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La Vida es Mejor Contigo en Ella

“La vida es mejor contigo en ella.”

Pitter patter echoes down the pavement. Laughter of preschool students dragging their mothers along. “Tranquilo” she murmurs. Across the street, the mouthwatering scent of bacon sizzling permeates the air, lingering long after you have left. Men relaying the newest information from the basketball game last night. Plastic bags ruffling as our favorite deli owner puts the holy trinity inside: juice, sandwich, and chips. Spanish songs of love and lost blast through the speakers as our tías and primas dance and reminisce. Down the road on the corner of the park, tíos and hermanos yell in triumph as they won the bet over a game of cards. Looking up, passing the brick buildings, stands the block’s chismosa in her window squealing about the latest news about the next door neighbor. The next window is an abuela hanging freshly washed shirts on the clothesline that connects to the neighbor across from her. A representation of a tangible



connection of the people in the community. Finally, there stands the guarded castle of The City College of New York. Would you believe that this is someone's journey everyday?

Angel, an eighteen year old, "practically nineteen," as he likes to say, is a student at The City College of New York studying psychology. Born and raised in Harlem, he is the son of two immigrant parents from Mexico. Coming from a small family consisting of just his parents, younger brother, and himself, Angel often found companionship outside his home.

"I don't come from a big family, you know? Most of the time, I'm alone, which is why I pour so much into my friends," he shares.

Community has always been the foundation of Angel's life. Growing up in a close knit, family oriented neighborhood, he is surrounded by people who uplift and support one another. From an early age, he was taught the importance of looking out for loved ones, ensuring their well being just as much as his own. It is a value deeply embedded in many first generation American kids, the understanding that family is not limited to blood but extends to the people we share struggles, values, and care with. Angel has a genuine appreciation for life and the people around him. He seems to navigate the world with immense gratitude and openness, something many people find challenging to embrace. Is it not interesting how we all share a general understanding of what culture is, yet we define it in our own unique ways?

Imagine one of those street interviewers in New York City approaching you, shoving that tiny, antagonizing microphone in your face, and asking, "What does culture mean to you?" Your natural instinct might be to start talking about ethnicity, race, food, or even heritage, and you would not be wrong. But could culture mean much more than that? According to Warren Kidd and Alison Teagle, scholars in sociology and authors of *Culture and Identity*, culture means "... 'the way of life of a group of people'. In other words – how they live their lives. The patterns

of social organization and the ‘normal’ ways in which we are expected to behave in society touch all aspects of our daily lives.” Kidd and Warren are saying culture means way more; it encompasses how a group of people live, including their beliefs, norms, language, and customs. Which, fair enough, they are scholars, after all. This sounds very similar to Angel’s definition.

He stated, “To me, culture is where you originate from. It’s your traditions, what you believe in, the people you come from.”

There it is again, the people that surround you. Community. Angel’s understanding of culture is deeply rooted in the connections between family and the collective. As he speaks, a light bulb flickers in my mind, though it takes a moment to fully illuminate. For Angel, culture is not just about what holidays you celebrate or what food you eat, it is about the support system that guides him, the love that is shared. From what I have come to know, Mexican culture is deeply rooted in community. Mexican families are often close knit, they have strong bonds that extend beyond the immediate household. It includes extended relatives such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Respecting your elders is essential, as is the value of collectivism. Helping family members, supporting one another emotionally, financially, and socially. Traditions such as *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) reinforce these connections, celebrating heritage and togetherness through shared rituals. Angel comes from a background where family is essential to personal growth, a guiding force that nurtures and sustains your identity.

As we shared laughter over extremely embarrassing childhood stories, Angel recounted a memory from a family trip to Mexico that left a lasting impact on him. He described walking through the city and seeing kids his age working, selling goods on the streets all day just to help support their families.

“There were times when I’d go into the city and see kids my age, you know, working. Selling stuff on the road. It’s crazy to see that. It makes me appreciative of the life I have here—you know, it’s a privilege.”

The weight of that realization hit me. Being so young and having to help support your family is a tough reality, one that emphasizes the deep rooted values of Latino culture. Much like in my own culture, there is an emphasis on community. That very ideal is what Angel embodies in the way he views the world and his relationships. Similarly to Angel, I view culture the same way. Growing up in a Caribbean household, family always comes first, but the same level of care is not always extended to those outside of blood relations. As my Haitian grandmother often says, “friends do not exist.” Unlike Angel’s neighborhood, mine is not as close. In fact, it reflects the common stereotype of New Yorkers: distant and reserved. However, I do not fully share my grandmother’s perspective. To me, culture is about both family and friends; connecting with the people who matter the most. Spanish is a Romance language. Literally, since it comes from Latin. What did you think I meant?

“Yeah, I speak Spanish. My mom and dad do, so that’s just what I speak at home” (Angel).

Beyond being one of the world’s most widely spoken languages, it serves as a vital link to Angel’s culture. Language is one of the main ways people outwardly express their identity. It reflects a community’s worldview, from humor to values to storytelling. Language also connects generations, preserving cultural heritage while evolving



with societal changes. Language keeps people's voices alive, even after they are gone. Many Spanish speakers, especially Gloria Anzaldúa, share this feeling. She was a writer and scholar in Chicana and queer theory. Anzaldúa emphasizes the deep connection between language and identity, arguing that your self worth is intertwined with linguistic pride. As she writes in her novel, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, "I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself" (127). For many bilingual speakers, especially in the Chicano and Latino spaces, speaking their native language (and sometimes Spanglish) is often met with criticism and seen as inferior. This tends to lead to internalized shame and a struggle for self acceptance. Anzaldúa insists that embracing your language is essential for embracing your cultural identity and self worth, just as Angel believes. There is a sense of pride in his language and heritage as he states, "I'm really proud of my culture—being Mexican has never been something I've felt insecure about." Overall, language is not just a way to communicate, it is the heartbeat of culture itself.

As we come to an end, getting to know Angel was a true pleasure. Having grown up surrounded by Latino culture, this experience was both nostalgic and enjoyable. The culture is something I hold dear, and it resonates with my own in many ways. Hearing Angel talk about his Mexican heritage fills me with even more pride for my own Haitian and Jamaican background and the language we speak. It has made me appreciate my family and all their quirks a little more. I am proud to have a strong support system and, most importantly, a tropical island to escape to when I have had enough of New York's hustle and bustle. Through Angel, I have learned that gratitude is essential, and it is something he deeply shares with his community. Never taking things and people for granted is a lesson I gained from his culture, one I often

forget but now strive to keep in mind. Before we say goodbye, I want to leave you with this verse from Javier Solís and Gerardo Reyes's song "Que Bonito Es Mi Tierra":

“¡Ay!, caray, caray, qué bonita es mi tierra, qué bonita, qué linda es.”

AI Transparency Statement

In my essay I used Google's Gemini to point out any run on sentences. I tried to limit as many of them as possible because I wanted the essay to sound more concise. For example, in my introduction, it states, "Born and raised in Harlem, he is the son of two immigrant parents from Mexico. Coming from a small family consisting of just his parents, his younger brother, and himself, Angel often found companionship outside his home." Before that I wrote, "Born and raised in Harlem, he is the son of two immigrant parents from Mexico, Angel comes from a small family consisting of just his parents, his younger brother, and himself, he often found companionship outside his home." The platform I used explained why the sentence was structurally incorrect and suggested breaking it up.

Citations:

1. Kidd, Warren, and Alison Teagle. *Culture and identity*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012.
2. Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books, 2022.
3. "Gloria E. Anzaldúa." *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/gloria-e-anzaldua. Accessed 7 Mar. 2025.
4. Angel Mosso. "Interview." Conducted by Mikaela Blount, 20 February 2025.