

# PERSPECTIVES

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

The quilt tearing in half represents the disconnect of culture most immigrants feel after acculturating and losing the bit of culture they have left, holding onto it by a string. It also represents the feeling of tearing away from your culture. Each patch has a pencil, pen and marker-drawn patterned background with a printed picture on top.

ART CREDIT: MARIELLA BAYONNE



Embracing  
While

Culture  
Rejecting

It

BY MARIELLA BAYONNE

Imagine you are one of around a thousand immigrants who travel to the United States each day. Differences between the Americans living here and you become more obvious, and almost embarrassing, day-by-day. Walking down the street and seeing people poke mini American flags into their lawns makes it seem like all they are trying to do is remind you that you aren't from here. Over time, you try to change that, wearing what all the American kids wear, avoiding speaking your native language, or packing a simple peanut butter and jelly sandwich for lunch, because that's what all the American kids eat. That is acculturation.

Culture is what makes us unique. Culture is the heart of our communities and identities as individuals. Acculturation is the process in which people adopt the cultural identity of the most prominent culture where they live—referring to our need to fit in and adapt. But the loss of cultural identity through this process, is it for the better or the worse?

Growing up in America as a person of color, especially in predominantly white neighborhoods, can make you feel like an outsider. Julia Lee, a Korean American author and teacher who moved to the United States at a very young age, grew up feeling like a misfit. She was unable to relate to most people she was around. Many people in that position may adapt to the most prominent culture, even though it may not be their own, to fit in more and 'stick out' less. "I didn't speak any English. And they [her parents] realized, 'Oh, my gosh, this is going to be an impediment to her success. We need to make sure she learns English as much as possible,'" Julia said. "And so they stopped speaking Korean to me at home. And then pretty soon, I didn't want to speak Korean, because I also just wanted to assimilate and wanted to be like everybody else."

In some places in America that aren't as diverse as places like Miami, people of color can feel left out and separated. "My parents had my sister and I go to Korean school for a while, and I remember

feeling like I didn't really fit in with those kids, either, because some of them spoke a lot more Korean than I did, or they came from very different families, or had very different religious beliefs," Julia said. "And so, even there, I was, like, OK, we're the same race or the same ethnicity, but I still don't feel like these are necessarily my people." Even while being Korean, Julia had assimilated so quickly as a child that she had forgotten much of her Korean roots. Now in her adult life, her daughter speaks Korean more fluently and is able to talk with her grandparents (Julia's parents) more easily than Julia can. It seems Julia avoided keeping that bit of culture she had left early in life, before it was too late.

Mary J. Levitt, Ph.D., a Professor Emerita at Florida International University, studied and researched psychology. She led a project based on the adaptation in newly immigrant adolescents (project SOL). Reflecting on her work, she said, "Over time, kids develop conflict with their parents very often, because the kids are assimilating faster than their parents, generally speaking. So the kids, they learn a language faster, they become part of the culture faster than their parents do, and what we found was, the conflict then with the parents was especially pronounced for the younger kids, because the younger kids were the ones who really adapted the fastest to being here, to being American."

Project SOL studied kids from Argentina, Colombia, Cuba, Haiti and the English-speaking Caribbean countries, who were first-generation immigrants, enrolled in third to ninth grade. One out of every 10 kids traveled without their parents, but the kids who immigrated with their parents tended to acculturate faster, while their parents still held on to most of their culture. Little did they know, while they were clinging to their roots, their own culture was changing. "The culture you're coming from is changing at the same time. So, it may feel a bit disorienting when people go back after many years to what they think they remember about their own culture, and that culture has changed in the meantime. You can never put your foot in the same river twice," Dr. Levitt said.

Views of culture have changed and will continue to change. When Julia grew up in a mainly white neighborhood, she felt like an outsider. But as life and identity in America continue to shift and progress, so do views of culture. Difference is celebrated. Being a person of color in America, especially bicultural, is like taking a piece of your own culture and mixing it with all of the other cultures in America and making a big diverse salad.

It's important to embrace diversity and culture. If you think about it, America is just a big, hot pot of culture. One many care to join. "Sometimes American immigrants become even more aggressively American than those who were born in this country. They want to make sure that everybody knows, 'Oh, I'm super patriotic,' or 'I'm super, into football and hotdogs and hamburgers, apple pie,' all those signifiers of American culture. But I think as I got older, I realized that ... it's not either/or, it's both/and. You can be both American and a person of color, or a person whose family came from a different country," Julia Lee said.

As we progress into accepting different cultures, it is important to also learn about them. Ignorance is not a trend, especially when it comes to people and who they are. It's important to educate yourself or others about culture, especially in America. According to the University of New Hampshire Carsey School of Public Policies, even though the U.S. population growth may slow, diversity grows. Adolescents are the leaders of the growing diversity of the U.S. population and the leaders of our future. The youth controls the next step we take.

Never be ignorant and rude to other cultures. The world around us changes every day, it's important to stay involved and engaged and maybe learn something new each day. Remember, we are all people, whether culture defines us, or assimilation "refines" us, we are still our own type of person and it's important to embrace that.