, safety, and architectural requirements factored into the project. During construction, it was Angélica Karlsson's job to serve as the connection between building and ground engineers, architects, project managers, electricians, plumbing, acoustics, moisture experts, etc. She also tracked whether reused materials were cost-negative, neutral, or positive, and ensured the finalized project was net-neutral. The school, which was completed at the end of 2021, challenges the construction industry to establish a new standard of fossil-free construction.

While traveling throughout the cities, I was able to stop at numerous parks, squares, and third spaces that utilized green space to decrease flooding and the greenhouse effect while actively promoting biodiversity. Two examples of this are Sankt Kjeld Square and SUND Nature Park. Sankt Kjeld Square is a cloudburst mitigation project designed by Bjørn Ginman for the City of Copenhagen. Prior to its renovation, the area was a gray, monotone roundabout that frequently suffered from flooding issues due to poor drainage and lack of vegetation. There were few bike paths and no social opportunities for citizens. Given its location in Copenhagen's Climate-Resilient neighborhood of Østerbro, the City of Copenhagen hired a nature-based design studio, SLA, to transform the area. Utilizing plant specialists and architects, SLA planted 586 new trees of 48 local species and converted two-thirds of the area's asphalt, equivalent to 9,000 m², into green urban spaces. In the process, formerly trafficked roads were narrowed and new bicycle routes were added to stimulate mobility. Being that Sankt Kjeld Square is located between two nearby parks, the space now functions as a dispersal corridor and increases

biodiversity in the city. The life-cycle cost of this project, along with many green infrastructure projects, is quite low. The design implements the “wild growth” concept that requires less and cheaper maintenance. In addition to the social, ecological, and economic benefits, the renovation has proven successful in mitigating flooding from cloudbursts. Coincidentally, the day I planned to visit Sankt Kjeld Square and Bryggervangen was a stormy one, and I had the fortune of seeing the design in action – and in case my praise isn’t enough, the project’s effectiveness earned it the Arne of the Year Award. SUND Nature Park is another SLA project completed for Bygningsstyrelsen and the University of Copenhagen. The project surrounds the Mærsk Tower, the University of Copenhagen’s new health sciences research complex. It included the construction of a park, multiple green roofs, a bike-friendly bridge, and an underground bicycle parking lot that can accommodate 1,000 bikes. Rainwater from the park, building, and green roofs is collected and naturally cleansed in the park and underground reservoirs to be recycled for park irrigation and building greywater. This site was particularly interesting to visit because I was able to witness the culture of fellow college students. Students were gathered outside, studying, eating, and talking throughout the green space. It felt reminiscent of the way students congregate on the Green at the University of Delaware on warm, sunny days.

Culture

Though the culture between Scandinavian and American cities is similar in some manners, there are drastic differences when it comes to the general mindset on sustainability. Scandinavians practice sustainability in a way that is seemingly mindless – as if there is no other way than the environmentally friendly way. In addition to their culture surrounding infrastructure, their consumption habits are far more environmentally minded than the average. The general environment surrounding food and grocery stores in Nordic cities is a testament to not only the culture of health and nutrition but also sustainability. Given that businesses are representative of what consumers want, it can be very powerful to look at the recurrent themes that appear in shops. During my trip, I visited a grocery store nearly every day, stopping at different types to get a comprehensive view. The variety of fresh, local produce was consistent throughout the different grocery stores and chains. Also consistent was the minimization of plastic use; it was common to find bulk and dry goods, like legumes, teas, and nuts, entirely unpackaged. For items that require packaging, like beverages, peanut butter, and jams, it was far more common to find glass or cardboard containers as opposed to plastic. When preparing a meal at a market salad bar in Stockholm, I was pleased to see that the only plastic was the lid of the container. The bowl itself was cardboard and the utensils were made of wood and wrapped in paper. I also observed that there were a great deal of independent grocery stores. While I did a lot of my shopping at stores like Føtex or Netto, I made it a habit to stop into small markets, like Vegetarisk Mat and Fram Ekolivs. Fram Ekolivs is a market that excels in its sustainability for a number of reasons. All of their suppliers are local to decrease transportation costs and employees recycle all cardboard and plastic themselves. They have made it a standard to remain below 20-30 liters of food waste per week and do so by lowering the price of food rather than throwing it away. Another testament to both sustainability can be observed through the packaging and material of hygiene products and household appliances. A large selection of bamboo toothbrushes, combs, and kitchen utensils was common in grocery and convenience stores. Products like shampoo, laundry detergent, and disinfectant spray were often packaged in a way

that omitted or minimized plastic. There was also a wide selection of menstrual cups, a sustainable alternative to cotton menstruation products like tampons and pads.

Scandinavian countries also offer innovative dining experiences to promote sustainability. While in Copenhagen, I had the opportunity to interview the farm manager at Østergro, the first rooftop farm in Denmark, and volunteer as a gardener. The fresh produce, eggs, and honey are sold in cooperation with Stensbølgård farm to 40 members who pay in advance for a weekly share of the harvest. The garden also serves as a form of community-supported agriculture (CSA) and invites volunteers to garden every Tuesday from 10 am to 6 pm. Gro Spiseri, the restaurant associated with Østergro, hosts one community table with room for 25 people in the rooftop greenhouse. Guests prepay for meals so the kitchen prepares food exactly the number of guests joining them, thus reducing food waste. Gro Spiseri also sources their food strictly from local growers, producers, and hunters, thereby decreasing the emissions associated with distribution. Between pulling weeds and planting tomatoes, I was able to interview Østergro's garden manager, Nanna. Nanna helped explain Østergro's mission, as well as the impact it has had on the community.

Another green dining experience was my meal at Restaurang Svinn in Gothenburg. Restaurang Svinn is a manifestation of the belief that social security is a human right, and no person should go unfed. Every week, Gothenburg City Mission rescues ten tons of food from manufacturers, wholesalers, and stores in the food industry. Most of this food is discarded by the food industry due to a short date, mislabeling, damaged packaging, or misshapen produce. Gothenburg City Mission's Food Centre receives this food waste and handles, stores, and packs it before sending approximately 80% to people in poverty throughout Gothenburg. According to their website, "each week, close to 500 food bags are distributed to children, adults and the elderly who otherwise cannot afford to eat their fill". The remaining food is then delivered to Restaurang Svinn or served to people who live in various forms of exclusion, such as those facing addiction problems or mental illness. This is a brilliant way for cities to help the environment by reducing food waste while supporting its people.

Conclusions

This report serves only as a synopsis of the research I was able to gather from this life-changing opportunity. This grant allowed me to recognize a passion within myself that will fuel my career and life goals indefinitely. I see my lessons from this project in everything I do, from the largest cities in the world to the most rural. I have a permanently altered view of transportation, architecture, green spaces, and streetscapes. This opportunity has also allowed me to network with many incredible people and develop strong connections with others in my industry. One of the strongest connections I've made is with Mads Kjær Ravn at Gehl. Gehl is my dream company to work for and I've already begun exploring internship opportunities with the help of Mads. Through this project, I learned about the importance of livable cities and the power they have to enhance people's lives. I'm incredibly grateful for the opportunity and will take these lessons and connections with me as I continue to learn and grow as an aspiring urban planner.

Emma Knapp
Plastino Report

All I Have Learned: The Philippines and Beyond

Having arrived home from my Plastino only a few days ago, I now find myself seated at my bedroom desk, the exact spot I wrote and researched for my project the previous winter. I feel the sameness of the space around me. My bedroom walls are painted the same muted yellow and the same worn carpet lies upon the hardwood floor. My windows' view to the street below hosts the same cars parked in their driveways and the same neighbors are on their daily walks. But what is different in my view this time are the trees. Those which the cold January once made appear barren and empty, have now grown vivid green leaves, visible down the entire length of the street. At this moment I see that my journey is similar to the tree branches that I now consider. Much like the branches changing their leaves across seasons, I too continuously adapt, shedding old beliefs and habits that no longer serve me to make room for new perspectives and insights. But the leaves cannot go through this process by themselves. Plants require light for photosynthesis, they use the sun's energy to create their own food in order to go through this cycle. The role of the sun to the tree is precisely how the Plastino acted for me. Just how the plants rely on the sun to create something for themselves, this opportunity has allowed me to produce my own plan for self-growth. Rather than being handed the lessons I learned as one might in the classroom, I was able to write my own project, use what was given to me by the Plastino to teach myself and further my own goals. The purpose of my Plastino was to discover the lasting implications of colonization in the Philippines, especially on the identity of the people, but what I discovered about myself in the process, I find equally significant. The first part of this reflective essay will be an evaluation of my project and its findings, followed by an account of some personal lessons I learned through my visit. Most importantly, I hope that this essay will demonstrate the personal transformation that took place for me during my Plastino.

Reviewing my time abroad this summer, I am reminded of a quote by Mexican poet Octavio Paz, who once said his country was a mix of three realities: the Aztec, the colonial, and the modern. Like any country that was colonized and still has a large indigenous population, these combined realities are similar to that which I found in the Philippines and were key to understanding the Filipino people's cultural identity. What makes this country unique is its experience of double colonization, which creates a blend of essentially four realities: the indigenous, the Spanish, the American, and the modern. Through museum trips, professor interviews, and student group visits, I learned the great extent to which Spain and the U.S left an impression on the country's culture. I discovered that although the Philippines revolted against both colonizers in the past, and despite the controversial occupancies by both countries, today there is minimal push-back against this foreign cultural presence. In this essay, I want to explore *why* I think that is, since while I was in the Philippines this answer was not clear to me. After contemplating the culmination of my experiences in the country, project related or not, I now believe that colonial culture is accepted for a combination of four reasons.

First, in respect to Spain's cultural presence, protest would be pointless due to how deeply-rooted Spanish culture is into the original Malay culture. I initially gained indications of this intertwinedness of culture when looking at the surnames of each professor I interviewed, including, Professors Ubaldo, Santiago, Jabar, and Tolentino, to name a few. Not only in names of individuals, but of the names of islands, streets, and even the country itself. Other evidence was in the language. Reading certain Tagalog phrases was like reading Spanish if the words were spelled slightly differently. For example, "How are you?" is "Kamusta ka?" in Tagalog, almost exactly pronounced like "Cómo está?", which is Spanish. In addition, they use the same Spanish number system to ten and have the same names for the months in the year. Another prominent

aspect of Spanish influence is in the architecture, where examples can be mainly found in Intramuros, an old walled Spanish city home to colonial buildings along cobble-stone streets which is the pride of the capital. This landmark includes the famous Manila Cathedral and Saint Augustin Church, leading to the greatest lasting impact of all: Catholicism, where the Philippines remains one of two of the only predominantly Catholic countries in Asia. The Spanish presence is astounding, and this cultural synthesis creates a unique identity of what can be considered “Hispanized Malay”. After 333 years of colonization, these two cultures are so entirely fused that it would be almost senseless to try and completely dispel Spanish-influenced aspects that still persist. Although American colonization came directly after that of the Spanish, it was for less than a quarter of the time, and so the Philippines’ relationship with American culture is entirely different. While it too is embraced in the country, the people’s reason for doing so changes.

It seems that Filipino resistance against adopting American culture is limited because American colonizers have ingrained in their minds a condescending attitude toward traditional ways and instead have promoted a “grateful” attitude for themselves respectively. This is evident from the very start of their colonization, where the U.S promoted its occupancy in the country by claiming that it was the “White Man’s Burden” to help the “uncivilized” peoples of the Philippines. Under the U.S, the quality of life was better than under the Spanish, and eventual independence was promised from almost the very beginning. Because of this, they are painted as the “heroes” who rescued the Filipinos from oppressive Spanish rule. This idea of the superiority of American culture was reinforced through the introduction of the U.S education system. Filipino children learning English were taught the “ABCs”, where “A” stood for apple, even when apples don’t grow in their tropical climate. The professor I interviewed said they created “little brown Americans” as they were conditioned to think like an American even though many

aspects of that culture were foreign to them. Appreciation of America is evident in museums, where I saw paintings of American historical figures being revered. In the malls, where American brands and capitalism culture is apparent everywhere (they even had an “American Bazaar” which only sold U.S convenience store products). The university, where they had an “American Corner” with U.S landmarks painted on walls, an entire major dedicated to American Studies, and a study abroad fair for only U.S universities. I felt the admiration of America in everyday interactions with locals as people asked me questions, stared at me, and asked to take photos with me. I noticed lasting colonial dominance in the beauty standard. I had an officer ask to take a photo with me and when I asked why he told me it was because I was “beautiful like a celebrity”. I saw families covered head to toe when swimming to avoid being darkened by the sun. I saw whitening and skin bleaching products on the shelves of every beauty store. When I mentioned this to a professor, he educated me on the greatest “whitening product” of all and the goal of most Filipino women: to marry a White man. Filipino culture was suppressed by the U.S for so long that it has created a detrimental preference to Americanization and therefore no desire for resistance against assimilation.

The third reason I think there is a lack of opposition to colonial culture is that the poverty that most of the county is facing takes issues of culture partly off of their minds as they are instead focusing on providing for their families. It was made very clear to me that the issues I was exploring were only really known in detail to highly educated individuals, and the wealth disparity I observed was shocking. Like any city, the rich and poor live together, but I had never seen a gap this apparent in any city I have previously been to. I would be walking along a sidewalk, polluted water filling the street where barefoot children played and stray animals roamed, and then I would turn the corner and walk into a three-story mall full of luxury shops

and hundreds of shoppers. Again, I would visit the richest business district with towering modern buildings, but two streets over see an entire family asleep in the street. But I didn't see the worst of the poverty until an anthropology professor offered to take me to the small indigenous community that he studies. The community, called Alangan Mangyan, sits at the base of Mt. Halcon along the Alangan River. The purpose of our visit was to feed the children their lunch, as he explained that if you ask them their favorite meal they will respond "rat". He said almost every girl I saw would be married off in the next few years, and that many of them walked for hours to and from the town to get supplies and find work. Seeing this first hand opened my eyes to an entirely other state of living and brought together many lessons from previous college courses right before my eyes. I think poverty is a major factor in what the average citizen of a nation is thinking about. These people were not concerned with cultural oppression, they were preoccupied with trying to climb out of poverty.

The last reason I think colonial cultures are embraced today, as said by a professor I interviewed, is that Filipino people are forgiving and adaptable. They took what happened to their country at face-value, and mixed their own indigenous culture into those of the colonial powers. Today, that creates the unique culture and identity that the people of the Philippines share. When you visit this country, you will of course understand this blend of culture that I have just discussed, but most prominently, you will see that Filipino people are the most hospitable in the world. It is due to the kindness of students and professors I met who shared their stories with me that I was able to be exposed to cultural phenomena I would have never gotten to experience otherwise. The relationships I fostered due to this trip have changed me in ways I couldn't imagine. From my connection with the anthropologist, I look forward to furthering my career in international relations and completing more field work projects, and hopefully one day return to

the Alangan Mangyan tribe to see their progress and support them. From the friends I made at DLSU, I hope to meet up with them one day in either the U.S and share with them more about my country and how I grew up. And overall, from my new found connection to this country, I cannot wait to return and explore each of its islands, becoming even more familiar with its culture and people.

Since I last sat at this desk seven months ago, I have learned exponentially more about Filipino history and culture, along with how colonial dominance has impacted the population's identity today. But not only have I grown academically, I have also grown as a person in ways only travel can allow. I learned how to handle adversity and take on challenges, I made strangers into friends, and I discovered how to be confident while alone. I met travelers that opened my eyes to all the alternative paths my life could take, people that made me excited about life, excited about all the places I can visit one day, and all that my future might hold. My Plastino gave me unforeseen opportunities that stretched tremendously past the scope of my project and gave me a greater appreciation for travel-based learning. Just as branches grow leaves that change their color and fall with the seasons, this project caused me to manage my assumptions and adapt my preconceptions to fit my new picture of myself and the society I live in. My Plastino placed me outside of my comfort zone and forced me to analyze myself and new situations. Like the changing leaves, this process is continuous. The same as all of my beliefs, what I learned on my trip will eventually be challenged, and once again I will reevaluate myself and my understanding of the world to evolve my previous notions of what I know to be true. Abroad or at home, in or out of the classroom, I look forward to finding my next "sun", the next opportunity that will allow me to learn and grow in the many ways that the Plastino did.

Hailey Kremenek

2023 Plastino Award Reflection

Before embarking on this journey I felt that I was in danger of falling in love with textile art and abandoning conservation to become a weaver in rural Ireland who makes lace on the weekends. Luckily, my travels through the Plastino Award have made the conservation of historical textiles become my life's mission. Changes in fashion, technology, and societal needs are reflected in textiles, and this glimpse into the past is what makes art so valuable. While abroad I was able to share experiences with the past artists whose work I was studying as I walked around their cities. I felt the weather patterns and architecture that guided how they worked and lived. My direct perception of why people made and wore certain textiles enriched my interpretation of their presence in daily life.

In Dublin I became acquainted with the River Liffey. The swans swam alongside me in the ancient waterway as I walked to the train station in the morning or back to my hostel at night. I spent my first afternoon at Ireland's National Museum, where ancient stone tools and hammered bronze jewelry told me that the Irish had craft in their lineage. My favorite objects were the bog clothes. My love for textiles is a losing battle, as their historically plant and animal fiber construction is highly biodegradable. Yet, the pair of tweed pants and brick red cotton jacket that fell off a carriage transporting goods or luggage were preserved in the antimicrobial peat for centuries. It was only my first day in Ireland, and I already saw how the land sustained its craft heritage.

By way of a quick train ride I went to Drogheda to meet Aine Dunne. At her converted-barn studio I spent the first of two days learning tapestry weaving. I created a small piece that mimicked the same plain weave I saw on the bog jacket. The next day we used a table-top fourcard loom that did the same weaving motions of my hands, but with a series of hooks and wires. Here is where I realized that textile innovation did not change the foundational technique, but mechanized the process. More important than the lesson was the friendship I developed with Aine through our time together. The colloquialism "spinning a yarn" comes from the conversation that arose between women as they sat together processing

wool on spinning wheels or drop spindles. After showing me the process of weaving, Aine and I spent most of our time talking as I practiced. Aine has been a tapestry artist since she was a teenager. She teaches classes and produces commissions for private clients, but she has had to supplement her income through working in the medical field. She spoke about the toll it took on her artistic productivity as trying to get in the right headspace after a day of work felt impossible. Last year the national Arts Council established a funding opportunity that artists could apply for to receive a year's income. Aine applied, but she said that the government had to revert to a lottery system after the enormous flood of applicants. This system isn't perfect, but it was far beyond anything I imagined could happen in the United States. As a working artist, Aine was doing another type of conservation. Her weaving practice kept the ancient craft alive in the present day.

My next lesson was in wool spinning. Sandra Cootes runs *Crafts of Ireland*, a tea room and workshop space on her family farm. I was happy to see more of the countryside in County Cavan, Virginia, which was so rural that I offended three separate cab companies by requesting their service from the bus stop to her house. With Sanda and five other students, I created my own full skein of yarn from wool that was shorn from her flock of Roscommon sheep the previous season. Within textiles is generational knowledge of movements that have been passed down and developed as humanity had new needs for clothing. I wanted to learn these techniques so I could understand objects that I may come across in conservation, but also to preserve this memory within myself.

I spent two days outside of Dublin with Ann Keller. Mountmellick lace is the only craft developed originally in Ireland, and has been in her family since before her grandmother. Ann taught me the four original Mountmellick stitches, and showed me examples of her own work that incorporated other traditional techniques. From Ann I learned about the current state of textiles in Ireland. Despite a strong culture of lace guilds, sewing skills are not taught in schools, a national textile museum does not exist, and there is not a lace conservator in Ireland. The void in the care for traditional textiles is hard to understand given the country's heritage. From these conversations, I understood the need for advocacy of textile heritage more than ever.

After a week in Ireland, I arrived in Bruges. I was unprepared for the view from the bus as I arrived at streets lined with gingerbread house-looking facades and cobblestone streets. I got off at a random stop because I didn't care how long I had to walk to my hostel if it meant getting better acquainted with this magical city. After a canal ride featuring the highest style in medieval houses and churches, I ate dinner in a square beside a statue of Jan Van Eyck. The next day featured museums full of paintings by Flemish masters and decorative arts designed by master artisans. The grandeur of the city inspired one to have a better posture and be more conscious of their appearance, as I felt myself dressing up each time I left my hostel. I began to understand the city's historical appetite for luxury textiles.

Belgium was the main producer of lace between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. It takes me hours to create a six-inch strip of basic half-stitch, so to produce yards of elaborate lace to appease an international demand requires a large workforce. Herein lies the antithesis of lace history that has fascinated me. The people who actually produced the luxury textile were often poor women and children. Lace schools were set up to teach poor girls a profitable skill. While some operated as poorhouses where young women worked for a place to sleep, the local Kantcentrum ("Lace Center") was a school run by nuns. I had heard about this museum years before on the Instagram page of Elena Kanagy-Loux, a lace historian and textile collections manager at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In graduate school, she had won a grant to study lace across 38 countries over a four-month period, and she spoke often about her education on her page. Reading her story gave me the goal to have a textile travel study of my own before I even heard of the Plastino Award. To have a lesson at this museum that was featured on her travels felt like I was truly building the life I had been envisioning. During my bobbin lace lesson and in the museum, I learned how girls living on the outskirts of the city were taught how to read patterns and learn stitches. There were pictures of students in the street working on their lace pillows. This harsh reality did not take away from my amazement at their skill, but my understanding of craft history had a seismic shift. How do I think about craft as an art if people saw it as a job rather than a creative outlet? What makes art reflective of its maker? Old master painters like Reubens and Rembrandt had workshops and assistants that produced their paintings, what does this say about their work? I was able to ponder these questions

while walking along the canal that runs through the medieval city center. I thought about the girls walking home to the outskirts of Bruges after school, and I wondered if they thought the water looked beautiful in the lamplight as well. The city was full of views that had been seen by millions of people before me, and I wondered how the lacemakers fit into it.

After Bruges was Antwerp, a city that was arguably more central to the Belgian lace trade. Over a third of Antwerp's population was involved in the lace industry during the seventeenth century, and yet I had to look hard to find traces of this past. St Charles Borromeo Church has "the Lace Room" in the upstairs of its seventeenth century architecture. The lace historian who volunteered at the church took me upstairs. The collection was simply acquired through the passage of time as ecclesiastical garments and objects were trimmed with the finest luxury textiles, and of course in Antwerp, that was lace. In glass cases were long lengths of lace taken off religious robes, and large delicate coverlets. It was a room full of lace. My guide took me through each case, pointing out different lace making techniques and even the stylistic developments that occurred over time. She showed me how Binche lace started with large networks of openings, then developed larger floral motifs, and then had small button-like shapes appear in its netted ground. I had never realized that lace had its own artistic development. Here, I saw shifts in style that changed with taste, not just technology. The magic of the Lace Room showed me how the ability to place many samples of art next to each other is integral to understanding its development as a craft, and therefore its legacy in human culture. So many single samples of lace are singular in museum collections, but when related pieces are placed together, one can understand how it existed as a body of work and industry. This afternoon appointment in the attic of a church solidified why it was important for lace to be preserved. If more exists, then more of the story can be placed together to form a narrative. This can only happen when efforts are made to save it.

On my last day in Antwerp I had just enough time to visit the Maagdenhuis. This museum, the "Maiden's House", was an orphanage for girls and young women that operated from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries. The girls here did not go home after a day of work. The orphanage had a school curriculum consisting of mathematics, reading, and lace making. When donations were scant, the

academic subjects were dropped and the little girls made lace full-time for the orphanage to sell. I learned from my visit to the Lace Room that some girls took lace lessons and their products were sold by their teacher as payment, but this exploitation of the orphan population of Antwerp was reminiscent of a Dickens novel. I walked through the open courtyard of the building, and saw the dining hall where the children ate. Most of the information was in Dutch, but the workers at the front desk were kind enough to tell me about the information I missed due to the language barrier. They said there was little remaining of the girls except some bowls and clothing. I entered this project determined to showcase the artists that made the gorgeous handmade lace that trimmed the most expensive clothing, and I knew that the makers were not adequately paid or recognized for their work. However, visiting these locations showed me that this was not a result of mere dismissal of female labor, but an entire economic system that exploited vulnerable populations. When art history is discussed, the social climate and political surroundings of the artists are often examined to better understand what the artist may have been responding to. However, there is an arguably more significant aspect of the making and selling of art that is less comfortable to examine. Art is a physical object produced by labor. How it was made and for whom needs to be considered to understand the system the artist lived in.

Like much of the lace made in Belgium, I traveled to France. I was told by my bobbin lace teacher that so many aristocrats in the French court were going into debt because of lace that King Louis XIII banned the trade in the seventeenth century. I was curious about this city that has been considered the fashion capital of the world for centuries. Today “Parisian” still connotes luxury and high taste. However, I did not have any strong expectations. I had heard both that Paris was the most beautiful city in the world, but also that it was an overblown tourist trap full of expensive food and bad smells. However, I wanted to decide for myself. I can conclusively say that Paris was my favorite city on my trip and the one that I could most see myself living in. With the many public gardens and two-hour long lunches, Paris is a city not to be consumed, but savored. People who are looking to try only the best food at only prices and conveniences that they are used to are going to be disappointed. However, if you are able to spend an

entire afternoon sitting in the Tuileries and can make an after-dinner espresso last for 45 minutes, then this is the perfect city.

My favorite part of Paris was walking from place to place and sitting in the parks to absorb the atmosphere. Outdoor seating at restaurants and the long walkways along the Seine made for perfect opportunities to people-watch. For an art history class examining printed ephemera from nineteenth century France, I wrote my final paper on the production of fashion plates, a type of illustration featured in clothing magazines that were popular before photography was widely adopted. I read how fashion plate artists would draw clothing based on the outfits they saw ladies wearing in stylish districts of Paris, with some plates captioned that the fashion was observed while the woman was walking “along the Champs d’Elysee” or “au voyage de Fontainebleau”. From being in Paris, I understood how the fashion culture was inseparable from the environment. It is a city to see and be seen.

Paris served as my home as I traveled to other locations in the country. My day trip to Roubaix showed me a post-industrial city not unlike my own home city of Syracuse, New York. From the middle of the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, Roubaix prospered from its textile factories. I wanted to visit the “city of one thousand chimneys” to see how the shift from weaving at home to working in factories changed the life of a textile worker. In the Roubaix Museum, I saw looms ranging from medieval reproductions, to surviving seventeenth century jacquard looms, to those used in twentieth century Roubaix. The basic weaving motion was the same, but the process was faster, and more dangerous. People became machine operators rather than weavers. The prosperity enjoyed by the town quickly fell as technology rapidly developed and lost the need for human workers. The industrialization of textiles encouraged textiles as a mechanical product rather than a human-made craft.

Another day trip took me to a very different environment. Chantilly, France, is known for its creme, horse racing, and lace, all of which are luxury items that communicate the majesty of the era. The Chantilly Lace Museum opened in the afternoon, so I spent the morning at the Chateau de Chantilly. On the walk to the grand estate I passed by its sprawling gardens and racecourse. The Chateau itself has both elements of a medieval castle and neoclassical buildings, with rooms inside that are filled with

renaissance paintings and sculptures. Chantilly is a town of finery that produces only the best. Though small, Chantilly Lace Museum proudly presented its intricate black silk lace. Large Chantilly lace shawls were incredibly fashionable in the nineteenth century, and the museum had many examples framed on the walls or draped over dresses. However, the museum also had examples of “blonde” lace, made with unbleached ivory silk, and pure white silk made in the region. I learned that the black Chantilly lace that I associated entirely with the town was just one iteration of the regional lace production. Lace developed like fashion, and responded to changes in tastes and styles. Lace has never been stagnant, and my new understanding of it as a responsive art form has rejuvenated my interest in the craft.

I ended my textile journey with one of the most famous historic textiles, the Bayeux Tapestry. For centuries the Bayeux Cathedral in the heart of the city housed this masterpiece and displayed it along its walls for two weeks out of the year. Today, the 70 meters of embroidery are housed in its own museum. My visit to the Museum of the Bayeux Tapestry presented the titular object hung along a hallway in its own glass case, and provided an audio narration of each scene as I walked along the story. The expressive forms and bold colors told me how King Harold and Edward, Duke of Normandy, fought for power. Tapestries were used as record keeping for centuries before the creation of the Bayeux Tapestry, with very few examples surviving. Textile artists doubled as crafters and historians. The significance of textiles to humanity was bigger than I could have imagined.

How I understand objects have been changed forever. I can research the history of lace making and even see some samples in person, but until I walked around Bruges and Antwerp, I didn't understand how where the lacemakers lived and worked made the significance of lace that much more complex. This struggle between beauty and pain, luxury and backbreaking work, is present throughout the history of textiles, and the entire existence of humanity. I plan to attend graduate school at the University of Glasgow to study textile conservation, and use my time abroad to learn more about lace history and conservation. This opportunity showed me how curiosity is the best motivator. I will always remember what I learned and experienced while immersed in my passion, and I will pass on the gift of excitement and possibility to others throughout my future career.

