IN VALHALLA, fallen heroes spend their days fighting and reliving their most glorious exploits, maiming and being maimed only to be restored each evening and feast together in the great hall. In a Buddhist hell realm, on the other hand, miserable hell beings spend countless eons hacking each other to bits by day only to be healed every night so they can endure the same torment endlessly. How can one culture’s heaven be another’s hell? Each culture has a distinct underlying set of core beliefs about the world. Just as a massive object will warp space/time around itself, drawing less massive objects toward it, so too these massive ideas warp the space around them in the mental worlds people build to navigate their day-to-day realities. After defining terms and exploring the general concepts underlying “cultural relativity,” this paper will propose a way of visualizing the map behind a given culture’s view of the world.

To begin with, in the current context “culture” is defined as a particular set of assumptions about reality made by an individual and/or shared by a group and passed on through time. Any given culture is an orderly frame that delineates the worlds of those who subscribe to it. For instance, in junior high culture young people share beliefs about which music is cool, which of their peers are the popular ones, which clothes are preppy, gansta, skater, etc. These ideas will differ from school to school, but each iteration of the junior high culture structures its world around similar institutions: the mall, the lunch room tables, current gossip, budding romantic interests, and other mainstays of young adolescent life. A culture, then, is a structured account of how the world works and one’s place in it.

Next, what about relativity? The relevant aspect of Einstein’s famous theory of relativity is that motion must be defined in terms of a given context, that there is no single underlying frame of reference with regard to which all movement

* Claire Villareal lives in Texas, where she studied Buddhism and meditation. She’s traveled in various parts of Asia deepening her understanding of various Buddhist traditions and their meditation techniques. She’s currently trying to finish her first novel before entering a graduate program in Religious Studies in the fall.
in the universe can be measured. For instance, we can say that a car travels at sixty-five miles per hour, but what we really mean is that a given car travels along the earth’s surface at sixty-five miles per hour while the earth rotates on its axis and travels around the sun, which itself is rotating in one of the arms of the Milky Way. Because we’re moving along with the earth, it seems to us to be standing still (even though it’s moving much more quickly than the car!). An observer on the planet Mars would observe the car’s velocity very differently, and an observer in a distant galaxy would give an even more divergent velocity for our sample car.

In the same way, each culture’s point of reference is distinct, and the meaning of a given event will be very different depending on who the observer is. In India, the most polite way to get someone’s attention is by snapping at them. In America, snapping to get someone’s attention is considered impatient and condescending. What does a snap mean? It depends on who does the snapping. As long as everyone is a member of the same culture, the one snapping and the one hearing the snap will understand the meaning of the snap in its context. However, if an Indian snaps at an American who is unfamiliar with the custom, that American will translate the event as an insult. Relativity, then, means in this context that each event, statement, or transaction has meaning and value according to the cultural lens through which it’s viewed. There is no such thing as the absolute meaning of a snap.

Having established basic definitions for “culture” and “relativity,” we can now examine the phrase “cultural relativity.” For our purposes, cultural relativity means that any event or transaction must be explained in terms of a given cultural framework in order for meaning to be ascribed to it. To use our earlier example of a snap, cultural relativity means that the snap has one meaning to the Indian and another to the American. The snap itself is neither polite nor rude; it is simply a transaction between two individuals. It’s tempting to say that if the snap occurs in India, then it’s polite and the American shouldn’t be bothered by it, and if the snap occurs in America, then the Indian should know the culture here and refrain from snapping. But in reality, the only place where that snap has any meaning at all is inside the heads of the participants in the transaction.

Cultural relativity, then, denies any inherent meaning to any communication but predicts instead that when two people share a similar enough frame of reference, they will interpret a linguistic event similarly. When we communicate effectively with our friends (with whom we share very similar cultural frames of reference), it leads us to believe that our words and symbols have an inherent meaning, but in reality the beliefs inside the speaker’s head and those inside the listener’s are similar enough that the illusion of external meaning is created. When we try to communicate with people whose internal worlds are more divergent from our
own, we more often find that they just don’t see things clearly or can’t seem to understand simple concepts. (People with divergent internal worlds, incidentally, need not come from the other side of the world. They could be our parents — or children — or anyone else who doesn’t see things our way.)

The bad news here is that we may never get everyone else to see life entirely our way. The good news is that we can use a culture map to figure out their internal worlds in order to communicate with them more effectively.

A culture map is an abstract construct that shows the contours of a given culture’s version of reality. Figure 1 is an example of a culture map which we can visualize in three dimensions, with massive, foundational ideas (defining concepts) at the center and lesser supporting ideas falling into place around them. These defining concepts shape the center of the culture map, and lesser concepts then cluster around those central ones, providing an internally coherent map of the entire known conceptual world for that culture. An individual using that culture map to explain her world will then locate any experience somewhere within that conceptual space and determine its meaning based on where it fits into her pre-existing vision of the world.

One last important feature of a culture map is that its edges are porous, allowing individuals to pass in, examine the terrain, and pass through. One doesn’t have to be a member of a given culture in order to peek into its culture map and get an idea of what the world looks like to someone who subscribes to that map. However, when one looks into another’s culture map and only sees the peripheral beliefs or doesn’t appreciate the power and beauty of that map’s defining concepts, that observer will misunderstand the other culture.

If we were, for instance, to imagine a Protestant Christian woman from the American Midwest and a Theravadin Buddhist woman from Northeastern Thailand, we would find very different defining concepts at the centers of their respective culture maps. At the center of the Christian’s world is an all-powerful creator god who sustains life as she knows it and directs the course of events here on earth. The rest of the Christian’s world falls into place around that central concept. If the Christian is “good” (however that’s defined in her denomination), she will go to heaven when she dies, and there she’ll be reunited with all her good loved ones. From her belief in the creator god at the center of her world, she explains the entire history of the world — its creation to its destruction, as well as her own life, from her birth to her death.

The Buddhist’s culture map looks very different. At the center of her map is the dharma, the Buddha’s teachings about the nature of the world and how to achieve liberation from delusions about the world. There is no creator god at the center of her culture map, and as a result her mental world is very different. The world and all sentient beings in it have existed from beginningless time, cycling
from one lifetime to another because they continually cling to concepts of intrinsic existence. When the Buddhist dies, she will pass into another rebirth in any of six states of existence, there to suffer once again the slings and arrows of outrageous delusion, until in some lifetime she finally pierces the veil of delusion and realizes the true nature of existence, at which point she has attained nirvana and will never again be reborn as a helpless sentient being. The Buddhist’s life is also defined from birth to death and on into the next life.

Now let’s say that our Christian doesn’t know much about Buddhism and observes our Buddhist bowing to a statue of the Buddha. In that Christian’s mind, the act of bowing is an act of worship. The Buddhist must be worshipping the Buddha, and the Buddha must be the god of the Buddhist religion. The Christian observer has just translated the Buddhist worldview into the Christian culture map. She has placed the Buddha in the central position in her draft of the Buddhist map, with the worshipper assumed to perform the same actions toward the Buddha that the Christian would perform toward Christ. The Buddha must be divine, must offer salvation, must demand certain things of his followers, must offer a way into an eternal heaven. The Christian’s assumed map of the Buddhist’s worldview is in the ballpark, but it’s certainly not an accurate picture of Buddhism. (The Buddhist, given a similar level of knowledge about Christianity and observing the Christian practicing her religion, would probably make similarly inaccurate assumptions about the mental map underlying Christianity.)

In any situation, then, an observer translates an action through the lens of her own culture map, and it finds a place there according to the core assumptions about reality contained within that map.

Because the Christian’s culture map has at its center a creator god who is relatively anthropomorphized, the contours of her cultural worldview will naturally be very different from the Buddhist’s. When a creator god is at the center of the culture map, karma makes no sense, nor do the Buddhist’s claims to work toward perfection of her own mind. From the Christian’s point of view, if the Buddhist refuses to acknowledge her central creator god, she’s already denying the fundamental nature of reality. If the Buddhist proceeds from her own assumptions to try to see reality ever more clearly, to let go of ideas of static selfhood or indeed of anything being unchanging and eternal — if the Buddhist assumes these things, then according to the Christian culture map she will simply meander further from reality until she becomes completely delusional.

From the Buddhist’s point of view, if the Christian begins with the assumption that there is an unchanging, eternal being in control of the entire universe, she’s already fallen into a serious delusion about the nature of reality. If the Christian then attempts to worship that being, expecting punishment from it at times and rewards at others, the
Christian is departing further from a clear understanding of reality even as she deepens what she considers to be her spiritual practice. From the Buddhist’s point of view, then, the Christian is actively obscuring her understanding of reality as it is.

Which of the two is correct? The easy way to answer this question is to pick the one with the culture map most similar to our own and back her against the other. But instead we can counter this question with a physics question: A scientist is sitting in his lab on earth, watching a real-time video of an astronaut piloting his spacecraft near the speed of light as he approaches a massive star. To the scientist, the astronaut’s time passes slowly, the second hand of his watch ticking lazily every few seconds. To the astronaut, the scientist’s watch has sped up, ticking several times per second. Which of the two is experiencing “real” time? In this situation, it’s obvious that neither has the “correct” time because there’s no such thing as a universal standard of time measurement.

In the same way, there’s no such thing the one “real” culture map which every human being would share if we could all just see things clearly. Even a simple physical event like the weather on a given day can have one meaning in one person’s internal world and a different one for someone else. Many people see portents in a cloudy day, while a trained scientist might see nothing but prevailing winds and rainfall patterns. Even the simplest event is open to multiple interpretations.

Given, then, that each culture is structured according to central ideas about the world, and given that one could visualize a map of a given culture, with its massive defining concepts at the center orbited by secondary ordering principles of the nature of reality — given, in short, that one can use culture maps to visualize the organization of cultural space, what does it matter? It matters because it gives us a way to understand others not as strange people with a faulty understanding of the world, but as people living in their own unique cultural space. It gives us leave to explore respectfully into their defining concepts, to allow them their own internally consistent world without having to impose ours on them. It opens our eyes to the rich diversity of the world around and inside us, most of which we take for granted. And most importantly, it allows us to let go of the tyrannical idea that the rest of the world must join us in the one true culture map.