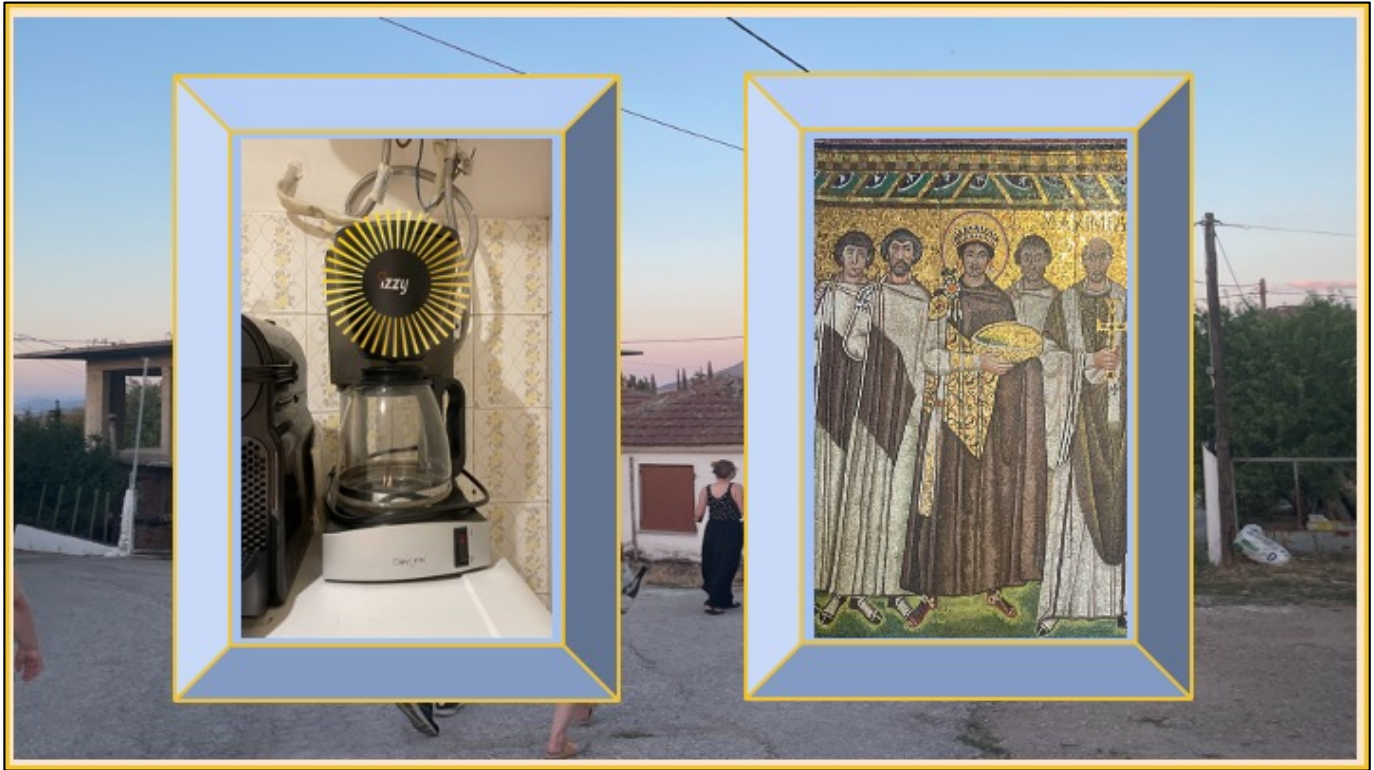


THE EYES THROUGH WHICH WE SEE



IZZY SHEPTAK

The Certificate in International Learning is designed to help students see the world in ways beyond those instilled in them by their own culture. It guides students to develop a deeper understanding of how the world around them changes when viewed through different cultural lenses and teaches them how to identify and explore these lenses. When undertaking my CIL journey, I found that the CIL training and my background in anthropology provided me with a useful toolkit for attempting to approach new experiences with a culturally relativist approach—an important set of skills when trying to acquaint oneself with new people and places in an authentic way.



A core component of my CIL experience was a study abroad trip. I spent three weeks during the summer of 2023 at an archaeological field school in Narthaki, Greece. During my time I visited many world-renowned ancient sites, picturesque pockets of nature, and small countryside towns. However, upon reviewing the photos I took of my trip, I couldn't help but notice that many of them had very little to do with Greece and more to do with myself. One of the first pictures I took in Athens was of the coffeemaker in my Air BnB. When I arrived there I had just taken three trains and a long walk across a new city in the +45-degree heat. On top of that, the airport had lost my luggage, leaving me without any sources of familiarity. I was tired, anxious, and alone, and in that moment I was in no position to appreciate the many wonders of Greece. However, being met by a little coffeemaker with my name on it was a comforting surprise, one that made me feel welcomed in a place that I otherwise had no connection to. It was a small thing that most other travelers would not have given a second glance, but it was an influential part of my adventure in Greece. I had a similar experience the next day when I happened upon a replica mosaic of Emperor Justinian I, an influential figure in Byzantine history and the source of my middle name. In this big, storied city, I was delighted to see that I was already there in small pieces.



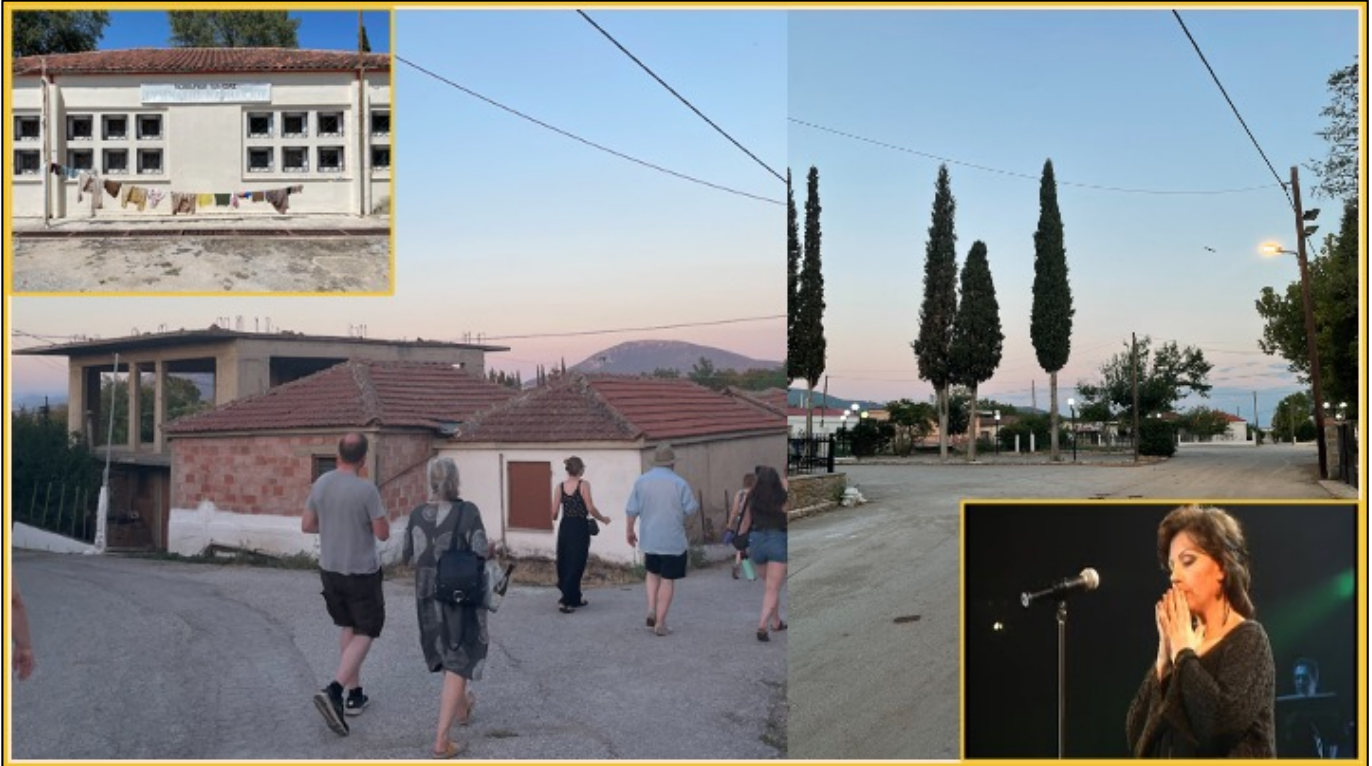
This trend continued throughout my trip. By the end, my camera roll was brimming with famous monuments and uniquely Greek landscapes, but I also found it to be chock-full of photos of the familiar—particularly of places that looked like home. Positioned next to one another, these two places on opposite sides of the world bear a striking resemblance. I wanted to hear the new country speak, to listen to its stories, and to get to know its people. At the same time, it was impossible not to draw connections to what I already knew. As the trip progressed, I found myself growing more acutely aware of the momentous degree to which our experiences of the world are shaped by our own eyes—eyes that are formed by foundational experiences that an individual can never be fully separated from. I was struck by the unrealistic nature of true cultural relativity, and for a moment I felt guilty. I was worried that I was doing a disservice to the place by impressing too much of myself upon it and in turn blocking my ability to see it as its authentic self.



I took pictures of Mycenaean pottery more than any other kind because I was struck by its resemblance to Trypillian pottery—a form made by the ancient inhabitants of modern-day Ukraine, and a culture I have a significant interest in. Was I, by focusing on Mycenaean pottery due to its resemblance to Trypillian pottery, failing to gain a more comprehensive picture of Greek pottery as a whole?



I asked myself similar questions during my Ukrainian language-learning journey—another core component of my CIL experience. I wondered if my Ukrainian-Canadian culture was preventing me from authentically seeing the true nature of modern Ukrainian culture. My worries about being unable to “see” *modern* Ukrainian culture surely weren’t helped by the fact that my primary language learning environment was a *historic* Ukrainian-Canadian village where I was completely steeped in the patterns and perspectives of the past.



I spent many sleepless siesta hours at the Taverna in Narthaki writing, reflecting, and chatting with my fellow nap-resistant peers about this very topic. During that time I came to realize that the attention I paid to certain elements of culture might have prevented me from giving equal attention to others, but at the same time, it allowed me to see details and nuances that others missed. This was true of my classmates as well. The English major saw myth everywhere, the business student often made insightful observations about the local economy, and the bartender devoted herself to learning all she could about the production of local wines. We all learned to see through new lenses; however, the magnification was determined by our own identities and interests. Had we attempted to be completely relativist and suspend belief in our own perspectives, we would have missed some of the most enriching experiences of the trip. Instead, we allowed our own views and interests to dictate the direction of our interest, and then we worked to approach the new subject matter with openness and by setting our presuppositions aside. This allowed each of us to engage with select aspects of culture in a deeper and more meaningful way, and then to exchange the knowledge we had accrued with one another. Thus, an important aspect of the relationality of my experience was not only in the relationships I built with the local villagers but also with my classmates. They might have been coming from the same Canadian background and worldview, but together we were able to “see” Greece much more authentically.

Video: Theos An Einai by Haris Alexiou. I heard this song for the first time in the Taverna in Narthaki. Nobody else noticed it playing, but it caught my attention because it possesses a character that is both mystical and inviting that I gravitate towards.



I realized that it is likely only an anthropological pipe dream for an outsider (at least one spending a short duration with another culture) to experience the “purest” form of a culture, unmanipulated by an outsider's eyes. However, that is alright. Ultimately, everybody experiences “authentic” culture (even in their native culture) a little bit differently than everybody else. Upon my return home, I was able to take this knowledge back to my pursuit of Ukrainian language learning. I saw that instead of worrying about which aspects of Ukrainian culture are most authentically Ukrainian, or about whether I would truly be able to “see” modern Ukrainian culture, I could allow all of my experiences of Ukrainian culture to build a richer and more complex understanding of lived Ukrainian experience. I didn't have to discard certain cultural elements or experiences because they weren't as authentic. Instead, I could allow them to be another thread in an ever-growing tapestry of knowledge.

Pictured:

Left: My great-grandfather and his family in Ukraine, representing historic Ukrainian culture and a source of authenticity.

Right Top: Me at the Ukrainian Village, a place representative of Ukrainian-Canadian culture and its unique mixture of historic Ukrainian culture and Canadian life.

Right Bottom: Myself and a new friend from Ukraine, representing my growing exposure to modern Ukrainian life.



It was okay, then, that the Ukrainian music I grew up and identified with didn't resemble what most Ukrainian youth listen to today. Such a diversity of experiences does not detract from the value of a culture but rather adds to it. There is room for the past and the present, for myself and others, for different—even competing—expressions of a shared identity.

Songs representing each of the pictured groups: a musical tapestry reflecting a cultural tapestry.

Song: "Пливе кача по Тисині"



Songs representing each of the pictured groups: a musical tapestry reflecting a cultural tapestry.

Song: Kolomyika by Ruslana—a modern Ukrainian artist, but one whose sound characterizes the blending of folk and modernity seen in Ukrainian-Canadian culture.

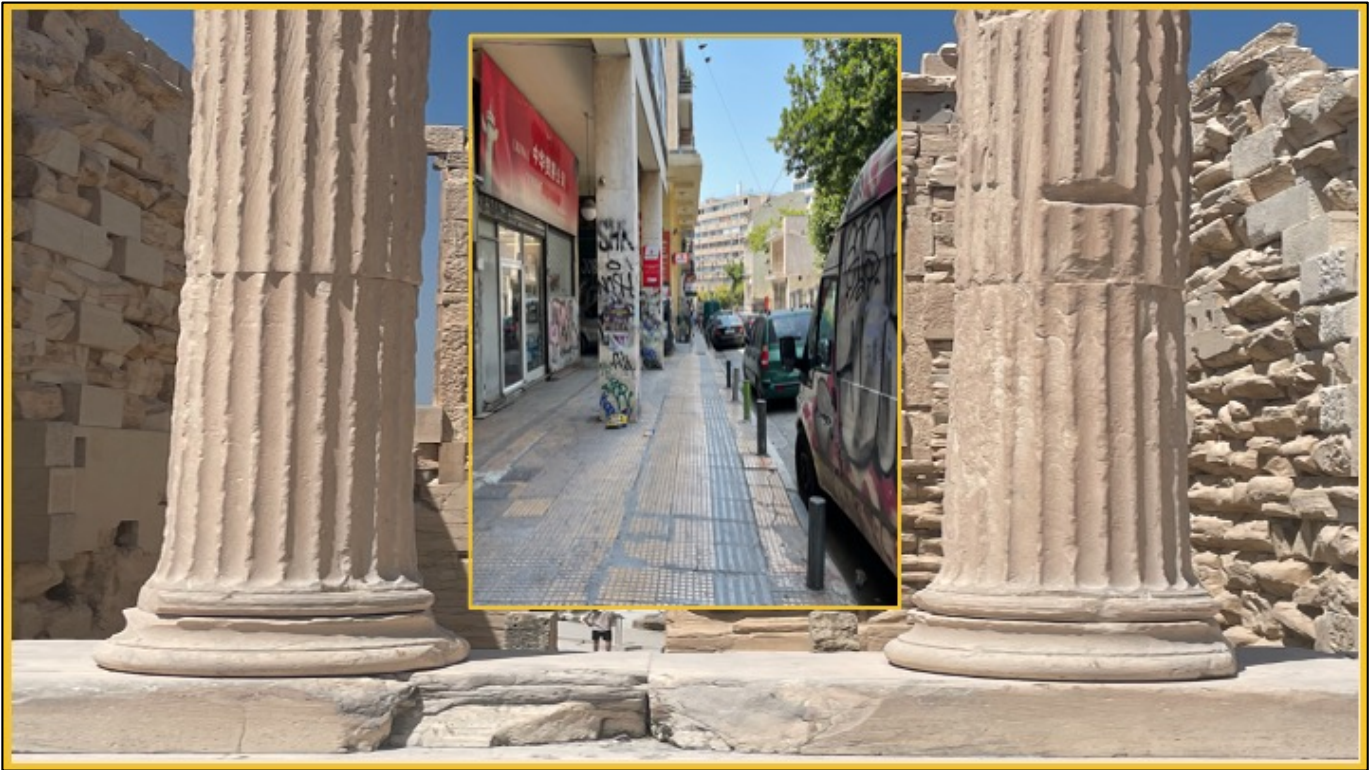


Songs representing each of the pictured groups: a musical tapestry reflecting a cultural tapestry.

Song: Вихідний by DZIDZIO—representing a genre of Ukrainian music and life completely foreign to my Ukrainian-Canadian experiences.



That also meant that it was okay that I didn't feel connected to Athens. When visiting such powerful and world-renowned monuments as the Acropolis or artifacts as the Mask of Agamemnon, I felt absolutely no connection. While others marveled at their significance and glory I couldn't help but feel like I was missing something. I likely was. This had nothing to do with those places and items, but rather with myself. Perhaps one day I will return to Athens and be able to appreciate the Acropolis in a new way, but at the time I was not in a position to hear it speak.



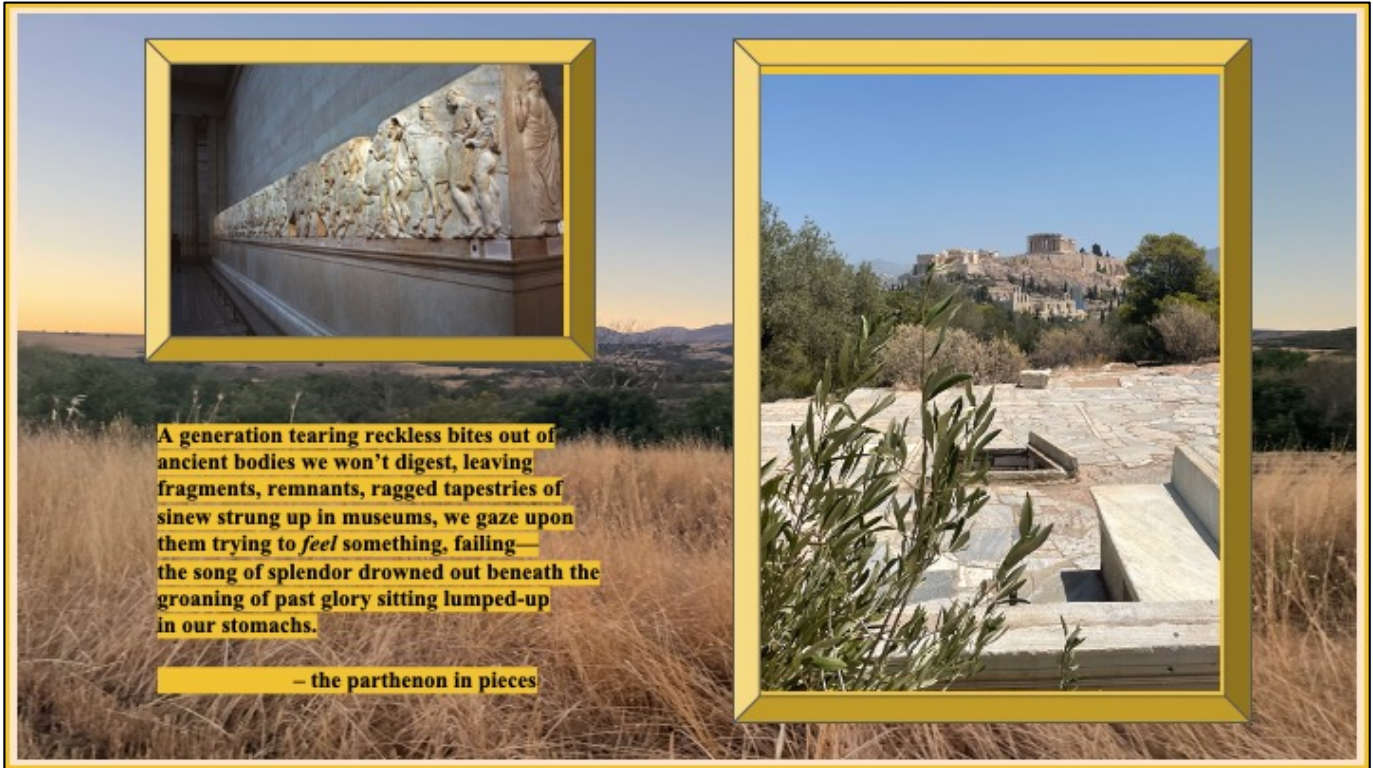
Rather than ancient temples, I found myself fixating on the modern streets of Athens—in particular their litter, graffiti, and broken windows, and the way they contrasted with the heroic imagery of Greece. They struck a chord where the Parthenon did not. I came to realize that this didn't necessarily mean I was failing to appreciate Greek culture, but rather that I was getting to know it in different ways.



Piercing the honey-sweet, sea-salt air—
broken bottles beneath olive trees,
the plaza littered
with wild mint, plastic gloves,
prickling oak sprawling beneath
Byzantine chant and smog.
Bright bursts of blossoms, graffiti.
Cigarette butts and silver ikons,
the Parthenon shimmering under
the Mediterranean sun and
scaffolding. Goat bells chime,
hooves scrape scrap metal.

The decay of ancient temples
beckons the poetic heart—
I came for the vestiges of
glorious civilization,
but didn't expect
the many ruins of Greece.

These observations found their way into little poems, and allowed me to holistically process my lived experiences. These small snippets embodied my experience of seeing new things through my own eyes.



A generation tearing reckless bites out of ancient bodies we won't digest, leaving fragments, remnants, ragged tapestries of sinew strung up in museums, we gaze upon them trying to *feel* something, failing—the song of splendor drowned out beneath the groaning of past glory sitting lumped-up in our stomachs.

— the parthenon in pieces

They are unique products of the intersection between myself and a foreign place.

**THANKS FOR
READING!**



My experiences enrich my view of the world and provide me with the materials to understand and create. I shape them and am shaped by them. My poems and my cultural experiences are authentic because I am authentic, and I am grateful for the eyes through which I see.