Interview of Simone Akgulian

[Track 1]
P: Ok Simone, I want to talk to you about your study abroad in...where did you stay?

S: Um I was in Mineiros it’s like a really small town in Goiás, Central Goiás

P: And Goiás is in what region of Brazil?

S: It’s called the Centroeste um which is like, it’s pretty smack-dab in the middle. It’s like sort of in between the Northeast and Paraguay and right by the capital of the country, Brasilia.

P: Alright so could you describe the place where you stayed specifically, and just your host family, and the general...what the place looked like and felt like?

S: Ya um, so I wasn’t —I tell people I was in a small town — and I don’t think people quite get just how small a town it was. Driving there from the nearest airport, like main airport that actually went real places, it was like a five hour drive on a two lane highway, and it was just farms. Just like straight up farms and either side. And there’s a wet season and a dry season in that area of the country, and when it’s our winter and their summer, it rains every day at around two o’clock and then it just stops, but in the winter it never rains.

P: So you went during the summer or the wet season?

S: I went nine months, so I was there most of the wet season and most of the dry season. But I remember driving there in the dry season really distinctly, just red—the dirt is really red, and the ground is just red dust as far as you can see.

P: So not exactly what you would associate with Brazil, coming in

S: No, I mean like, I’m from a pretty urban area and I was really nervous about going to this like small town, and you’re just so far removed. I was thinking: what if I had like a heart attack or something. There is literally nowhere—there’s nowhere—I can’t see any civilization. There’s a gas station like every two hours.

P: That’s crazy. But you made the best of it though. What were some things you—how’d you assimilate, did you end up taking a better attitude toward, what was your view on it toward the end?

S: Well I think, I had a hard time assimilating. I was in high school and I think it’s not only hard being in a different culture, but in a rural culture as opposed to an urban culture which I think was a bigger difference than the typical Brazilian vs. American difference, [you had] the rural vs urban setting [too]. I think by the end I really had come to love it—
and I really liked the slow pace of the rural area. I stayed in a very small town, just completely isolated, and my host dad was an agronomer, which is like a farmer-engineer. I stayed with three host families and of all those host families every one of them had farms. And I would spend a lot of time on the farm, sleeping on the farm, I learned to drive a tractor. I ate freshly-slaughtered meat that I saw alive a few hours ago And that was a little disturbing—but one of the great things about exchange is that you just sort of learn to roll with it. I remember one of the first weeks, they brought home a live chicken. I didn’t understand they were gonna slaughter it, I didn’t know why it was there, and then I see the feathers in the trash can after lunch and I realize I had eaten chicken, and that was a sort of horrifying realization, but I think, at first, it’s so shocking because it’s this culture that you didn’t even realize still existed, and I don’t think that exists in the United States anymore—at least quite to the extent that it exists in Brazil. But like, you just have to learn to appreciate it and just roll with it, because instead of being scared you learn to embrace it.

P: So you spent the majority of your time in Goiás and Centroeste but did you get the chance to see any of the other parts of Brazil, and if so, then how did they stack up to your experience in Goiás?

S: Since the school year is different there, I had a summer break in January, and I took a month long trip to the very far Northeast, like Fortaleza, and I took a trip through some of the more rural parts of Bahia, and all the way down the coast. Literally from Fortaleza to the South of Rio to São Paulo. SO I saw a lot of it. It was a lot more Americanized than the part of Brazil that I was staying in.

P: Which part specifically can you talk about?

S: Well, maybe it was just the tourism because I went with a group and we hit up the tourist hotspots. But you, the hotels were very—they used a lot of English terms like suite, or deluxe suite, or king or royal that aren’t really culturally Brazilian. And they had a lot more Americanized food. Like ya know there was this restaurant called Canao Quebrada, and this wasn’t supposed to be a very Americanized town—and there was a bagel shop there owned by a guy from Philly who served cheese steak. It was very touristy. I’m sure there were authentic parts of Brazil. But at least Brazil in that region was a lot more Americanized. And you, what I noticed was that Brazilians really have fascination with Americanized things as sort of ‘chicer’ so they want to show you the more American parts, which made me really disappointed because I wanted to see Brazil.

P: So can you talk a little bit more about your time in Rio and kind of your preconceived notions of Brazil—how Rio sort of fit that and how Goiás sort of challenged it?

S: Ya like my mom had lived in Brazil, and she lived in São Paolo, Salvador, and Recife. And those are all pretty urbanized environments and very cliché Brazilian environments. SO my mom would always tell me about—‘bikinis!’—you know, everybody—I don’t know why I thought this—but I thought everyone would be wearing a bikini all the time, and if they were wearing regular clothes they would probably have a swimsuit on
underneath it, you know. I had a sense that it was very much like a beach town, like the whole country. Even like the big cities, you know, the executives or whatever. I had this idea that it was very casual and very lazy and—you know—where everyone just eats fruit all time—just sort of like a paradise. That cliché idea of Beach town, paradise. White sand beaches

Track 2

S: My mom would always tell me that like in Recife and Salvador and everyone would be walking around in Brazilian bathing suits—and those are small bathing suits. The guys wear really brightly colored banana hammocks, and the girls wear like thongs and stuff that barely covers the top part—and it doesn’t matter how big or small you are—or if you’re pregnant! They have this obsession with tan lines, and they want as small an area of white as possible, but they want the tan lines....

[1:00 on [bikini discussion]

P: Alright so you want to talk a little more about your experience in Goiás?

S: Alright: I’ll talk about the farm because that’s the most interesting part to me. My host family had two farms and the one farm was like a two and a half hour drive. Only half an hour of that drive was on a paved road. We were on a highway and the first time we went over I thought “wow two and a half hours, that must be pretty far”—it’s actually not that far, because we turned off the road and we just start driving on this—path—it wasn’t even marked, it was just driven on so many times to the point where nothing was growing there. We’d drive on that, and it was dark and my host dad—ok. So Brazilians love beer. I think people have this idea that they drink hard liquor. But it’s only beer. They drink it all the time. So my host dad is not on paved road, so in his mind that means he’s not driving. So he had this six-pack next to him and we’re in this old pickup truck. The back is loaded up, my host mom and I are just chillin out in the car and he pops open a six pack and just starts drinking them. And it’s getting dark and we’re driving on a dirt road, like—it starts to get really dark. And there start to be these little creeks running through because we were getting closer to a river. And these little creeks are just these deep beds. They don’t really build bridges over them, they stick...what is it called ‘quebra-burros’ I think—over them—it’s like ‘donkey-breaker’ or something and they call it that because donkeys can go over them they’re just logs that the tires roll over. And I was horrified the first time I went. And it got to the point where I could not see anything. There were no lights like I had never seen that many stars in my life, but we roll up. And we finally get to this farm. But this farm—there’s no electricity and we’re on this riverbed and there are mosquitos everywhere. And I didn’t realize beforehand but there were like seven people living on this farm in the middle of nowhere. And these were not young people they were like probably in their fifties and they had been doing hard labor and they had been tanned to the point of looking like leather. And I thought, you know, what if one of them gets sick? They don’t have a car. They get stuff when my host dad drives to the farm and brings them stuff. Like there’s no way they can get away from this farm unless they wanna take one of the 40 cows they have and ride two and a
half hours to town…So we get there and the only lamp they have is a gas lamp and we walk in the house and it’s this tiny little farm house. And there are no doors, there are no hinges—and so these dogs that were kind of there but kind of wild would just wander into the house. My host mom would get so mad she’d be like “I hate these goddam dogs!” They’re always coming in here and so we walk in and there are dogs there. And it’s cold because like we’re on this riverbed and it’s dark out. All the walls, the four outside walls are all plaster and concrete, but the inside walls don’t go all the way up to the ceiling—and they’re just plywood that are held up with little brackets holding them together. And like all the furniture is like old Brazilian stuff. Like it looks like the movies that we’ve seen in our film class where they’re set in like the olden Brazilian colonial days — and so I sit down on this really old bed that smells like the outdoors and I scream because these goddam things fly out from under the bed! And—I didn’t know Portuguese when I got there and I had no idea what they were, and my host mom is trying to explain to me what they are, and I have no idea what she’s saying, and finally she does this vampire impression, and I realize that they’re bats. And I realize that there are bats living on the underside of my bed. And I was really terrified at first, but then I found out, they were fruit bats, they’re weren’t gonna bite me so I was kind of OK with it.

And I wake up the next day and I’m covered in mosquito bites, and I’m hot and I’m sticky—it’s really humid in Brazil. And I’m really nasty because it’s the dry season and all this dirt, all this red dust has just stuck to me, my hair gets this orange color because all the dirt just stays in there. So I wanna go and take a shower and I go up to my house mom and she’s like “Ya sure.” So she shows me this bathroom and it’s like literally this toilet, and—OK—the way that that they get water is they pump it up from this river and they put it into this big sanitation vat so it’s this big vat that quote unquote “sanitizes the river” and so the way they have it rigged is that they have a tube going from the sanitation pump that has a spigot above the toilet in the bathroom, so I’m literally showering right next to where I’m using the facilities, and I turn it on, it’s freezing—because it’s river water and it’s cold. So it shocked me and I couldn’t breathe and I tell my host mom and she’s like “OK, we’ll heat it up.” So before that I hadn’t seen her cook anything and—and it sounds so unbelievable, I feel like people think I’m crazy but I swear to God it is true I have pictures—it is a wood burning stove, it is a huge metal-top, wood-burning stove. And my host-mom literally takes two buckets, fills them with water from this shower-spigot thing, heats them on the wood burning stove, and I shower and wash my hair with heated water from a bucket. So at this point my host mom and I are bored so we’re like “let’s go for a drive.” So this farm is huge. And she takes the pickup and we sort of just go out into the wilderness. And we find someone living on the farm that isn’t supposed to be living on the farm, that has set up camp on the farm, and that’s just sort of migrating from place to place. And that part of the farm hadn’t been developed so we were just like “you know what, if you’re passing through that’s fine.” So we keep going, and we end up on top of this —kind of like plateau—and it just juts out and you can see for miles miles and I can’t see anything but the river—the red river, and just palm trees. And just literally, there was no town. I had never been so isolated, so like away from humanity in my entire life—like the closest thing to humanity was this 1985 pickup truck that’s like sitting behind me and I’m really scared it’s gonna break down because then I’m stuck and I have no idea where to go. So ya. That’s my host family.