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Ni de Aqui, Ni de Alla

Wood, foam core, fabric, acrylic paint, yarn, plexiglass

Throughout my adolescence, my sense of belonging was dictated by my hyphen-Americanism. With extended family, I knew I wasn't seen as a "true Mexican," while, with my white friends, I felt a barrier separating us and weakening our connection. I felt like I was being tugged in both directions so floating in this gray area was something I learned to tolerate. It was not long ago that I learned to interpret this dual identity as I wanted to, not as how others decided to label me. "Ni de aqui, ni de alla" (from neither here, nor there) is a phrase that has recently been popularized and used to unite first generation Hispanic-Americans like myself. It is used to describe our state of being and identity, in artworks like Groana Melendez's body of work and by people in my family as a way to connect to the world in a more conceivable way. My piece zooms in on the hyphen that connects my two cultures and explores these separate yet intersecting parts of myself. I built a miniature model of my living room in NYC and another model of my Grandma's home in Mexico City. Although these two places are defined in different ways, I wanted to emphasize that they influence and connect to one another. This is expressed through the clear separation in between the two, allowing you to see both clearly at one time. I created this piece as a thank you note, not only for my beautiful Mexican culture and unique identity, but for my family who let me flourish with their love and support.

Ni de Aqui, Ni de Alla:
An Exploration of Being [hyphen] American



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OS46

Writer's Note: In this paper, I address the unique experiences of hyphenated Americanism and analyze the societal pressures that come with this label. I also explore how our identity can change with our environment and how even our own self-labels can affect our sense of acceptance. Lastly, I reexamine my own view of my identity and the world around me to answer the question: how does personal identity and nationality affect one's sense of citizenship and belonging?

In 1915, President Theodore Roosevelt weighed in on the immigration exclusion acts that were being passed at the time, saying, "There is no room in this country for hyphenated Americanism... A hyphenated American is not an American at all" (Roosevelt). More than a century later, hyphenated Americanism is still a controversial topic, one that many claim to be "divisive." For those who are balancing multiple ethnicities and cultures, it can be challenging to label who we are, and using [hyphen] American can make navigating our identity easier.

In order to explore this concept, it is necessary to look at how Mexican-Americans express their identity. In a 2010 study, Mexican-American high school students were interviewed about their experience with ethnicity in different environments (eg. friend group, family, school). When they were asked what it meant to be Mexican-American, most responded with experiences of discrimination; they experienced stigmatization, feelings of "otherness," and separation. Despite growing up with our own beautiful culture, thriving in the U.S. proves to be difficult with the acts of prejudice we face. Racial incidents can make us lose hope in truly expressing ourselves, and this is damaging to our identity.

However, the students revealed that although they internalized negative comments about their identity, they also internalized ways to cope with these biased messages: it was found that their "intraethnic experiences" were empowering and supportive in the way they self-identified

(Quintana, Stephen M., et al, 2010). Similarly, it was reported that adolescents who “believed that their ethnicity was a central aspect of their self-concepts” had more interest and were more engaged in their school environment (Brown, Christia Spears, and Hui Chu, 2012). The issue of acculturation, which is assimilation to the dominant culture of a society, is also one that can be difficult for those growing up in different cultures. For example, a study was done on what ethnic labels reveal about college students of Mexican origin. It was discovered that those who self identified with only their country of origin (“Mexican”) were more likely to speak Spanish more often and had higher levels of “acculturative stress,” which is the psychological impact of adapting to a new culture. However, those who self identified with their host country as well as their origin country (“Mexican-American”) were more likely to speak in the language of the host society and have less acculturative stress (Wang, Sherry C., and Byron L. Zamboanga, 2007). Apart from pressure put on us from societal norms, we put pressure on ourselves to conform to one state of being. It’s with these labels that we can be our own worst enemy and not allow ourselves to explore our identity.

From these studies and interviews, I saw how there was a collective shared experience that I could relate to, yet I understood how the story of each person was unique. To explore this further, I interviewed my brother, Brandon, on his experience of being Mexican-American and growing up in New York City. When I asked him if embracing his Latino identity was important to him and why, he responded, “Latino identity and expression is important to me because it makes up who I am and my family. It’s especially important for my family and I here in the US since we don’t live in Mexico, and it is especially easy to lose one’s traditions over time. Being able to express my Latino identity is important to keep my traditions alive even when living a 5 hour plane ride away.” Like my brother, I see the importance of keeping our culture relevant in our lives as

well as in the world around us. We recognize that there's already a disconnect since we live so far from our origin country, so we do as much as we can to close this gap. Brandon is currently a sophomore at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. He is the first in our family to go to college, so I asked him about this experience. "Being the first person to go to college in the family is important because you set all the expectations, of not just my own house, but for my cousins who live near me and for future generations. Although it's challenging at times because I have no idea what to do since it's my first time, I have to show everyone else that it is possible". Even with our parents, I can see how they are taking my brother's experience with the college process and using it to help me in the best way they can. I continued on this note of his experience with college; not only is he the first in his family to attend one, but he also attends a predominantly white institution (PWI). I asked him about any similarly identifying communities he has connected with and he responded, "I have found Latinos/ Hispanic people at my school which made me feel comfortable, but I have also found non-Latino students that I also feel comfortable around." It was on this subject that I couldn't connect with him as much. While he had previously only attended schools where white students were the minority, I've been attending a PWI for the past few years. It's here where I can see how growing in different environments can drastically change our actions as Mexican-Americans. In my high school, I use many opportunities to spread knowledge and awareness about my culture and people, while my brother doesn't see it as necessary. So I dove deeper into this difference between us and asked him how his environment changes how he sees his identity. He said, "The environment that people live in tends to mend and shape other people in a variety of ways. I live in a city that is filled with a variety of people and living with certain groups tends to change your point of view of life. Sometimes those points of views of life come from one's own cultural identity. For example, when I was younger, I went to school with a lot of

African-American students. There were about 3 total Hispanic students so over time, I tended to speak less and less Spanish because it was something that I didn't really use anywhere but home". My brother and I attended the same school for a while and I related to the experience of "losing" our Spanish for a time. It wasn't until I started taking a Heritage Spanish class that I started speaking Spanish more at home. This flip between school culture and home culture is also a major factor in deciding how much we express our identity. So lastly, I asked about the different pressures my brother experienced from both cultures in these different environments while growing up. He responded, "Growing up there was definitely pressure coming from other cultures. It never got to the point where we tried to belittle or condescend each other. For example, we would argue to see who has the better food, better music, better dancing style, etc. However, as we learned over time and became more worldly we realized that all our cultures have some similarities, but also differences and that's what makes each of us stick out. So rather than neglect those differences we can learn new things."

These final words of my brother encapsulate what it is like to grow up with two cultures, without knowing which one you fully truly belong to or identify with. Similar to my brother, I am learning to embrace my Mexican identity and navigate the hyphen in the label Mexican-American. A few years ago, we threw a small party to welcome some of my extended family from Mexico who had just arrived. We were well into the night when my name was called in the living room. I don't know where the question came from, but my heart dropped to the bottom of my stomach when I was suddenly asked, "Where would you say that you're from?" At that moment, I ran through the possible scenarios in my head. I could either say, "I'm Mexican" and have my whole family exclaim, "No you're not! You were born here, you're American!" in disagreement. Or I could say, "I'm American," and have my whole family exclaim, "How could you say that?! Are

you not proud of your Mexican blood?!” in disagreement. I was young at the time, but I was already accustomed to this debate that played in my head every time I was asked this question.

Ni de aqui, ni de alla (neither from here, nor there) is a phrase I’ve only discovered recently, but since then, I’ve heard it numerous times. It has been used by first-gen people to describe our state of being and identity, in artworks like Groana Melendez’s body of work that is titled the same phrase, and by people in my own family as a way to connect to the world in a more conceivable way. It’s a phrase that I have connected with as it not only expresses my actual dual identity, but also the influence these identities have on my sense of belonging.

With my family, as much as I adored and embraced my culture, I could tell that I wasn’t seen as a “true Mexican”. At school, I was slightly different from my white peers and although we were born and raised only miles apart, there was a barrier between me and them. Even today, the hyphen in the phrase Mexican-American feels like a tight rope that’s pulling me in both directions of my identity. It’s possible to feel like I’m being tugged in different directions, but I also feel as if I’m not accepted on either side; as if I’m floating in a gray area that is my identity. Being a first generation person of color is a unique and harrowing experience; I’m an American citizen, but does America really and fully accept me as who I am? Mexican blood runs through my veins, but will I ever be enough for the country that gives me the culture that I love?

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