It haunts us every day. It can happen at any time. It can catch us when we are least expecting it or when we are most prepared, and we still might err and make ourselves vulnerable to different degrees of embarrassment and multiple misunderstandings. I have experienced many cultural shocks, but none has been bigger than that of simple social interaction in America. Allow me to elaborate.

I am from Argentina and social encounters go a little bit differently there. I greet most Americans with a nod, maybe a hand gesture, possibly a handshake and very rarely a hug. In contrast, Argentinians kiss family, friends and maybe friends of friends in the cheek once (just once, do not get any ideas) when we meet. Men too. I know what you are thinking, but we do it because we are confident in our masculinity (or at least that is what a really clingy guy told me once). While Americans give little steps back every time you get closer to them in conversation, Argentinians use closeness and touching as communication devices, which also create the illusion of emotional closeness and generates attachment. In fact, our friendships develop fast and passionately; we can start talking to a stranger out of nowhere and by the end of a couple of hours hug them goodbye as we do longtime friends.

It was hard for me not to find all of what I was used to very easily in Houston at first, and being a new arrival with few friends to start did not make it easier. But gradually I started understanding how to interact successfully and I am slowly mastering the arts of small talk and keeping my distance. Nowadays, I greet the people I am closest to with a hug, but it is not the same. Literally. Have you ever hugged an American? It is an interesting experience. It starts with getting close, but leaving the window open to escaping the interaction, which gets you off to a rocky start. When you both realize the hug is going to happen, you start opening your arms wide, unsure of how much you will or should exactly bring them together later and dilate the approximation to assess just that, which I call the “slow motion” phase. And finally, you get close at an uncomfortable angle, but without touching, and very awkwardly hug the air around the other person to quickly pull yourself back out to safety again. That kept happening to me until I discovered the sideways hug. You cannot go wrong with the sideways hug; no possibility of face-to-face touching and clear visuals to readily break the embrace. I am not sure if it is the lack of practice or the possibility of lawsuit that render Americans such awkward huggers, but I could get rich giving lessons, although I would rather not risk deportation due to violation of my F1 VISA guidelines.
Sometimes it is a good thing most Americans do not understand our fast-paced conversations in Spanish, as no subject is taboo in Latin American conversation. We do not stay away from politically incorrect or morally ambiguous issues. On the contrary, we seek a never-ending discussion on them, and we impatiently interrupt each other to burst out in highly opinionated monologue. While Americans withhold from speaking their full minds and mask their improper emotions to spare feelings and avoid social mishaps, Argentinians let their tongue loose at any chance. In Argentina, you either develop a very thick skin or realize no one is really trying to offend you, they are just honestly expressing their opinions and it is probably all in good fun! I would imagine most Americans would be scandalized with our conversation topics if they could understand us. For example, I was once having dinner with a mixed group of Latin Americans and Americans and we realized many words that were perfectly innocent in some Latin countries, were outrageously obscene in Argentina, which brought about the opportunity for endless innuendo. I was trying to translate everything to my friend Paul, but believe me; he did not really want to know. And believe me; you do not really want to know either.

When we party, Argentinians are loud, heavy drinkers and go all night long! That part was not that hard to adapt to (Odin bless Valhala!).

Politics is the meal of the day every day in Argentina, while Americans seldom discuss it. We criticize measures and complain about the economy. We do not comment on corruption; what is the point anymore? Did you know that voting is mandatory in Argentina? It was a shock to me that most Americans I met hardly discuss politics (ironically, it is politically incorrect) and could not be bothered to vote. It never occurred to me before that in the ultimate democratic scenario you would have the right to refuse to vote!

After a year of living in the US, I finally feel like I am able to successfully carry social interactions and I feel surrounded by friends again. Non-metric units and final prices without taxes included, however, might still take me a while more to get used to.

Yes, I miss Argentina, but I would not change a thing about my life now. Which culture is right? Both, of course. There are no rights or wrongs in intercultural exchange, but only celebration of differences. And as I keep living in America, I adapt, I encounter new philosophies and ways of thinking and I embrace them; they enrich me. This goes to the first-years: I know. The first year sucks. OISS makes it so much better, but no matter how many miracles they work, cultural adaptation is harsh. But do not fight it, join it. It gets better. You will get better. You will grow and become a more complex, interesting person. Just look forward to it, as I look forward to my intercultural experience every day!