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Field Notes from Abroad: Person to Person

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## Person to Person in Costa Rica

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Field Notes from Abroad: Person to Person in Costa Rica

Here, the human body isn't taboo. Nudity isn't "nudity." While Costa Rica is considerably conservative (which one can loosely credit to its catholic majority), a human body is accepted, utilized and celebrated; it is not a thing to be hidden or ashamed of.

On the television, there are commercials depicting and instructing self-mammograms with completely bare breasts shown. On the news programs, stories about breast cancer and breast feeding are accompanied by breasts as well.

In day care centers where some of us spend our community service time, preschoolers and their teachers use (much to our dismay) "pene" and "vagina" freely and boldly. Children aren't embarrassed using the toilet in plain sight of their peers, while the women breast feeding while sitting in restaurants and walking down sidewalks shock us. I have only learned more about myself and my own culture through these distressing experiences. I have to ask myself, *why am I scared of a breast feeding woman?* And an even better question, *why am I ashamed to say or hear the appropriate anatomical terms for my own organs in a classroom?*

Although there is a vast array of cultural differences in lifestyle, mores, norms, and habits between Costa Rica and the USA, I chose to focus on the perception of nudity because it is the most perplexing, to me. When I told Lisa, a friendly young woman who works at a café, about the unbelievable nudity I'd seen that week in advertisements, she looked at me as if I were speaking Russian. Once I attempted to explain to her how unusual it is to have breasts on family friendly television channels, she interrupted me to ask why I thought it was inappropriate. Just like me, Lisa struggled with grasping my perspective- she couldn't understand how a woman's breast was unseemly and unfit for television. "It's just a breast," she assured me "there's wrong with that?"

Lisa's confusion mirrored my own, and was all but resolved when I switched examples to ask her about the common use of "inappropriate" words and discussion in preschools about our genitals. "It's just our bodies, we all have one. I don't think I understand the problem you see."

I found it surprisingly difficult to step out of my ethnocentric viewpoint and analyze this phenomenon from a new angle, but finally I grasped that in my own culture, our perception of nudity is much more rigid than it is in Costa Rica. Modesty, while it is valued in conservative cultures, comes with guidelines that can differ drastically between one and the next. While displaying your body lewdly with intentions to seduce is viewed as inappropriate in Costa Rica, healthy bodies and their functions are celebrated and discussed. Meanwhile in my own culture, covering yourself up is a virtuous trait associated with modesty, and women rarely breast feed in public because it is inappropriate to bare themselves and their private body parts to the world. We are taught that "penis" and "vagina" are naughty words when we are very young, and discouraged from discussing our "privates" with others. I believe that word (privacy) and the concept of individual privacy is critical in this cultural divide, because in my culture, expectations of personal privacy are held high. In Costa Rican culture, personal privacy is not achieved as successfully as in the USA, and therefore the concept of keeping your "privates" private is far-fetched and impractical when taking into consideration the lifestyle and values associated with the transparency and openness within the Costa Rican families. I was never aware of how peculiar it is that I come from a culture that begs me to reject and conceal your sex, but is simultaneously responsible for hyper sexualizing the global media.

Interview: Lisa (Café Delicias worker) October 18, 2013