

Monachopsis

Living in an Americanized, Hispanic household with Mexican heritage, the intersectional ties I face prove difficult to accept. The disconnection with my culture and realization of its subjectivity lead me in an attempt to understand myself. Influential aspects with the preservation and diffusion of my culture inspired my process and mixed media installation of my tree of life.

This installation utilizes contrasting positive and negative space (with a limited pallet) while focusing on significant places, people, and moments that shaped my culture. Myself and significant family members have been removed from the photographs, and our family has been mapped on the regional map of the United States and Mexico. Elements of collage, found objects, painting, and pieces of trees are present to construct the tree and a Día de los Muertos altar. In this way, I am commemorating my culture and life that has been filled with loss and a sense of being out of place.

As my work evolved with time, I reminisced on my life thus far, and I wonder where it is headed. I have discovered the various factors—such as history and society—that dismantle a culture, leaving me to shape my own for future generations. This sculptural installation poses questions about adaptability, assimilation, and the inevitability of cultural change.

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Based on realizations from my life so far, I question the social constructs of race and ethnicity in relation to my cultural identity. For centuries, these concepts have influenced society greatly and stratifying humans based on appearance. With history

Hot air balloons from the Balloon Fiesta¹ scattered across the warm sunrise over the Sandia Mountains, the cottonwood Bosque running along the murky Rio Grande River and the smell and taste of chile in the majority of meals is what I have grown up with. I realize this is the idealistic facade of the “Land of Enchantment²” and the Albuquerque metropolitan area or stereotyped as a drug ridden city portrayed by the crime-drama TV Show, Breaking Bad. I grew up in the South Valley, along El Camino Real³ and the Historic Route 66. The less acknowledged part I also grew up with is food like tamales⁴, pozole⁵, albondigas⁶ etc., close familial ties, Catholic iconography of La Virgen de Guadalupe⁷ and the Spanish language, rooted in Mexico where my great grandparents and other members of my family have come from.

Back home, I grew up in an Americanized Hispanic household that served as a blessing and a curse. In the heart of the American Southwest, Hispanic culture flourishes and is predominantly influenced by Mexico. As New Mexico is a minority-majority state, there are more people of color here than whites which doesn't compare to other states. It's in the state constitution to recite the Pledge of Allegiance in both English and Spanish, making New Mexico one of the few constitutionally bilingual states.

I then think to myself, “Am I a New Mexican or the New Mexican?” Knowing where my family came from and grew up with, me and other young people of Mexican descent are the future of Hispanic/Latino culture in America. Yet, there are some aspects of my Mexican heritage that have been whitewashed. I then have this blurred distinction of what is actually American or Mexican. This has led me down a confusing path through my life as this cultural fusion of Mexican and American culture leaves me in this complex middle ground of not knowing where to belong.

If you were to ask different people to define culture in their own terms, they would most likely say customs, language, traditions, art, music, fashion, food, festivities etc., and they would be correct. The Oxford English dictionary defines culture as the “arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively” and or “ideas, customs and social behaviors of a particular people or society.”⁸ To many, this is an appropriate definition because it

¹ Balloon Fiesta: Albuquerque's International hot air balloon festival held every year in early October with hundreds of balloons taking off and that come in many different shapes (<https://www.balloonfiesta.com/>)

² State nickname to describe New Mexico (*Tierra del encanto*, in spanish) because of its scenery and rich history. (<https://statesymbolsusa.org/symbol-official-item/new-mexico/state-nickname-state-quarter/land-enchantment>)

³ *El Camino Real*: Historic byway trail of Spanish colonials lead by Don Juan de Oñate in 1598 from Mexico up and through present day New Mexico. (<https://www.newmexico.org/things-to-do/scenic-byways/el-camino-real-national/>)

⁴ *Tamale(s)*: traditional Mesoamerican dish, predominantly in Mexico, made out of *masa* (starchy and typically corn based dough), steamed in a *hoja de maiz* (corn husks, which my family uses) or banana leaf in other regions in Mexico. For my family, both sides make tamales and are usually done by the women of the family, but are at times when the family makes them together during holiday occasions of Thanksgiving and Christmas , with pork and red chile. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/19/dining/where-christmas-means-tamales.html>)

⁵ *Pozole*: traditional Mexican soup/stew made of hominy, meat (typically pork) and red chile. Can be garnished with limes, onions, shredded lettuce/cabbage etc. (<https://www.kcet.org/shows/the-migrant-kitchen/pozole-the-most-controversial-soup-in-indigenous-mexican-culture>)

⁶ *Albondigas*: Mexican meatball soup. I have always enjoyed this dish when my Nana (maternal grandmother) makes it. (<https://culinarylore.com/dishes:what-are-albondigas/>)

⁷ *La Virgen de Guadalupe*: Spanish/Mexican version of the Virgin Mary from image of her in Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. Although my mom has adopted a more Baptist lifestyle, my dad's side who are not devout Catholics still idolize this figure and has been present throughout my life as a symbol of purity and protection. (https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=456)

⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary* (<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/culture>)

is simple and easily understandable for the general human population on earth. Yet, this definition is one dimensional and does not take into account other aspects that influence culture. Experts embrace a more complex definition of culture such as “shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs, and affective understanding that are learned through a process of socialization. These shared patterns identify the members of a culture group while also distinguishing those of another group.”⁹ What this means is that culture also encompasses metaphysicalities like the ways in which we think and perform actions based on our surroundings. With this more nuanced understanding of culture, it takes into account political, social, economic, and psychological factors that play into culture, especially those of marginalized communities of color who are deemed “minorities” and sub cultures of the dominant Western Culture.¹⁰ After discovering new findings of culture, I have struggled with defining, embracing, reclaiming, and ameliorating my culture. To understand my own identity, I analyzed my cultural identity through race and ethnicity.

“¡Ay, que bonito mi mijo, es guerito!” “You’re not Mexican, you’re a gringo!”

Until I came to Oxbow, I didn’t realize that I was weird. Not from my personality, which is weird in of itself, but because I never felt so brown in a place before. I have gone to city council and town hall meetings with Working Classroom¹¹, and was asked if I noticed anything about the people there, which was it consisted mostly of old white men. I, and many others from Mexican descent, have struggled with identity based on our birth place, physical features, and the color of our skin. I have struggled as a victim of racial, and ethnic colorism discrimination. Back home, on my side of town of the South Valley at least, majority of people are some shade of brown with some gringos¹² around.

My skin is much lighter than some of my moreno¹³ family, leading them to nickname me “guero¹⁴”. Unknowingly, this label would set a path of privilege and rejection. Privilege was my golden ticket because, at first glance, I looked similar to the people who looked down on and rejected us and I didn’t have to prove myself to them as much as my other family members who had more pigment in their skin. Looking back, my family unconsciously put me on a pedestal for

⁹ University of Minnesota’s Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition
(<http://carla.umn.edu/culture/definitions.html>)

¹⁰ Western Culture defined by European countries and their colonization and immigration in other countries like the United States, “What is Culture?” article by Live Science (<https://www.livescience.com/21478-what-is-culture-definition-of-culture.html>)

¹¹ A non profit arts organization in Albuquerque, New Mexico providing workshops and professional opportunities to youth from historically ignored communities. I have been involved with them for five years since eighth grade and have been able to create public art murals, take workshops with guest artists, and be a paid actor/intern
(<http://www.workingclassroom.org/>)

¹² *Gringo/a(s)*: slang Spanish term used in Mexico and in parts of Central and South America to denote (broadly and inoffensively) a U.S. citizen or European. Can derogatively be used to describe a Hispanic who speak little to no Spanish. Possible derivations of it comes from words “green” and “go” and phonetically similar words such as *grin* (green), from an invading U.S. Military song, *Green Grow the Lilacs* and the association of the color green U.S. dollar with Anglos and saying “*grin go home*”. (<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/08/07/209266300/who-exactly-is-a-gringo>)

¹³ *Moreno/a(s)*: person(s) of “dark brown or black-brown skin tones and/or Amerindian or Afro-Mexican origin.”
(<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/08/07/209266300/who-exactly-is-a-gringo>)

¹⁴ *Güero/a(s)*: term used in Mexico and in parts of Central South America to denote someone of “fair complexion or with blond, light brown or red hair. Originates from phrase, *huero huevo*, meaning empty egg or egg lost during incubation, then the color white being associated with sickness.

being a light complected male in the family who would show a natural curiosity for knowledge and art. This naturally set me apart from my moreno family members who weren't as favored and peers in school who would presume I was pejoratively called "white" or "gringo" because I was not as dark as they were. I was always discouraged and never knew why I was pushed away from my own people. At times, I wish I was darker so I wasn't glorified and be the right shade to connect with others.

Now, I often feel pity, exotification and or confusion from my Caucasian counterparts because of my background, appearing different from them and not being fully in tune with my culture. What I considered normal is at a different standard in other places or seen as inferior to those more white or pretentious to those more brown. Am I Hispanic, Latino, or Chicano? This conflicting plurality continues my identity crisis. I accept that I don't have it as bad as others, yet my struggles are still valid as human being, regardless of my outer appearance or blood.

Race perpetually distinguishes and divides cultures today as a superficial social construct. Being a relatively a recent concept for about the past 500 years, scientists have long argued the issue of race. The general global acceptance of race has influenced history and society tremendously, yet essentially has been used to oppress predominantly people of color and shapes many different cultures.

In the seventeenth century, during European exploration and colonization, the term "race" began to evolve as a means to differentiate human populations in the Americas and Africa. This prelude to a new "racial worldview", the ideology of institutionalized, systematic social stratification based on race being unalterable and carries certain moral, dispositional, and intellectual abilities linked to its phenotype.¹⁵ Even before the founding of the United States and the Constitution after the American Revolution in the late eighteenth century, racism was the foundation for the institution of African slavery and encroachment of Native Americans. This then lead to classifying these populations of African and Native American descent as inferior, institutionalizing and developing social social mechanisms for these differences.

As a rapidly industrializing nation expanded westward in the nineteenth century, they were faced with moral dilemmas of race inevitably shown in the sectional differences in the Antebellum, Civil War and Reconstruction Period about challenging and reforming the socioeconomic institution of slavery. Yet, as proven with analysis of the aftermath of the Civil War, Reconstruction and new amendments like the thirteenth through fifteenth amendments passed during this time did not resolve black disenfranchisement. Instead, it continued it through criminalizing freed African Americans through convict leasing, lynchings and Jim Crow continuing through to the present day with a declared war on drugs in colored communities mass incarceration of them.¹⁶ Interdependent agendas of Jim Crow, social darwinism and racial segregation would be challenged in the mid-twentieth century during the civil rights movement lead by cases such as *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954-1956) declaring racial segregation unconstitutional and activists such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968) in his boycotts and speeches. People involved in this movement were successful in establishing the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (under President Lyndon B. Johnson) which allowed for integration of public facilities, and equal employment for all¹⁷. Today, though, issues of gang violence within

¹⁵ (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/race-human>)

¹⁶ *13th (film)*, on Netflix discussing issues with the 13th amendment and the disenfranchisement of African Americans post Civil War to the present day.

¹⁷ (<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-act>)

segregated colored communities and police brutality against mostly black individuals plagues the U.S.

For myself, my ancestry had a similar struggle since the time of Westward Expansion to that of the modern era with the Civil Rights Movement. Another issue, in particular for my background, that can be seen alongside African ancestry in America is with the large Mexican population beginning with the aftermath of Mexican-American War (1846-1848) acquiring territory from Mexico and trying to create peace through the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo (1848). What this treaty did was the opposite, by unrightful acknowledgement of citizenship of the people in these annexed territories and loss of their civil and property rights to Anglo settlers, being debated in cases of Mexican descendents.¹⁸ Because of different interpretations and the ramifications benefiting the U.S. and oppressing those of Mexican ancestry, there is some negative, xenophobic sentiments towards one another that have carried on into the modern era and present day. Concurrently with the Civil Rights movement was the Chicano Movement¹⁹, where they protested against the institutions of education and agriculture that condoned inequality and discrimination.

Historians can classify a combination of four movements going on such as the youth advocating for education and the antiwar movement, the farmworkers movement, movement for political empowerment and the land rights movement. The beginning of the movement can be attributed to Reies López Tijerina in New Mexico with the land grant movement in 1966 and 1967 with his cause of the federal government restoring the land rights of descendents of those affected by the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. Following Tijerina was Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales in Denver raising Chicano nationalism with his poem *I am Joaquin*, and the Aztec myths of “Atzlán” or the homeland. In the central valley of California, farm workers organized by César Chávez for self determination through nonviolent strikes, pilgrimages, boycotts and fasts. Students also began organizing walk outs from their crumbling school system in Los Angeles that lacked support for Mexican American students and were successful in meeting up with Presidential Candidate John F. Kennedy. With the culmination of these causes for equality, the establishment of La Raza Unida Party in Texas promoted a third party voice and power for Mexican Americans; it was seen at its peak in the 1972 election and the Raza Unida convention. The mistreatment of this communities for decades with lack of rights and access to vote and receive benefits as rightful citizens called for this. This exemplifies the influential and change and continuity of race on American culture over time. Despite progress being made, Americans still live in a divided country and the polarity of classes and races remains.

From these ways of oppression, aggressive and extreme groups arise in response to lack of immediate progress or action within and between cultures and or races. Ways in which radicalized sentiments with race and culture can be seen in are ethnocentrism and colorism. There needs to be the term “race” to have racism, there is also “ethnicity” for ethnocentrism. Ethnicity describes “a [shared] common identity-based ancestry, language, or culture. It is often based on religion, beliefs, and customs as well as memories of migration or colonization.” This sociocultural concept can often be confused with the sociobiological concept of race. Ethnocentrism is usually defined as a particular ethnic group feeling superior over other supposed inferior ethnic groups. It is an unavoidable quality we all possess and should be an

¹⁸ (https://www.pbs.org/kerawar/wars/wars_end_guadalupe.html)

¹⁹ *Chicano Movement*, or *el movimiento*: “used by historians to describe a moment of ethnic empowerment and protest among Americans of Mexican descent beginning in the 1960s.” Spanish for “the movement” (<http://www.brown.edu/Research/Coachella/chicano.html>)

opportunity for growth based off the definition of “making false assumptions about others' ways based on our own limited experience.”²⁰

For Hispanics and Latino/as, this is prevalent in nationality, ability to speak Spanish etc. An often in group form of discrimination within races and ethnicities especially for Hispanics/Latinos is colorism, which is the discrimination based on people’s skin color and meaning associated with it. Studies have shown implicit biases for lighter skin tone in the U.S. with those from Mexican and Puerto Rican background²¹. This racial stratification is prevalent in Latin and South America, where a caste system based on racial ancestry is seen predominantly with mestizos and mulattos²². These mixed or multiracial groups²³

When discussing race and ethnicity, this mindset often leads to categorizing different names and labels for people of the same ancestry, yet divided culturally. It is often hard to decide what defines a certain identity and when you cannot fit in the criteria or do not believe you or the name is representative of that identity. Today, there are a wide range of terms to describe different colored communities, yet only “white” and “Caucasian” for those who have created these multipurpose labels. In my case, for those of Mexican descent, there is Chicano/a²⁴, Hispanic, Latino/a²⁵ (or more recently Chicanx or Latinx²⁶). In America, this labeling debate persists as there are regional and political reasons for using any of these terms, all simultaneously including and excluding people while some, like myself, use the terms interchangeably. There are certain associations when identifying with a label, either being pretentious or ghetto. A common misconception for Chicano/a(s) is that they must be a Cholo/a²⁷. Even for some Hispanic/Latinx families, the labeling only continues with superficial terms like “*Negro/a(s)*”, “*Indio/a*” or “*Chino/a*” to describe people that are or are not in this ethnic category. It is correct in describing a race or nationality but overgeneralizes on this physical label and is not

²⁰ Emeritus Anthropology Professor Ken Barger of Indiana University Indianapolis, (<http://www.iupui.edu/~anthkb/ethnocen.htm>)

²¹ (<https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/fall-2015/whats-colorism>)

²² *Mestizo/a(s)*: meaning “mixed” in Spanish, used in Latin America to denote someone of mixed ancestry with white European and indigenous background.

Mulatto(s): similarly with mestizo, denotes someone of mixed ancestry with white European and African ancestry. (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/10/mestizo-and-mulatto-mixed-race-identities-unique-to-hispanics/>)

²³ *MULATTO IN THE UNITED STATES: Including a Study of the Role of Mixed-Blood Races throughout the World*

²⁴ *Chicano/a(s)*: “Someone who is native of, or descends from, Mexico and who lives in the United States. Chicano or Chicana is a chosen identity of some Mexican Americans in the United States. The term became widely used during the Chicano Movement of the 1960s by many Mexican Americans to express a political stance founded on pride in a shared cultural, ethnic, and community identity.” Reclaimed pejorative term for young Mexican Americans at the time. (https://www.exploratorium.edu/sites/default/files/Genial_2017_Terms_of_Usage.pdf)

²⁵ *Hispanic(s)*: Derived from Spanish term *hispano/a* meaning “of or from Hispania.” Denote someone native of, or descends from, a Spanish speaking country with linguistic ties, although holds a more colonial connotation. Adopted during Nixon’s presidency to have a term for Spanish-speaking groups in U.S on the census. Commonly used in Southwest, in states like New Mexico and Texas.

Latino/a(s): Includes people of Spanish or Portuguese speaking countries in Latin America, excluding those born in or descended from Spain and holds more cultural ties. Commonly used in California.

(<http://remezcla.com/features/culture/latino-vs-hispanic-vs-latinx-how-these-words-originated/>)

²⁶ *Latinx, Chicanx*: Gender neutral term for Latinos/as that is more inclusive and non binary.

(<https://www.them.us/story/latinx-is-officially-in-the-dictionary>)

²⁷ *Cholo/a(s)*: (typically young) member of Mexican-American gang subculture. Distinctive demeanour, clothing, make up, speech pattern, tattoos and graffiti within low socioeconomic *barrios* (American/English equivalent of the “hood(s)”) with susceptibility to lack of education and increase in criminal and drug related behaviors.

(<https://www.britannica.com/topic/cholo-gang-subculture>)

considerate of the individual's complexities rooted in this colonial mindset²⁸. There also is this xenophobia for those of Mexican descent with those born in America being different from Mexican immigrants or "Mojados"²⁹. With these continuing labels and misconceptions of them, the issues remain unresolved.

Race continues to be a controversial topic all over the world, but our constructed differences have led us to have a diverse, polycultural world we can appreciate with many different customs, languages, food, and art that humanity would not have gotten if it shared one monoculture. Through socialization of our society, humans (or at least people of the western world as they are often credited with exploring and colonizing away from Europe and Asia) racialized³⁰ cultures. In a country where racial minorities are marginalized, the U.S is expected to become a "minority white" nation by 2045³¹. With this, those of the white majority feel their cultural race and ethnicity is at risk to a growing multicultural diversity seen with Alt-Right propaganda more present since President Trump's election in 2016.³² Race and ethnicity also implies a greater homogeneity or heterogeneity than actually exists. A more inclusive term for race that should be used is "ancestry", as it acknowledges human variation linked with geographic origin of our ancestors while focusing on the history of a person rather than categorization³³.

Even today, scholars continue to disprove the validity of race being a social phenomena rather than biological. There is only hope that the modern technology of the twenty-first century can unite humanity instead of further dividing it. Ultimately, this part of one's cultural identity is hard to determine when factors of self perception and society's perception as it is different from person to person. Humans tend to notice differences more than similarities amongst one another. People of certain cultures and races may preserve their culture by only associating with people of the same ancestry, which may promote cultural pride or divisions. As future generations come, race may simultaneously preserve and diffuse cultures based on the support or lack of support for diversity in America. Depending on if I have children or not and with who, their physical features and ancestry may lead them to adopt new customs or continue the ones they learn from others similar to them. Although race is debated today with genetics, it has led to discrimination of certain groups of people while allowing diversity and cultural specificity away from a universalistic view.

²⁸ The Spanish Colonial Casta System (<http://www.bellavistaranch.net/genealogy/casta.html>)

²⁹ *Mojado/a(s)*: Spanish for "wet", serves as a derogatory term in Spanish as the equivalent of "wetback" to describe a Mexican Immigrant who came to the U.S by crossing the Rio Grande River. (<http://articles.latimes.com/2013/apr/01/local/la-me-latino-labels-20130402>)

³⁰ University of Calgary, Anti-Racism Education, (<https://www.ucalgary.ca/cared/racialization>)

³¹ Brookings, (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2018/03/14/the-us-will-become-minority-white-in-2045-census-projects/>)

³² Article on *Alt-Right*, from Southern Poverty Law Center (<https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/alt-right>)

³³ Harvard University: The Graduate School Arts and Sciences' *Science in the News*, (<http://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/flash/2017/science-genetics-reshaping-race-debate-21st-century/>)

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