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“Embracing Existence: Exploring Mexican-American Identity, Agency, and Resistance”

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Honors Thesis
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Abstract:

This research investigates Mexican-American identity, agency, and resistance, contextualizing them within the socio-political landscape of the United States. Drawing from existing scholarship, the study employs qualitative interviews to explore how Mexican-American college students assert their ethnic identities as resistance against societal pressures to assimilate and institutions that marginalize them. The findings reveal the pervasive influence of racialization and marginalization experienced by Mexican-Americans, shaping their sense of belonging and connection to their Mexican heritage. Drawing upon Telles and Sue's (2019) concept of the "ethnic core," participants deepen their ties to their Mexican identities through familial and social networks, cultural practices, language, religion, and geographical context. This robust framework enables them to resist attempts to erase or diminish their cultural identities.

Moreover, extended periods abroad, particularly in Latin America, contribute to their cultural rediscovery and appreciation, further solidifying their Mexican identity. Unlike previous generations, participants exhibit a disconnection from their American identity, in part due to historical events such as the Trump presidency and the racial reckoning following George Floyd's murder. Nevertheless, they acknowledge the privileges of U.S. citizenship but prioritize their Mexican heritage as a means of resistance. My research underscores the complexity of Mexican-American identity formation and resistance, highlighting the importance of individual agency in navigating societal structures and asserting cultural identity.

Introduction

"I'm just gonna miss like existing" – these poignant words, spoken by one interviewee, encapsulate a more profound reality within the Mexican-American experience. They echo the pervasive struggle against racialization and cultural erasure, highlighting the profound longing to simply exist within a society that persistently marginalizes the Mexican-American identity and narrative. In the face of the pervasive struggle against racialization and cultural erasure, how do the 37.4 million people of Mexican origin in the U.S. assert their existence? (Pew Research Center, 2022). I draw on scholars like Flores-Gonzalez (2010), who argue that rather than adhering to conventional assimilation patterns, second-generation Mexican-Americans frequently bolster their ethnic identities in response to societal pressures. This perspective then lays the groundwork for understanding the concept of the "ethnic core," as proposed by Telles and Sue (2019), which suggests that individuals draw upon a deep-seated ethnic pride to assert their Mexican-American identity. Drawing on the works of these scholars leads me to examine how Mexican-Americans exercise individual agency to assert belonging, reinforce ethnic pride, and strengthen their ties to cultural heritage in response to racialization and expected assimilation practices. Through this agency, they affirm their sense of belonging within their community and demonstrate how resistance plays a crucial role in identity formation.

Sociologists like Flores-Gonzalez, Telles, and Sue have studied distinct age groups of second-generation Mexican-Americans who have resisted expected assimilation practices and have shown a solid connection to their ethnic identity. However, even though one in four Gen Zers identify as Hispanic (Pew Research Center, 2020), there needs to be more research on how and why Mexican-American Gen Zers resist expected assimilation practices and show a stronger connection to their Mexican identities. There is also insufficient research on how the travel

experiences of Mexican-American Gen Zers[1] to other Latin American countries may influence their connection to their Mexican and American identities. Being in Latin America provides them with a sense of belonging and an avenue to reflect upon their identities as Mexican-Americans and why they call themselves so.

This research is necessary because one would expect that the racialization of Mexican-American individuals would have diminished over time, especially after the new conversations of race that have surfaced and have been demanded with the murder of George Floyd in 2020. Yet, I am finding that Mexican-Americans are still racialized. The literature in this research was set before these conversations of race were present, and while we talk more about race, what we don't talk about is the persistent power relations that exist within U.S. institutions that continue to marginalize and racialize Mexican-Americans. I show this by interviewing a new generation of Latine college students who can talk about this experience of racialization and how their identities are impacted by it. With this in mind, my research seeks to answer the questions: To what extent does resistance manifest in the assertion of ethnic identity and the cultivation of agency among Mexican-Americans? How do experiences abroad contribute to the development of agency and the assertion of ethnic identity among Mexican-Americans? My answers to these questions argue how identity is used as a means of resistance to defy expected assimilation practices and experiences of racialization.

Drawing on the works of Flores Gonzalez (2010) and Telles and Sue (2019), I will explore how factors like racialization and the "ethnic core" shape the identities of second-generation Mexican-Americans. Specifically, I'll examine how Mexican-American Gen Zers use their identities for resistance amidst societal and institutional pressures. Furthermore, I'll

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[1] Gen Zers, also known as Generation Z, refers to individuals born roughly between 1997 and 2012. They are the demographic cohort succeeding Millennials.

investigate how the prolonged experiences of Mexican-Americans in Latin America influence their understanding and definition of identity and how that manifests into resistance.
I take a qualitative research approach and draw on a total of five follow-up interviews with Mexican-American college students between the ages of 20-24 to show how they use their identities as a means of resistance to expected assimilation practices and against the racialization they face in the U.S.

Thus far, I have introduced the topic and the significance of my research, which is to explain how, despite the racial awakening in the past few years, Generation Z of Mexican-Americans is still being racialized and, therefore, use their identities as a way to resist and assert their belonging against the racialization they face in the U.S. Next, I will present context to better understand how Mexican-Americans are racialized in the U.S. and how this racialization leads them to develop their ethnoracial identities as Mexican-American Gen Zers[2]. Then, I will proceed to discuss the theories presented by Nilda Flores Gonzalez (2010) and Telles and Sue (2019) to support my argument and understand how racialization and the ethnic core influence the Mexican-American identity. I will then follow by presenting my methods and framing why conducting interviews with this group of individuals was important for my study. Subsequently, I will then present my findings and discussion to show how students talk about their experiences of being racialized in the U.S. and how that has led to a disconnection from their American identities. But also how their ethnic core has strengthened their connection to their Mexican identities while at the same time creating more ambivalence around their identities. This will then lead me to discuss how they use their identities as a means of resistance.

[2] This context was gathered from a previous research project that was conducted in the Fall Semester of 2023 titled, "Ni de aqui, Ni de alla": How the Mexican-American student is seen as the perpetual foreigner in the U.S. and in Latin America" which expands on the work of Nilda Flores-Gonzalez (2017) to reveal the complexities of their dual identities, shaped by experiences of racialization and pride in their Mexican heritage.

Finally, I will bring the theories presented and my findings together to show that the Mexican-American identity is used as a form of resistance to experiences of racialization and expected assimilation practices.

Context: The Racialization of Mexican-Americans as "Illegals" and the Perpetual Foreigner

As we delve deeper into understanding how identity can be used as a form of resistance, it is important to understand what racialization means and how racialization impacts the Mexican-American and broader Latine community. Exploring the intricacies of racialization not only sheds light on systemic barriers but also underscores the imperative for empowering Mexican-American individuals to reclaim and redefine their identities amidst oppressive structures and assimilation expectations.

Racialization, as Brown, Jones, and Becker (2018) frame it, "signals the processes by which ideas about race are constructed, come to be regarded as meaningful, and are acted upon" (120). Zinn and Wells (2023) offer a more simple and clear definition for the concept of racialization: "the process by which groups are socially defined and hierarchically positioned as races" (2549). Collectively, both of these definitions reveal that race is constructed through societal processes, where ideas about race gain significance and influence actions. Racialization involves two processes: ascription and identification. As Brown, Jones, and Becker (2018) note: "Ascription involves the application of arbitrary and usually phenotypic characteristics to lump together individuals into a meaningful social category. This process creates a common sense assumption of shared characteristics used to legitimate specific patterns of resource allocation and exploitation (Lacayo 2017). The identificational element of racialization involves acceptance of this designation, often for mobilization or identity construction" (120). One integral aspect of

Latine racialization involves the process of ascription, where racial stereotypes are utilized to shape a perception of the Latine culture as inferior (Zinn and Wells 2023).

To better understand how some of these stereotypes are formed and how this racialization came to be, as early scholarship suggests, we must look at the events that occurred after 9/11. The racialization and discrimination of Latine[3] immigrants, specifically Mexican immigrants, has always been present in U.S. history. For instance, the exploitation of Mexican migrant laborers during the early 20th century, as seen in the Bracero Program, is a clear example of systemic discrimination. It was a government-sponsored initiative that systematically exploited Mexican laborers for cheap agricultural labor in the United States during WWII. "It was viewed by civil rights advocates as a corrupt, coercive, and exploitive labor system, roughly on a par with black sharecropping in the south" (Massey 2008: 70). Furthermore, the mistreatment of Mexican immigrants did not end with the Bracero Program but continued through subsequent policies and practices. Some of the most recent examples being the "1996 Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, which gave the federal government new police powers for the "expedited exclusion" of any alien who had ever crossed the border without documents" (Massey 2008: 74-75). As well as the "Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRIRA) which enlarged the grounds for deportation, expanded the use of "administrative" rather than immigration court removals, eliminated benefits and certain relief from removal, increased mandatory detention, established new barriers to asylum, "criminalized" many immigration-related offenses, restricted immigration of those with low income, barred reentry to

[3] Leo R. Chavez (2013) and Nilda Flores-Gonzalez (2017) and other authors use the term "Latino" to describe someone from or with a Latin American identity. In this study I will be using the term "Latine" as a more gender-inclusive alternative that reflects a commitment to recognizing and respecting diverse gender identities within the Latin American community.

the United States based on prior unlawful presence, and enlisted states and localities in immigration enforcement" (Kerwin 2018: 201).

However, in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the United States witnessed a seismic change in its approach to immigration. The passage of the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (USA PATRIOT) Act of 2001 expanded the government's surveillance powers and had profound implications for immigrants. The USA PATRIOT Act paved the way for increased scrutiny of immigrants, leading to the erosion of civil liberties and due process. The creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in 2003 further emphasized the securitization of immigration. Agencies like Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) became prominent players in enforcing immigration policies, contributing to an environment where immigrants were increasingly viewed through a lens of suspicion and potential criminality. Securitization would also be expanded into local communities in partnership with local and federal law enforcement to deport any immigrant who may or may not be undocumented. These heightened security measures, specifically at the U.S-Mexico border, would only "provide the exemplary theater for staging the spectacle of 'the illegal alien' that the law produces" (Oboler, 2016: 81). From this we see an anti-immigrant stigma towards Mexican immigrants arise but also all Latines no matter their citizenship status. "Stereotypes of Mexicans as alien, foreign, inferior, and criminal result[ed] in racial profiling that targets 'Mexicanness' in general" (Zinn and Wells 2023).

The systematic criminalization and racialization of this community collectively forged the concept that Leo R. Chavez calls the "Latin[e] Threat Narrative," which posits that Latines are not like previous immigrant groups, who ultimately became part of the nation. According to

the assumptions and taken-for-granted “truths” inherent in this narrative, “Latin[e]s are unwilling or incapable of integrating, of becoming part of the national community. Rather, they are part of an invading force from south of the border that is bent on reconquering land that was formerly theirs (the U.S. Southwest) and destroying the American way of life” (Chavez, 2013). Chavez asserts that the Latin[e] Threat Narrative creates this mark of “illegality” that is then associated with the idea that Mexican immigrants, are criminals and “thus illegitimate members of society undeserving of social benefits, including citizenship” (Chavez, 2013). By “social benefits” this means that immigrants are also undeserving of “education, health care, housing, and wealth” (Canizales & Vallejo, 2021).

The "illegalities" of everyday life are often literally instantiated by the lack of various forms of state-issued documentation that sanction one’s place within or outside the strictures of the law" (Oboler, 2016: 81). Not having the ability to issue a driver’s license or any other type of identification leads to this reinforcement of “illegality,” which, importantly, is extended to all generations of Latine immigrants: “By the late 1990s, not only were undocumented migrants framed as undeserving and undesirable, but legal immigrants increasingly were being tarred with the same brush: This image of the immigrant free loader obscured the various legal statuses of the subject population” (Massey & Sanchez, 2010: 70).

The election of Donald Trump significantly accelerated the perpetuation of the Latine Threat narrative and escalated the criminalization of immigrants within the United States. Trump’s infamous campaign, similar to that of Ronald Reagan, centered on promises to ‘Make America Great Again,’ emphasizing the construction of a ‘big beautiful wall’ and shielding the country from perceived threats posed by undocumented migration, crime, and drugs (Aguis Vallejo & Canizales, 2021). This era marked a resurgence of white nationalism, highlighting the

deeply ingrained white supremacy and racism within American society, impacting immigration policies, and fostering discrimination and violence against Latines, shaping their sense of belonging and identification (Aguis Vallejo & Canizales, 2021).

This resurgence of white nationalism continued in 2020. While COVID-19 triggered an unprecedented upheaval across the globe, in May of 2020, George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis, Minnesota, during an arrest by a police officer who knelt on his neck for over nine minutes, sparking widespread protests against police brutality and racial injustice across the United States and around the world. Alongside the protests was a racial reckoning, one that demanded new conversations about race and the systemic racism present in the U.S. These conversations happened at various levels and throughout different institutions including Macalester College, a liberal arts school located in the Twin Cities, about 15 minutes away from where George Floyd was murdered. Macalester is an institution that prides itself on being diverse and multicultural, where race and white supremacy can be discussed. But even with these new conversations of race present in our society today, racialization is reconstituted. Racial biases persist against the Latine community, perpetuating stereotypes towards Mexican-Americans with terms like "illegality" and criminalization. Consequently, these stereotypes shape how Mexican-Americans use their identity as a means of resistance.

The Racialization of U.S. Citizenship

But the rejection of “American” is also tied to the racialization of U.S. citizenship and the American identity as white. This association of Americanness and whiteness is what historian Mae Ngai terms “racialized citizenship.” “As racialized citizens, U.S.-born Latines’ social integration is limited by boundaries of racial otherness, which shapes their opportunities and mobility in American institutions" (Canizales & Vallejo, 2021). These boundaries of exclusion

and marginalization that Latines face are what lead them to define themselves as Mexican-American. Anzaladúa (1987) says that recognizing the constraints within their American identity and their view as perpetual foreigners in the U.S. leads to their identification as 'Mexican-American' despite not holding dual citizenship or being born in Latin America. Embracing the label 'Mexican-American' signifies a complex acceptance of their American roots intertwined with a deep pride in their Mexican or Latin American heritage. They embrace and incorporate their Mexican cultural heritage seamlessly. They joyously observe their distinctive traditions, relish their cuisine, and commemorate their unique holidays. They embody a fusion of two cultures, each with different levels of Mexican or American influence. But this embodiment is not the result of their lack of or resistance to assimilation in the U.S. Instead, it is the result of the U.S. failing to fully integrate Mexican-Americans into society and make them feel part of the collective American identity. To further understand this concept of racialized citizenship, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) says:

> "Nosotros los Chicanos [Mexican-Americans] straddle the borderlands...Among ourselves we don't say nosotros los americanos, o nosotros los españoles, o nosotros los hispanos. We say nosotros los mexicanos (by mexicanos we do not mean citizens of Mexico; we do not mean a national identity but a racial one). We distinguish between Mexicans del otro lado and Mexicans de este lado. Deep in our hearts, we believe that being Mexican is a state of soul – not one of mind, not one of citizenship. Neither eagle nor serpent, but both. And like the ocean, neither animal respects borders" (Anzaldúa, 1987: 84).

In this quote, Anzaldúa signals that the term "Mexicanos" for Chicanos or Mexican-Americans, doesn't merely denote a citizenship or national identity; instead, it signifies a racial identity. This

racial identity or racialized citizenship becomes a defining aspect of their existence, residing in the soul rather than in legal or national affiliations. By saying they are Mexican, they are rejecting that whiteness that is affiliated with being American. This act of rejection highlights the complexity of citizenship, as citizenship is not merely a legal status but also a social and cultural construct. As mentioned by Bloemraad (2013), citizenship is “a continuum of inclusions and exclusion.” Rejecting an American-centric identity suggests that the inclusivity of citizenship is not uniform, and there are nuanced layers of inclusion and exclusion based on cultural, racial, and ethnic affiliations. Therefore, not fitting what “American” means in the U.S. leads to the ethnoracial identity formation of Mexican-Americans.

Becoming ‘Mexican-American’

The U.S is a country where one’s race or perceived race “often outweighs one’s class, gender or even nativity status in determining how individuals are treated on a daily basis” (Golash-Boza, 2006: 35). Currently, the U.S. Census (2022) has six racial categories: White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander and Other. Out of these six categories, none of them fully encompass the experience of being Mexican-American or Latine in the U.S. Flores-Gonzalez (2017) highlights that other groups in the U.S. have corresponding pairs of ethnicity and race (e.g. African American/black or Caucasian/white) but Latines do not. Latine is not considered a race because Latines are “phenotypically heterogeneous, often racially mixed, and not assumed to share a particular biological or genetic makeup” (Flores-Gonzalez 2017). Instead, Latines are viewed as a pan-ethnic group. The racialization that Mexican-Americans face in the U.S. leads them to understand that they are not perceived as black or white because their Latin American heritage is evident through their appearance, cultural behaviors, or surname (Flores-Gonzalez, 2017).

Pressured to choose from one racial category, Flores-Gonzalez (2017) states that Latines resort to choosing "Other" and racially identifying themselves as Mexican-American or Latine. Not identifying themselves with the conventional racial categories that exist in the U.S. leads to the ethnoracial identity formation of 'Mexican-American' or 'Latine.'

The term ethnorace, as used by Flores-Gonzalez (2017) refers to a group "who have both ethnic and racialized characteristics, who are a historical people with customs and conventions developed out of the collective agency, but who are also identified and identifiable by bodily morphology that allows for both group affinity as well as group exclusion and denigration." Flores-Gonzalez uses this definition of ethnorace to state that there are four dimensions to the ethnoracial framework. First, Flores-Gonzalez (2017) states that the ethnoracial identity forms when, instead of using the standard racial categories, Latines "couple ethnicity and race as equivalent concepts that can be used separately, simultaneously, and/or interchangeably." This means that youth may either identify themselves as ethnically Mexican or racially Latine. Or that they interchangeably use the terms Mexican and Latine to describe their race. The second element of this ethnoracial framework is what Flores-Gonzalez terms "The Latino Prototype"'. This emphasizes that body morphology plays a role in defining what a Latine should look like and how other non-Latines can then racialize them. The most common physical characteristics attributed to Latines are dark hair, dark eyes, tanned skin, and average height. However, because Latines are racially mixed, sometimes they may not be viewed as Latines at first physical glance, but the minute their Latin American ancestry is disclosed, they are racialized as Latine. Pointing to the third element of this framework, the weight of the Latine Ancestry. When Latines lack the physical traits that would identify them as Latine, the weight of their ancestry or particular cultural traits like speaking Spanish leads to their racialization as Latines. The last element of

this ethnoracial framework is ethnorace as a form of resistance. Meaning that Latines believe they are a part of this ethnorace as a way to ultimately reject the ill-fitting racial labels that exist in the U.S. and ultimately claim their place in the U.S. All to say that the adoption of the Mexican-American or Latine identity is a result of the racialization and racial miscategorization that they experience in the U.S. Therefore Latines think of themselves as a separate ethnoracial group that consists of people who are of Latin American origin.

This ethnoracial identity formation is the result of what Massey and Sanchez (2010) coined as "reactive ethnicity". Where being rejected or left out by the host society makes reactive ethnicity see identity as forming against that exclusion. Therefore distinguishing themselves this way is not a choice but rather the result of "being othered as noncitizens and non-American" (Flores-Gonzalez, 2017: 6). It is a reactive identity that arises as a result of "how they [Latines] understand race, experience race, and develop racialized notions of belonging" (Flores-Gonzalez, 2017: 2). Taking these theories and concepts into account, will help better understand my argument that Latine is an ethnorace and that this ethnoracial identity forms as a result of the racialization Mexican-American face in the U.S.

But to further expand on Flores-Gonzalez's third dimension of the ethnoracial identity formation, Davis and Moore (2014) explore how the use of Spanish is another factor that signals Latines "subordinate racial status on the racial hierarchy" (Davis and Moore 2014: 689).

In the U.S., a racialized social system exists. Race is one of the primary social, political and economic stratifiers (Davis and Moore 2014: 690). This is evident through the pervasive influence of white supremacy in the disproportionate accumulation of power, privilege, and wealth by white individuals, leading to the systemic oppression of people of color. Through this

racialized social system, the construct of race is imposed upon individuals through an existing racial framework, shaping their identities before they can even self-identify racially.

In this context, Davis and Moore (2014) argue that the Spanish "language has been constructed, and more specifically, has been raced in a way that no other non-English language has. Moreover, as a consequence of Spanish being raced, it has, in turn, the power to race its speakers, in the same way, their Latino phenotype can" (682). What this creates then is a process of "racial-othering" through language, where any language other than English is deemed as "un-American" which runs the risk of compromising "American culture" (Davis and Moore 2014: 682) or more explicitly white "American" culture. This racialization process extends to all generations of Latine immigrants regardless of citizenship or time in the U.S. It "becomes an important mechanism by which white racial power and domination can be asserted upon Latinos in the United States" (Davis and Moore 2014: 680) Ultimately what Davis and Moore (2014) note is that the racialization of Latines is complex. It goes beyond phenotypic associations, "the language, combined with phenotypical markers, signifies the 'racial other' in a white-dominated society."

Literature Review

To gain deeper insight into the dynamic ways that Mexican-Americans assert their individual agency and utilize their identity to resist U.S. societal structures and culture, this literature review will serve as a critical foundation for understanding why and what leads Mexican-Americans to use their identity as a means of resistance. I will commence by elaborating on the notion that traditional assimilation theories inadequately grasp the nuanced experiences of Mexican Americans, using Flores-Gonzalez's (2010) contention that rather than adhering to conventional assimilation patterns, second-generation Mexican Americans frequently

bolster their ethnic identities in response to societal pressures. This perspective lays the groundwork for understanding the concept of the ethnic core, as proposed by Telles and Sue (2019), which suggests that individuals draw upon a deep-seated ethnic pride to assert their Mexican-American identity. This discussion will then set the stage for examining how Mexican-Americans take individual agency to assert belonging and reinforce ethnic pride while strengthening ties to their cultural heritage, allowing them to not only affirm their sense of belonging within their community but also show how resistance is a pivotal force in identity formation. Resistance, defined here as a response to marginalization and discrimination, plays a significant role in shaping individuals' identification as Mexican-Americans, fostering a heightened sense of ethnic pride and solidarity. Examples drawn from both within the Latine community and beyond will lead me to frame my research and answer these questions: Through what avenues does resistance manifest in the assertion of ethnic identity and the cultivation of agency among Mexican Americans? How do experiences abroad contribute to the development of agency and the assertion of ethnic identity among Mexican Americans? Overall this literature review will contribute to the broader narrative of resistance and empowerment within the Latine community.

Assimilation Theory and Ethnic Core

The traditional theories of assimilation are "based on a presumed pattern of incorporation of early European immigrants, who for the most part assimilated and became "American" by the third generation" (Flores-Gonzalez, 2010). For example, Park and Burgess (1924) define assimilation as "a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons or groups, and by sharing their experience and history are incorporated with them in a common cultural life" (735). Milton Gordon's later

expanded on this definition with his traditional assimilation model of "Americanization," which conceptualizes assimilation as a seven-stage process (Garcia 2017) cultural or behavioral assimilation; structural assimilation; marital assimilation; identificational assimilation; attitude receptional assimilation; behavior receptional assimilation; and civic assimilation. (Gordon 1964). What these traditional assimilation theories suggest, then, is straight-line assimilation where "each generation becom[es] more assimilated than the last and descendants usually [are] absorbed into the mainstream by the third generation" (Flores-Gonzalez 2010: 199).

Many migration scholars have historically critiqued these traditional assimilation models, because they expect immigrants to adhere to white standards without acknowledging the underlying racist and unequal systems in the U.S. These models perpetuate the notion of a colorblind society and the American Dream myth, which upholds racist beliefs. Success in the U.S. is often linked to assimilation, promoting the idea that it's necessary for immigrants. Furthermore, assimilation prioritizes white norms and suggests that immigrants must conform to them to achieve equality with white Americans (Garcia 2017). Taking into account the structural barriers that immigrants face, Portes and Zhou (1993) posit the segmented assimilation theory which talks about how the lives of immigrants and their children are dependent on three different paths: The first path involves immigrants assimilating into mainstream society, following a traditional model. The second path leads to downward assimilation, marked by conflict between generations and low educational achievement. The third path results in selective integration, where immigrants achieve middle-class status through education and community support (Garcia 2017). Of these three paths and "given most Mexicans' nonwhite race, low socioeconomic status, and subjection to discrimination in the United States, Portes and others predict assimilation mainly into native minority groups" (Flores-Gonzalez 2010: 199). Therefore, in thinking about

these different assimilation models, Flores-Gonzalez (2010) argues that the second-generation Latines' incorporation or assimilation into the dominant U.S. culture is more complex, given that second-generation immigrants live in a transnational context where their social relationships include the sending and receiving country, in this case the U.S. and Latin America. This means that second-generation immigrants are continuously in contact with people, organizations, and institutions in Latin America through the actions of their family members or community (Flores-Gonzalez 2010). This ultimately leads people in these transnational relationships to form an "emotional embeddedness" or emotional belonging to their ethnic identities, due to strong familial and community ties and the racialization that Latines face in the U.S. Being racialized leads Latines to feel like foreigners in their own country which "ultimately erodes second-generation youths' emotional attachment to the United States and intensifies their feelings of emotional belonging to their immigrant families and communities" (Flores-Gonzalez, 2010: 201).

Strong familial and community ties, however, are not the only factors that contribute to this intensified emotional belonging to their ethnic identities or, as Telles and Sue (2019) call it, their "durable ethnicity." Telles and Sue (2019) claim that this durable ethnicity results from what they coin as the "ethnic core," which serves as a counter-force to the dominant culture, specifically in the case of assimilation processes for Mexican-Americans. The ethnic core, as Telles and Sue (2019) define it, is a "set of forces encompassing structures and institutions that foster ethnicity including ethnic neighborhoods, organizations, markets, social networks, community, and the media. These components are created and reinforced by social and political forces or contexts, including racism, ethnoracial inequality, persistent immigration, proximity to

the ethnic homeland, official ethnoracial classification, and shared histories of colonization and segregation" (Telles and Sue 2019: 184).

Therefore, in thinking about what leads Mexican-Americans to use their identity as a means of resistance, it is important to review how traditional assimilation models fail to encompass the Mexican-American experience. Mexican-Americans assert this "durable ethnicity" not only with their connections to their culture but also given their experience with racialization and discrimination growing up in the U.S. Unlike European immigrants, Mexican-Americans have had to face and continue to face "institutional and structural racism that creates ethnic spaces such as ethnic neighborhoods, segregated schools, and segmented labor markets, which then become part of and strengthen the ethnic core" (Telles and Sue 2019: 186). The argument therefore, explains how Mexican-Americans take agency of their own identities against these institutional and structural barriers that have impacted their experiences.

Individual Agency

The formation of the ethno-racial identity among Mexican-Americans is deeply influenced by a multitude of social and political forces. As previously discussed, social exclusion resulting from racism and xenophobia plays a significant role in this process. This exclusion, rooted in the 'Latine Threat Narrative' articulated by Chavez (2013), perpetuates a sense of otherness and cultural exclusion among Mexican-Americans. It is important to recognize that this marginalization is not solely based on legal status but extends to all individuals of Latine heritage. Regardless of citizenship status, Mexican-Americans often find themselves labeled as 'alien citizens', as explained by Flores-Gonzalez (2017), due to the immigrant ancestry that marks them as perpetual foreigners. Thus, the intersection of racism, xenophobia, and the criminalization associated with 'illegality' shapes the collective identity of Mexican-Americans,

reinforcing a strong ethnic core within the community and a separation from their American identity. However, the refusal to identify as “American” is additionally linked to the racialization of U.S. citizenship, where the American identity is predominantly associated with whiteness. Historian Mae Ngai refers to this association as “racialized citizenship.” According to Canizales and Vallejo (2021), as racialized citizens, individuals of U.S. birth with Latine heritage encounter restricted social integration due to the confines of racial difference, influencing their prospects and advancement within American institutions. It is the experience of encountering these boundaries of exclusion and marginalization that again prompts individuals to define themselves as Mexican-American. How, then, do these Mexican-American individuals combat or resist these social and political forces that socially exclude them from the U.S. dominant culture, and what is the result?

Morales and Shroyer (2016) define agency as “self-efficacy, autonomy, and power to impact change for themselves and others” (7). The individual agency that Mexican-Americans develop “directly relates to the complex interplay of internal and external focus that shape who they are” (7). By taking individual agency in their identity as Mexican-Americans, these individuals resist the forces that exclude them and deter their belonging in the U.S. Morales and Shroyer (2016) note that bilingual Latina educators challenge school policies that impact the students' learning experiences to support English Langauge-Learning (ELL) students: “Despite many ‘English only’ rules in the classrooms, participants indicated that they were willing and able to support students’ learning and language development by making connections between concepts in their students’ native language and English” (9). They also noted individual agency in teachers who would actively speak up against different curricula and teaching practices that deterred students learning. Their actions, either direct or indirect, were aimed at challenging

exclusionary forces such as 'English only' classrooms and curriculum inequalities, which are direct outcomes of the racialization and marginalization experienced by U.S. Latines. Despite facing these systemic barriers, they, drawing from their own experiences as former students, leveraged their identities as Latines to confront these exclusionary practices that hinder the Latine community.

In this same way, Sapp, Kiyama, & Dache-Gerbino (2015) explore how Latine students activate individual agency to overcome different institutional and social barriers and increase their academic opportunities beyond high school. The Latinas in this study were part of low-income, urban public school systems but "despite the challenges and barriers they face in these settings, [they] demonstrated a high level of self-efficacy and activated agency in educational, familial, communal, and out-of-classroom environments to overcome challenges and barriers embedded in systemic structures that privilege some and disadvantage others" (Sapp, Kiyama, & Dache-Gerbino 2015: 47). These students choose to take on extra course work, summer school, Advanced Placement classes, and tutoring sessions to excel academically. "Latinas activated individual agency to motivate themselves to stay focused academically. Even when Latinas shared instances in which they felt marginalized by teachers and counselors or lacked information about and access to college opportunities, they stayed focused and determined to succeed academically" (Sapp, Kiyama, & Dache-Gerbino 2015: 51). Overall what Sapp, Kiyama, & Dache-Gerbino's (2015) findings show is that despite being situated within a system that allocates opportunities away from them, Latinas possess agency within various environments.

Lastly, this same agency is seen in a study conducted by Chang, Torrez, Ferguson, and Sagar (2017), examining how undocumented Latine students excerpt individual agency to

"maneuver as best they could amidst social and cultural impositions" they had to face in the U.S. These students cultivated a sense of "critical hope" through the deliberate and natural shaping of their identities, laying the groundwork for persisting and resisting the seemingly bleak choices of opportunity presented to them given their undocumented status (Chang, Torrez, Ferguson, & Sagar, 2017). Each of these students showed individual agency in imagining and manifesting scenarios in which they gained citizenship. Through envisioning a future where they eventually attain citizenship, undocumented students constructed alternative realities that provided both meaning and comfort in their daily lives and uncertain futures. This agency of their lives and imagined futures then enabled them to break free from perpetuated social norms and imposed limitations.

All to say that these examples of agency illustrate the significant role that individual agency plays in the lives of marginalized groups, specifically Latine communities, as they navigate challenging social and institutional landscapes. By recognizing the individual agency of Latines, we can better understand their resilience, resourcefulness, and capacity for empowerment in the face of systemic barriers and discrimination. This ultimately leads us to understand how Mexican-Americans use their identities to resist the exclusionary and racist forces that impact their belonging in the U.S.

Resistance

Darder, Noguera, Fuentes, and Sanchez (2012), in their study about liberation practices among Latine students, educators, and parents, quote the foundational work of Paulo Freire (1971), particularly his concept of "conscientização," or critical consciousness, which serves as a profound lens through which to examine resistance. Freire (1971) posits that critical consciousness is not a passive state, but rather a dynamic process born out of collective struggle,

exlucidating how individuals, through reflection and dialogue, can awaken to the oppressive structures that impede their civic participation. This understanding propels individuals and communities towards proactive measures aimed at dismantling and reshaping societal norms for a more just and equitable world. What Freire (1971) tells us then is that resistance to the systems that oppress marginalized people is born out of struggle, and therefore this resistance can be practiced through individual or collective agency. For numerous Mexican-Americans and the broader Latine community in the United States, their lived reality today is still marked by entrenched racism and xenophobia woven into the institutional frameworks within which they navigate despite citizenship or generation. This is despite new conversations of race that have surfaced and have been demanded with the murder of George Floyd in 2020. Their defiance against these oppressive structures and the establishment of their identities as Mexican are evident in the diverse methods of resistance they employ.

Escudero's (2020) example of resistance in a study about undocumented youths' activism in the U.S. shows how youth with various intersectional identities (Asian undocumented, undocuqueer, and formally undocumented individuals) "strategically deploy [their] intersectional identity [ies] as a means of counteracting the limitations they face when taking part in political activism as individuals who are not formally recognized as able to make rights claims in the first place" (Escudero 2020: 32). What their work has accomplished, through an intersectional movement identity, is not only to build bridges with other marginalized communities, but it has led to the campaigning of increased rights for undocumented people in the U.S. and recognition at a federal and state level. As Escudero (2020) notes, these activists, specifically undocuqueer activists, "have purposefully and intentionally drawn upon their own identities and lived experiences to work toward the creation of a more socially just world" (Escudero 2020: 103).

Using their identities to mobilize against structural oppression and work towards liberation is a form of resistance that these individuals take. While they take collective agency to resist, they use their identities, critical consciousness, and lived experiences to take up space and to let these institutions of power and oppression know that they are present.

In a similar example, Seif, Ullman, and Núñez-Mchiri (2014) show how undocumented immigrant students who have been part of the U.S. education system their whole lives, "have formed communities of interest that organize and "come out" as "undocumented, unafraid, and unapologetic" (185). These students are emerging as leaders in a "movement for their own liberation" (185) as they continuously help to inform their immigrant communities, mobilize voters, and lobby elected officials. They are resisting this silence that is imposed on them by immigration policies in the U.S. and are increasingly asserting their presence politically and in written forms. Again this form of resistance is built upon this consciousness of the struggles they face as undocumented Latine students and they use their identities as a way to claim their rights and belonging in the U.S.

Political resistance is only one way of asserting presence and belonging. Rodriguez (2023) explores how Latine students in college access programs in the suburbs show resistance to the white middle-class standards these programs try to push on students. Rodriguez provides an example of a student whose desktop read "I Speak Spanish, Y Que [So What]?" (362). This simple act of resistance, as Rodriguez notes, shows that they are "embracing and engaging in translanguaging practices that allow her to navigate the world, not necessarily by switching between languages but by thinking and communicating in both" (362).

Displaying the message “I Speak Spanish, Y Que [So What]?” is a form of resistance against assimilation pressure in societies like the U.S. where linguistic and cultural assimilation are often encouraged, particularly within educational institutions. Rodriguez (2023) elaborates:,

> More specifically, while it is important to enroll Latinx students in advanced-level courses, their resistance highlights the continued costs of having to endure predominantly white spaces that can tokenize them and that lack curricular representation of their cultural worlds (Conchas, 2001; Venzant Chambers, 2022). As Mia shared, ASP [a college access program] was trying to make students “fit into a box” (362).

While recognizing the benefits of the college access program in facilitating academic progress, it's crucial to acknowledge that the students' resistance within predominantly white educational environments represents a form of agency and empowerment of their Latine identities. Their refusal to conform and fit into predefined molds can be interpreted as a deliberate assertion of individuality and ethnic pride. This resistance serves as a means of prioritizing their ethnic identity and asserting their presence in educational spaces.

A noticeable gap exists within sociological literature regarding how Latine individuals employ their identities as a means of resistance. This gap prompted me to seek insights from other academic fields. Therefore, taking these theories and concepts into account altogether shows the various factors that contribute to the multifaceted nature of the Mexican-American identity formation. Ultimately, this identity challenges conventional assimilation theories and emphasizes the pivotal role of ethnic pride in resistance against societal pressures. The literature support the argument that Mexican Americans assert their individual agency and utilize their identity as a means of resistance against U.S. societal structures and culture, while expanding on how external factors like study abroad impact the way Mexican-Americans perceive themselves.

Methods

In this study, I aim to address the following research question: To what extent does resistance manifest in the assertion of ethnic identity and the cultivation of agency among Gen Z Mexican-Americans? As a way to argue that by embracing their ethnic heritage and asserting their cultural identities, they challenge experiences of racialization, reject assimilationist norms, and reclaim their autonomy.

To do so, my research employed a qualitative research design where I conducted fifteen in-depth interviews with students. The interviews in the study offered a valuable lens through which to explore resistance. Throughout these interviews, students expressed a profound sense of pride in their Mexican identities, highlighting the significance of their cultural heritage. However, juxtaposed against this pride is a recurring narrative detailing their encounters with racialization and discrimination within the United States. It is this combination of celebrating their Mexican heritage while navigating experiences of marginalization that leads these individuals to embrace the identity labels of 'Latine' or 'Mexican-American.' This combination of experiences is a pivotal explanation for the emergence of 'Latine' as an ethnoracial category and how they use this identity as resistance, encapsulating the fusion of cultural pride and the realities of facing discrimination within their social context.

The students participating in my study were all between the ages of 20 and 24 and were born between 1997 and 2012, meaning they are part of the Gen Z population. They are all attending or have graduated from Macalester College. Eight interviewees were Latines born in the U.S. and identified as Mexican-American. These individuals studied abroad or are currently studying abroad in Latin America. By Latin America, I am referring to Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, and South America. Five of the eight interviewees accepted an invitation to a

follow-up interview in the Spring of 2024 after returning from their study abroad trip in the Fall of 2023. The follow-up interviews provided a reflective space for students to reconsider their experiences, identify any new insights or evolving perspectives since their previous interviews, and assess how their return to the U.S. influenced their deeper understanding of their Mexican-American identities. In these follow-up interviews is where, I explore the question: To what extent does resistance manifest in the assertion of ethnic identity and the cultivation of agency among Gen Z Mexican-Americans? As a way to argue that by embracing their ethnic heritage and asserting their cultural identities, they challenge experiences of racialization, reject assimilationist norms and cultural expectations, and reclaim their autonomy. I examine how they detach from their American identities and prioritize their Mexican heritage as a form of resistance, highlighting the tensions in their hybrid identities. These interviews provide insight into the cultivation of agency and why there is an assertion of ethnic identity in the face of societal pressures.

I opted to conduct interviews with these particular groups of students for several reasons. Considering that the largest Latine demographic in the United States comprises individuals of Mexican origin or descent and that there is a large population of Mexican-American students on Macalester's campus, delving into the experiences and perspectives of Mexican-American students becomes particularly pertinent. This particular group of students is also in a period of transition in their lives, where they are experiencing change and pondering the question, "Who Am I?". They are also all college students attending a predominately white institution situated in St. Paul, Minnesota. They are at an institution that has a strong emphasis on multiculturalism and internationalism; therefore, how does all of this impact the way that they are perceived and choose to idenitfy themselves.

The participants in this study were all recruited through email invitations. I sent them a summary of the project and the logistics of the interviews and acquired informed consent to record our conversation before their involvement in the study. Participants were assured of confidentiality and their right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequences. Interviews were conducted in a private and comfortable setting on campus. The duration of each interview ranged from 45 minutes to 90 minutes. The duration of each follow-up interview ranged from 20 minutes to 30 minutes.

All participants involved in this study possessed bilingual proficiency, with the majority indicating Spanish as their first language. To ensure an inclusive interview process, participants were informed that although the questions were formulated and presented in English, they had the liberty to respond in English, Spanish, or Spanglish. Offering these language choices aimed to facilitate more natural and unrestricted communication during interviews, allowing participants to express themselves fully without concerns about language proficiency limitations or the need for translation. Therefore, some of the quotations cited in this research were translated.

To analyze my data, I used Otter.Ai to transcribe all of my audio recordings. After checking, translating, and correcting errors, I examined the data using a thematic analysis. The process involved multiple stages: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. The two main themes used to analyze my data were based on the students' experiences: Being proud of being Mexican-American and experiencing racialization.

As a Mexican-American researcher, my position within this study is shaped by a unique intersection of cultural identity and language fluency. Being fluent in English and Spanish allows

me to navigate the nuances of communication within the community under study. Moreover, my personal experiences intricately tie me to the topic, granting me an intimate understanding of the cultural dynamics and the complexities of the issues being investigated. This positionality not only serves as a facilitator in establishing rapport and understanding with participants but also presents an opportunity to delve deeper into the intricate layers of the subject matter, drawing from lived experiences that resonate within my personal and research realms.

Findings and Discussion

The main objective of this analysis will focus on exploring how Mexican-Americans assert their identity in their current context and to what extent they utilize their identity as a means of resistance against assimilation expectations in the U.S. This section will commence by highlighting the reasons why the Mexican-American students I interviewed feel disconnected from their American identities. Subsequently, I will expand on Telles and Sue's (2019) concept of the "ethnic core", analyzing how participants in my research demonstrate a deep-rooted connection to their Mexican identities through factors such as family, celebrations, and location. Moreover, I will argue that another influential factor in mediating a strong identity is the experience of studying in a Latin American country for a semester. Lastly, I will demonstrate how the Mexican-American students I interviewed assert their resistance through individual agency by prioritizing their ethnic identity as the central aspect in defining and shaping their sense of self and learning journey.

Mexican Roots in Family Traditions and Communities

"We know that we're Mexican. And we've always been raised like that…" Nicole, a Mexican-American student born and raised in Chicago, talks about her awareness of being of

Mexican descent. Ingrained in her since she was young, being Mexican became integral to her identity. Like my other interviewees, Nicole, in asserting her Mexicanness, demonstrates a profound connection to her cultural background and upbringing, showcasing both pride and familiarity with her Mexican identity, as it was the culture in which she grew up and was socialized. The students in my interviews all described how their Mexican identities became integral to their identity. Judith, a Mexican-American student, said:

> I grew up in Chicago, which is a very, it's a city filled with a lot of Mexican immigrants, and also children like me who were born there, but have parents that are from Mexico, or other countries in Latin America. And so I grew up pretty well connected to my culture.

In this quote, Judith highlights the rich cultural environment of Chicago, particularly its significant Mexican immigrant population. Judith emphasizes that her upbringing in this diverse setting led her to have a solid connection to her cultural roots. She implies that growing up in such an environment allowed her to maintain a close tie to her heritage and identity despite being born in the United States. Similar to Judith, Sofia says:

> I grew up in Brooklyn, New York, with my sisters and my mom…, there's a lot of Latinos. Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Mexicans, and growing up, I would like, go to school, and I would just like- Spanish would be all around me.

Again, like Judith, growing up in a diverse city allowed Sofia to be surrounded by not just her Mexican culture but other Latine cultures. She grew up in an environment where Spanish was commonly used in her neighborhood and at school. However, only some of the students I interviewed grew up in a place that would so easily allow them to access their Mexican culture.

For some, their Mexican identities were influenced by their families. Alex, who also identifies as Mexican-American, says that they grew up in rural Minnesota. While there was a small Mexican community in their hometown, they were usually surrounded by white families. So they say, "My family really influenced my identity growing up, I guess because we were a small family." Having their small immediate family allowed Alex to be connected to their Mexican roots because they were present to teach them Spanish, learn different Mexican cuisines, and practice various traditional holidays. However, this influence often went beyond the immediate family and was exacerbated in the external family. Emily, who also identifies as Mexican-American, said that her identity stemmed from being surrounded by her aunt and other family members. She says, "We were just always around them and with them. And so that was really like, where I could find space to be, you know, within Mexican culture".

Other things that influenced students' understanding of their Mexican identities were cultural aspects that come with being Mexican, like language and religion. Nicole also said that, apart from growing up in Chicago, she felt that "there's just such a strong connection between being Mexican and speaking Spanish. I mean, it depends on everybody. Because I think I feel more connected to this Mexican culture because I speak Spanish." Speaking Spanish has allowed Nicole to connect with and claim her Mexican identity further.

Other participants like Sofia, highlight the importance of growing up in a community with predominantly Spanish speakers. "Spanish would be all around me. So I, I would like never like doublethink to like, to think, to speak Spanish at home or outside of home when I was growing up." Growing up in a diverse city gave Sofia the opportunity to freely speak Spanish without having to second guess herself or feel discouraged from speaking Spanish. Rather she

grew up in a community that fostered her growth in Spanish learning and expanded her vocabulary skills.

For some interviewees like Emily, learning Spanish came from other sources. She says,

> Growing up, I would listen to like, like lullabies in Spanish. Or little stories in Spanish. "Arroz con Leche". Like I don't know if you know that. [Starts singing] Or "Sana, sana, colita de rana". Like those little like little things that I remember growing up that were like, part of my, you know, daily life and stuff. We also celebrated, like, we had the Rosca the Reyes and stuff like that. And we would go to misa in Spanish on Christmas eve.

For Emily, these Spanish oral traditions implemented through songs, stories, and mass, contributed to her language acquisition in a natural and immersive way. Her experience demonstrates how early exposure to a language through familiar and culturally relevant contexts can significantly contribute to language acquisition.

But the acquisition of Spanish was also the result of a need. Sofia and Emily talked about how Spanish was their first language because it stemmed from the need to communicate with their mothers. Sofia noted, “My mom didn't speak any English growing up., So the only way to really communicate with her was in Spanish”. Sofia signals why language was her first language growing up. And in the same way, Emily expressed,

> So like, learning Spanish, connecting with my Mexican identity, was so for me tied to like connecting with my mother, if I could do that I could, you know, have a stronger relationship with my mom. And I think that was really, really internalized when I was younger.

Both of these examples underscore the profound impact that language can have on personal identity and familial bonds. Language becomes more than just a means of communication; it becomes a vessel for cultural heritage, emotional connection, and intergenerational understanding.

On the other hand, Melanie, another Mexican-American student who grew up in Minnesota, said, “I feel like religion was always like a very important thing to my family. Specifically the Catholic religion, but I think that is closely tied to being Latino.” Linking Catholicism with being Latine suggests that Melanie’s identity has stemmed from the cultural practices and traditions that come with being a Catholic Mexican. For example, she later states:

> I think the big one that I can think of…one that just happened was Dia de los Muertos, which isn’t always tied to religion, but I feel like it can be. And I think that was a big one, especially having family members transnationally, because you’re not always like with them to, to like, mourn the death of people. So I think that was a really important one for my family. But also Dia de los Reyes was also a really big one, that we would celebrate it like maybe two weeks, even though that’s supposed to be a one-day thing.

For Melanie, celebrations like Día de los Muertos or Día de los Reyes, while they hold religious value, are Mexican traditions and celebrations that she grew up with and have shaped her identity as Mexican.

Melanie, however, was not the only one who pointed out the celebrations that made her conscious of her Mexican culture. Several interviewees talked about how they celebrated their Mexican heritage and identities. For some, it was the traditional and Catholic Mexican holidays

like Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead), Día de los Reyes Magos (Three Kings Day), Las Posadas which is a series of processions or gatherings held from December 16th to 24th during which participants reenact Mary and Joseph's search for shelter by going from house to house, singing songs, and requesting lodging, symbolizing the couple's journey, or El Día de la Virgen de Guadalupe (Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe).

Celebrating these particular Mexican holidays shows that my Mexican-American interviewees have a powerful connection to their Mexican heritage and culture, which is why they feel proud to call themselves Mexican. While these holidays represent preserving their culture, that does not mean they never partook in any traditional "American" holidays. Many of my interviewees noted that their families and they also celebrated Thanksgiving. However, their Thanksgiving consisted of "pozole," "tamales," and "tacos," and most of the time, Thanksgiving or the 4th of July was used as an excuse to spend time with family and friends, never really paying attention to the significance of either holiday.

How these students know that they are Mexican varies. These examples show their connection to Mexican heritage stems from various influences. Whether that was growing up in a diverse city like Chicago, whether being Mexican was ingrained in them since childhood, whether it was speaking Spanish or celebrating specific Mexican holidays, all of these students were aware of their Mexicanness because they were socialized in Mexican culture by their families. Nevertheless, their pride in calling themselves Mexican stems from something deeper beyond their cultural socialization. Calling themselves Mexican is also the result of the racialization that they have faced in the U.S.

Mexican-American as an Ethnoracial Identity

The two juxtaposing experiences of being proud of their Mexicanness and facing

experiences of racialization because of their Mexicanness lead to the creation of their ethnoracial identity. Expanding on Flores-Gonzalez's (2017) ethnoracial framework, I will highlight the four dimensions: Coupling of Race and Ethnicity, The Latine Prototype, The Weight of the Latine Ancestry, and Ethnorace as a form of resistance, by providing examples of why my interviewees self-identify as Mexican-Americans and what led them to do so.

As mentioned earlier, Flores-Gonzalez (2017) points out that, unlike other U.S. groups with corresponding pairs of ethnicity and race (such as African American/black or Caucasian/white), Latinx individuals do not fit neatly into such established categories. Not fitting into any of the defined categories leads students to say:

> I feel like race here is only- you only fit into one category or like, unless you're very clear on, like, your roots, and you can fit into more than one. But it's just like, especially just being Mexican. It's like, "What race am I?" because there's no, there's no space for me.

In this quote, Emily expresses a sense of exclusion or confusion about where she fits in the U.S. racial framework, especially as a person of Mexican heritage. It sheds light on how conventional racial categories might not encompass the multifaceted identities of Mexican individuals, therefore leading people to racially and ethnically identify as Mexican-American. To analyze how Flores-Gonzalez's ethnoracial framework manifests in my interviews, I'll start by emphasizing the initial aspect outlined by Flores-Gonzalez: The coupling of race and ethnicity. In this first example, Emily, a student who identifies herself ethnically and racially as Mexican-American, uses the terms "Latina" and "Mexican" interchangeably to talk about her experience growing up in the U.S. She says:

> When I was younger, it was really hard for me to connect with my Latina identity. But I always, I think this is something that I've reflected a lot on, but for me, connecting with my Mexican identity was a struggle because of the whiteness that was around me.

She demonstrates this interchangeability of the terms "Latina" and "Mexican" to allude to her race. We can determine that she was using these terms to racially identify herself because later in the quote, she states that she could never fit into the spaces of whiteness around her, in the same way, that Emily uses ethnicity and race interchangeably. In another quote, Andrea says, "I think definitely. Growing up in a community with other Latinos, I didn't think about it too early on, like oh, like I'm Mexican, I'm not white". In this example, Andrea also shows the interchangeability between Latine and Mexican to describe her race. Again, we know she is using these terms to distinguish her race because she emphasizes that she knew she wasn't racially white. That there was a distinction between her and white people. However, Flores-Gonzalez's (2017) ethnoracial framework argues that Latine millennials couple ethnicity and race "either directly or indirectly." By directly coupling the two, she refers to how Latines view their race and ethnicity as the same thing. Indirectly coupling the two means that Latines use different but interrelated terms. My findings show that my interviewees only couple ethnicity and race indirectly. Throughout my conversations with my Mexican-American interviewees, they repeatedly acknowledged that race and ethnicity were two separate things. For example, in her interview, Nicole talks about her experience in high school and having to fill out the demographics section for the SAT. She says, "You would have to put like, "What race are you?" and I'm like, wait a goddamn minute. Because what am I? I know, this is like race and not like, ethnicity…" While filling out these forms Nicole is aware that her race and ethnicity are not the

same things, which highlights the difficulty of fitting complex and multifaceted identities into singular predefined categories. In another quote, Andrea says:

> But it's still like very, very interesting to me, how Latinos or people from, like, Latin America don't have a racial category. We're just viewed as the ethnic category, even though like we've been racialized, like all of our time in the U.S., but other groups do have a racial category. I've never why?

Andrea also shows awareness that being Latine is not a race but an ethnicity. She finds it intriguing that while Latines have experienced racialization and faced similar issues as other racial groups, they don't have a specific racial category assigned to them within the conventional classification systems. This observation contrasts with other groups with distinct racial categories recognized in societal classifications. In the last example, Sofia says, "I think it's definitely interesting because Latine is not considered a race, like more of an ethnicity than it is a race." Sofia acknowledges that Latine is considered an ethnicity rather than a race, showing her awareness of the differences between these two concepts. These quotes illustrate the complexities individuals from Latin American backgrounds face regarding racial and ethnic categorization in the United States. They highlight the frustration, curiosity, and awareness regarding the blurred lines between race and ethnicity and the struggle to fit complex identities into predetermined racial classifications. This ultimately challenges Flores-Gonzalez's ethnoracial argument that Latines use race and ethnicity directly and instead shows that this new generation of Latines is aware of the differences between these two terms but yet continue to use the terms Latine and Mexican interchangeably to talk about their race.

The reason for this can be explained by Flores-Gonzalez's second dimension: the Latine Prototype. In this dimension, Flores-Gonzalez argues that Latines form their ethnoracial identities because they can be physically racialized as Latine. Physical traits often linked with being Latine are tanned skin, dark eyes, dark hair, and average height. Andrea says, "And I think in the U.S. it is very easy for me to just say like, "Oh, I'm Mexican." And they'll just be like, "Okay, you are Mexican" because they don't, they might not see you as American…". While Andrea didn't explicitly state the physical characteristics that would identify her as Mexican or Latina, she implies that there are physical characteristics that can be "seen." Which would make her not American or, more specifically, not white. In the same way, Nicole says, "It was more just I'm Mexican kinda, I guess, and like everybody saw me like that too, right…" Again, while not explicitly stating the physical characteristics that would out her as Mexican, she implies that there are characteristics that people "saw" that would mark her as Mexican.

But when no physical characteristics can physically distinguish Latines as Latine, the weight of their Latine ancestry, as Flores-Gonzalez calls it, leads to the formation of their ethnoracial identity. Jesus, who ethnically identifies himself as Mexican, and racially as Latine, says, "I'm pretty like light skinned. Especially for like a Latino… I don't know, it shouldn't mean anything, but it does. And I sense it". Jesus discusses how, as a light-skinned Latine, he's perceived as white, affecting his experiences and interactions within his cultural and non-Latine community. Yet despite some of the privileges that he might have as a white-passing Latine, he mentions that he always identified himself as Mexican first, and once that was clear to his white peers, he began to be racialized as Latine. Similarly, Emily, who is biracial, has a non-traditional Latine last name, and is also white-passing, says:

> I also felt like people very much tokenized my Mexican identity. I had a lot of white friends growing up that would be like, “You’re Mexican? Oh my god!” and they’d be like, “tell me all about your Mexican culture…

Emily, despite being half white, expresses that the minute her white friends found out she was Mexican, they only saw her as Mexican, therefore making her feel very “tokenized.” She later goes on to explain that this made her feel “inferior” to her white friends. Melanie, who is also biracial, expresses feeling tokenized by her friends when they find out she is Mexican. She says, “I was like one of their only BIPOC friends and kind of like the idea of feeling like an exception in their lives, or like the one good person of color that they like to know or whatever interact with.” Melanie expresses a sense of feeling singled out, or tokenized, as the only person of color within her white friend group. What these three examples show is that despite being half-white or white-passing, once their peers discovered the truth about their identities, all three were solely racialized as Mexican. Another way to look at the weight of the Latine ancestry is through the racialization of language. Two of the interviewees spoke about their experiences with Spanish as another way they were racialized in the U.S. beyond phenotypes. Both reflected on their experiences attending U.S. schools after having spent the early stages of their childhood in Mexico. In conversations with Andrea, she talked about how transitioning to elementary school in the U.S. was hard for her because of the existing language barrier. She says,

> And in there, at that school, I remember it'd be really, really hard like transitioning as a little kid, obviously, I didn't know anyone. And I only knew Spanish. And at that time, like when I first enrolled, they didn't have any ESL or like, any Spanish teachers. So I was, I would just be like, so sad going to school. And my mom tells

> me that I used to like cry. And that they would tell her like if she could come to school with me. Because like, I was like, so sad. I was like, nobody understands me. But then they eventually got like a student aid helper. He was like a, he was a Mexican teacher. And he co-taught, [with] the teacher that we originally had. And yeah, that's when I kind of, I guess, started learning English, like being able to like somebody teaching me in Spanish, but also like, trying to make me understand English that made the process a little bit easier.

What Andreas' experience shows is that within U.S. education, there is a push for English language learning only. In this example, the absence of ESL (English as a Second Language) or Spanish teachers explicitly highlights how the U.S. fails to accommodate other non-English languages. Rather than having programs that would have initially helped Andrea feel more welcomed into the classroom, she was expected to learn English without any help or guidance. There was no option for her to take bilingual classes or Spanish classes that would more easily help her transition into the U.S. education system. Rather, as Andrea notes, she was left feeling alone and othered because she only spoke Spanish.

In a similar way, Raul reflected more deeply on the many things that he was forced to forget when he arrived in the U.S. He specifically says, "When I was here, I had to forget like my language." Raul's reflection involves delving into the broader implications of linguistic assimilation and the erasure of cultural identity within many immigrant experiences. Raul implies that in the U.S., he was expected to learn English because anything outside of English was below the standard. There was an expectation for Raul to assimilate into U.S. culture and society by being forced to forget Spanish. What happens then is that this pressure of English-language norms can, therefore, exacerbate feelings of marginalization and reinforce

power dynamics based on linguistic privilege. Growing up in the U.S. meant that Andrea and Raul had to learn that Spanish was not a language that was welcomed in their learning environments. More broadly, Spanish was not a language that was accepted in white American culture.

This ultimately leads to Flores-Gonzalez's last dimension of her framework: ethnorace as a form of resistance. Students who used ethnorace as a form of resistance continuously pushed back the idea of only being American. While recognizing the privilege of being from the U.S., they acquired their values and beliefs from their Mexican identities. Andrea, who identifies herself as Mexican-American, says:

> I always, everything that is about me, I give to my Mexican identity. But just because I'm geographically here in the U.S. and interacting with this specific society, I can say I'm an American, but I never, I don't think I see myself as like a true American the way others; maybe white people might.

Andrea says that she gives everything to her Mexican identity. While recognizing what it means to be physically in the U.S., She does not proclaim an American identity because she associates being American with being "white." Therefore using ethnorace as a form of resistance to the racialization she has faced in the U.S. In the same way, Emily says:

> And I really just have to grapple with the fact that, like, my racial and ethnic identity is fluid, and I'm never going to find a place where I can pinpoint it, but I really accept the fluidness of it all that I can exist within all these spaces. But like, I don't know, like I can

exist in all these spaces. Can I? But not in the white space, definitely not there.

Emily accepts that there will never be a place where her identity as Mexican-American will fit in nicely, where she can mark a box. While she doubts the places she can exist, she shows security in the fact that she will never be able to exist in white spaces. Therefore, she uses her identity and the fluidness of her identity to claim her ethnoracial identity as Mexican-American and separate herself from whiteness. Ultimately claiming her space and existence in the U.S.

Up to this point, my findings show how Flores-Gonzalez's ethnoracial framework manifests itself in my interviews with Mexican-American students. But to further enhance her analysis and theory I will discuss how students' experiences abroad in Latin America have influenced how they perceive themselves and come to understand their Mexican-American identities better than they did before being outside of the U.S.

"I'm not like, "I'm American": *Sense of Disconnection*

Reflecting on his experience growing up in the U.S after some time of living in Mexico, Raul, a 21-year-old Mexican-American student says,

> I was forced to forget, being here [U.S.]. When I was here [U.S.], I had to forget like my language, food I used to eat, my history, the fact that like, my dad was a cattle rancher and like I lived half my life in the ranch, like in nature, taking care of the earth and like growing seeds and shit and like learning how everything is literally connected.

Raul's reflection on his life in the U.S. underscores the pressure for Mexican-Americans to assimilate into normative U.S. culture. The expectation to 'forget' aspects of his Mexican identity, such as language, food, and upbringing, reflects the deliberate effort by the U.S. education

system to erase cultural differences and enforce homogeneity. However, Mexican-Americans find it difficult to erase their ethnic and cultural identities due to persistent experiences of racialization and exclusion, which deepen their sense of otherness. Consequently, rather than integrating into American life, these students distance themselves from their American identities in response to societal and institutional exclusion. As Emily states:

> When I was in Peru. Race isn't talked about a lot. But here in the United States, it's always questioned. So you, you become prone to like, always questioning yourself and where you fit in.

Emily, who identifies herself as Chicana or Mexican-American and grew up in Minnesota, reflects on the struggle to belong to the U.S. due to her racialized experience as a Latina. This is seen in the way that she emphasizes how race is "always questioned" in the U.S. compared to her experience in Peru. Her reflection suggests that race and racial identities are constantly under scrutiny in the U.S., which leads to the experiences of explicit inquiries, implicit biases, or systemic discrimination that Mexican-Americans face in the U.S.

Even though Emily is biracial, white-passing, and has a non-traditional Latine last name, in another interview she provides an example of the racialization she has faced when she discusses that the minute her white friends found out she was Mexican, they only saw her as Mexican, therefore making her feel very "tokenized." She says "I had a lot of white friends growing up that would be like, "You're Mexican? Oh my god!" and they'd be like, "tell me all about your Mexican culture." This experience shows how Emily's feeling of tokenization resulted from her Mexican identity being used for the entertainment or enlightenment of others. Altogether, these feelings of tokenization and racialization that she has experienced led her to say "I'm not like, "I'm American". Like, no, no, I'm like, I'm Chicana. Like that. I'm like, a little

group in America. [laughs] Little like, in a little bubble there." Ultimately showing her disconnectedness from her American identity. This same feeling of being tokenized and othered was felt by Melanie, who is also biracial, grew up in Minnesota, and identifies as Mexican-American when she states:

> I feel like here at Macalester or other places I enter in the U.S., you're like one of few Latinx people in the room. And I feel like that's always, it's a very prominent part of my identity obviously, but it's always like something that for me people can also obviously see……it's important to like, do all the work we do here at Macalester, but like not being the only one in places. Like it was like, good breathing room to like, not always have to be like the representative or like, whatever.

In her reflection, Melanie addresses the experience of marginalization and the burden of representation within predominantly white spaces. She notes that the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in classrooms amplifies the visibility of her Latine identity, making her feel singled out as the spokesperson for the Latine community. Her awareness of being visibly different contributes to a feeling of constant observation and judgment based on racial and ethnic background, impacting her sense of belonging and connection to her American identity.

Disconnectedness from American identity is also related to the way that my interviewees associated being American with being white. In an anecdote about his experience abroad, Raul noted an encounter he had with an Ecuadorian classmate who told him about wanting to romantically meet a "gringo". While his classmate referred to meeting someone from the U.S., Raul had a different understanding of the term "gringo" which he linked to someone with "blonde hair and blue eyes". He later reflects,

> It just took me like, wow. It took a minute. But at the end of the day it took me like a day to realize that like, her definition of what a gringo is, and my definition of what a gringo is, it's very different.

Raul's associates being American or in this case "gringo" with being white. To him, the term "gringo" refers to a white person, with blonde hair and blue eyes, which contrasts with his own Mexican heritage and physical appearance. Associating being American with being white is the result of what Flores-Gonzalez (2017) notes as the Latine[4] Prototype. In this dimension of the ethnoracial identity formation, Flores-Gonzalez argues that Latines form their ethnoracial identities because they can be physically racialized as Latine. Physical traits often linked with being Latine are tanned skin, dark eyes, dark hair, and average height. Even though Raul does not have the stereotypical physical traits that a Latine might have, as he says,

> And like, even when I was in Ecuador, I was seen as Mexican. Which to them was like a race. But here, my race is perceived very differently. Like, I've been called literally everything but Mexican, because of the way I look like. Because I don't fit into like their stereotypical perception.

He is also seen as everything but white. What Raul's reflection shows is the physical racialization that Mexican-Americans and other Latines encounter in the U.S. His awareness of these racially perceived differences leads to the realization that he does not fit the stereotypical definition of what it means to be a 'gringo' or a white American, thus creating a sense of distance from the American identity. While Raul's reflection reveals the definition of the term 'gringo' as indicating to someone from the U.S., Melanie's perspective delves into its

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[4] Flores-Gonzalez (2017) uses the term "Latino/a" in her study to describe someone from or with a Latin American identity. In this study I will be using the term "Latine" as a more gender-inclusive alternative as it reflects a commitment to recognizing and respecting diverse gender identities within the Latin American community.

connotations within the U.S. context. She expresses, “I feel like American, just saying the word American has like sort of like superficial ties to like whiteness. And like yeah, it's also complicated because I'm biracial”. Which comes to show how she is disconnected from her American identity, even though she is half-white. For these Mexican-American students finding a sense of belonging or connection to their American identities is difficult. While they don’t completely reject their American identities as a part of who they are and how it has impacted their experience, there is ultimately a connection missing due to the exclusion and racialization they face as Mexican-Americans. As Judith, who identifies as Mexican-American says, “I've never felt that like sense of like, wow, like, this is what it feels like to live you know, to like belong and like, stuff like that”. Her feeling of otherness and being a foreigner in her place of birth—that she could never "live" and "belong"—is the result of being racialized in the U.S. This racialization has created for her, like the other interviewees, a distance from her American identity.

In the end, these experiences lead Mexican-American students to have a heightened connection to their Mexican identities and the Latine community. As Emily notes, “But I think there is like this community around Latinidad that is prevalent in the end… I think it's stronger in the United States. So like, "you're Chilena". "Oh my god, I'm Mexican". Like we're best friends”. While she does not explicitly state what makes the Latine community stronger in the U.S. she implies that the bond between different Latines in the U.S. is more than just a bond over a shared identity, it is also a bond due to their experiences of racialization. She implies that Latines in the U.S. become “best friends” because there is a common understanding of lived experiences and an understanding of cultural and ethnic identity.

In all, the Mexican-American students I interviewed revealed the various ways in which they felt detachment from their American identities. Their experiences ranged from feeling marginalized within predominantly white spaces to grappling with the burden of being seen as representatives of all Mexicans. Their feelings of detachment were also in response to their association of the American identity with whiteness, which is the result of the physical racialization that Latines face in the U.S. These experiences often prompt students to seek connection within the broader Latine community. This in turn leads me to examine how Mexican-American students develop a heightened sense of attachment to their ethnic heritage, stemming from their strong ethnic core.

The Ethnic Core:

The concept of the 'ethnic core,' as proposed by Telles and Sue (2019), encompasses a range of systems and establishments that actively promote ethnicity, including "ethnic neighborhoods, organizations, markets, social networks, community, and the media" (Telles and Sue, 2019: ?). This 'core' is fortified by the persistent encounters with racialization, inequity, and marginalization experienced by Mexican-Americans in the United States. Expanding on this notion, I will delve into specific examples illustrating how the 'ethnic core' influences my interviewees' strong connection to their Mexican identity.

When speaking to my interviewees, one of the biggest influences that impacted their connection and relationship with their Mexican identities was family and friends. Emily says,

> "I do gravitate more to this Mexican culture and identity and heritage, because I was raised by a Mexican mother…And so I think growing up I was always kind of thrown into that…So I do identify more with my Mexican identity"

Even though Emily is half-white, she told me that because of her mom the traditions in her household were always Mexican ones. She says:

> I had birthdays, like we would sing, we would, we would have piñatas, and sing "dale, dale" like the song. Like, we would sing las mañanitas, we would like, you know, dunk people's faces into their cake and all that which was super fun. Growing up, I would listen to like, like lullabies in Spanish. Or little stories in Spanish. "Arroz con Leche". Like I don't know if you know that. [Starts singing] Or "Sana, sana, colita de rana". Like those little like little things that I remember growing up that were like, part of my, you know, daily life and stuff.

Emily's account illustrates the significant role her Mexican mother played in instilling Mexican traditions and values within their household. Despite being biracial, her upbringing was steeped in Mexican culture, evident in the celebration of Mexican traditions such as birthday parties with piñatas, singing traditional songs like "las mañanitas," and sharing lullabies and stories in Spanish. These experiences not only enriched her understanding of her cultural heritage but also contributed to her strong identification with her Mexican identity because she was in a social network that nurtured and encouraged her ethnic identity. In the same way that her mother had an impact on her connection to her Mexican identity, Emily also notes being surrounded by her aunt and other Mexican family members was where she "could find space to be, you know, within Mexican culture". Having a social network that consistently exposed her to Mexican traditions, language, food, and customs reinforced her connection to her Mexican heritage, aligning with Telles and Sue's (2019) findings on the impact of social networks on the ethnic core.

In the same way, Judith notes a strong connection to her Mexican identity because of the people she found herself surrounded by:

> I would for sure say Mexican. I mean, all of my friends are Mexican-American. My parents and brother were born in Mexico like my entire family's there. Like I don't really have roots here other than me, like me being born here…

Even though Judith was born in the U.S. she feels a stronger connection to her Mexican heritage due to the strong presence of the Mexican identity within her family and friends. Overall, examining the influence of family and friends on the interviewees' connection to their Mexican identities provides insight into the importance of familial and social support in nurturing and preserving cultural heritage.

Another important part of the ethnic core that impacted my interviewees strong connection to their Mexican identities was culture and religion. In a conversation with Raul he says,

> And at my house, I speak Spanish, I cook Mexican food, I listen to Mexican music. And not even Mexican, just like Latin music. And it's like, I don't know, I feel like I'm very centered in my identity.

Being surrounded by cultural aspects of the Mexican identity such as speaking Spanish, cooking Mexican food, and listening to Latin music, Raul highlights the importance of cultural immersion in shaping his identity and fostering a sense of belonging. Engaging in these different cultural practices shows how it is an important part in maintaining a strong connection to his Mexican identity. Similarly, Melanie talks about how religion, specifically Catholicism, has played a strong role in centering her Mexican identity. She says:

> "I feel like religion was always like a very important thing to my family. Specifically the Catholic religion, but I think that is closely tied to being Latino."

Linking Catholicism with being Latine suggests that Melanie's identity has stemmed from the cultural practices and traditions that come with being a Catholic Mexican. For example, she later states:

> I think the big one that I can think of…one that just happened was Dia de los Muertos, which isn't always tied to religion, but I feel like it can be. And I think that was a big one, especially having family members transnationally, because you're not always like with them to, to like, mourn the death of people. So I think that was a really important one for my family. But also Dia de los Reyes was also a really big one, that we would celebrate it like maybe two weeks, even though that's supposed to be a one-day thing.

Practicing Catholicism and celebrating these particular Mexican holidays shows the powerful connection she has to her Mexican heritage and culture. Engaging in these rituals serve as anchors for the interviewees' sense of belonging and cultural continuity.

Another factor of the ethnic core that emerged during my interviews, was the profound impact of location in both shaping and centralizing my interviewees' Mexican identities. As Judith recounts:

> I was raised in Chicago. It's like a huge Mexican population there. I was raised in a very, very like Latino neighborhood, and so and so because of all that its way strong- I feel a so much, very much stronger connection to my Mexican identity.

In this quote, Judith highlights the rich cultural environment of Chicago, particularly its significant Mexican immigrant population. She emphasizes that her upbringing in this diverse setting led her to have a solid connection to her cultural roots, which is similar to what Telles and Sue (2019) found in their study. She implies that growing up in such an environment allowed her

to maintain a close tie to her heritage and identity because there was access to her Mexican culture through the community, restaurants, and other businesses. Overall, growing up in an ethnic neighborhood in Chicago served as a backdrop for enhancing her cultural identity.

Expanding upon the 'ethnic core' framework established by Telles and Sue (2019), I will present an additional factor contributing to the 'ethnic core' influencing my interviewees' robust connection to their Mexican identity. Specifically, I intend to explore the impact of extended periods spent abroad, particularly in Latin America, on the formation and reinforcement of this connection. For many of my interviewees being in Latin America allowed them to feel a strong sense of belonging and feeling of home. As Emily notes,

> But in Peru, I think people just accept you as you are. Or in Latin America, people are like, bro there's mestizos all around us, like Mexican American is those two racial identities and so it's more accepted. And I think, for me, that allowed me to get more grounding in myself about my identity.

What she expresses here is that Peru was a place where she could just be. There was no need for her to explain her identity to anyone, unlike in the U.S. where she needs to justify her place in society in order to be accepted. In Peru she was in a space that uplifted her identity rather than bring her down or make her feel like an "other". This same feeling of existing is what Melanie describes in her reflection about her time in Mexico:

> Like it was like, good breathing room to like, not always have to be like the representative or like, whatever. And I think just like having that breathing space and just like, not always having to be like, "This is my identity". And this is obviously, it's different than a lot of other people here, was a way for me to like grow within my own identity... just having the experience of like going to classes in

> Mexico and just like looking like other people was like an interesting and really good experience.

By having the opportunity to step back from this role of being the representative of the Latine community in white spaces, Melanie was able to feel liberated and engage with her identity on her terms. Being in Mexico and being surrounded by people who looked like her allowed her to freely exist without being racialized or signaled out for her Mexican identity. This experience offered Melanie a sense of validity and belonging that made her embrace her Mexican identity. For my interviewees being in Latin America provided them a feeling of belonging and a place that made them feel welcomed and at home. As Raul notes, "being in Ecuador reminded me so much of being home. So much of being home in Mexico and my upbringing." This is because of the familiarity they felt with the culture in Latin America. Judith speaks on this familiarity in one of her reflections:

> I guess just like living in Latin America, like in Latin America has definitely made my connection to my heritage to like my Latine identity weigh so much stronger than it is being here. I guess like being with people who speak the same language, who grew up around similar musics, similar music. Not so much food, but like, you know, yeah. Just being around people who also have like the same sort of warmth that like my parents have was really is really nice. It's definitely made it stronger, I would say.

Unlike in the U.S., my interviews were surrounded by a language and culture that was very similar to their own. They were in a place where they could deeply connect with the people they interacted with and not feel alone in their experiences or feel as though sharing their culture would be tokenized by others. Being in Latin America provided my interviewees with a sense of

happiness as Judtih notes, “It’s hard leaving a place that you are so happy in”. But their time abroad also served as a time to gain a desire to learn more about their Mexican heritage. Emily says:

> I think it made it really made me want to go back to Mexico and Oaxaca in particular, where my family's from and like, spend time with the land and understand my culture a little bit more deeply. Because now I feel like I know Peruvian culture, more than I know, Mexican culture. And I was like, I want to go back to Mexico, not to the U.S.

In the same way, Judith says:

> It just made me want to visit Mexico even more…I just want to learn more about where my parents grew up, where my brother grew up. I just want to learn more about everything in my family that I don’t know that, that well. It just made me want to go, go back there and like meet everybody and just learn more about my family’s history.

And finally, Raul notes:

> But Ecuadorians really love Mexicans, Mexican food, Mexican culture, they're so interested in it. They're very knowledgeable. And like, in more Mexican artists, than I even am. They're like, they appreciate it. It's like literally cultural appreciation, like at its finest. It's almost like if they appreciate my culture so much, why don't I? I feel like I take it for granted, or I don't see it as special as it is. And I think it's just because I had never gone abroad and ever seen other Latin cultures…It's like it's ridiculous that I don't appreciate it. So yeah, I guess it just reaffirmed it that I was like dang, "I'm Mexican."

Overall, these quotes collectively demonstrate how their experience in Latin America evoked a sense of cultural rediscovery and appreciation, prompting them to seek out deeper connections to their heritage and identity. All of this shows that another important part of the ethnic core in enhancing my interviewees' connectedness to their Mexican identity was their extended period in Latin America. The question now is, how do my Mexican-American interviewees exercise resistance through their agency using their identities?

Resistance Through Identity

In the face of pervasive societal pressures to assimilate, endure racialization, and confront systemic inequality, the Mexican-American students I interviewed showcased a profound connection to their Mexican heritage. However, their connection wasn't merely to a broad Mexican-American identity; rather, it was intricately woven with a deep-rooted embrace of their Mexican heritage. This unwavering sense of identity catalyzes their defiance against prevailing narratives and structures that seek to marginalize them, manifesting in acts of resistance.

While the students I interviewed expressed a stronger connection to their Mexican identity than to their American identity, they did not disregard their American identities completely. My interviewees acknowledged that recognizing their American identities was important in being cognizant of the privileges they carry. As Emily says, "I am Mexican-American, because I, my experience is completely different from somebody living in Mexico". She acknowledges the difference between growing up in the U.S. versus growing up in Mexico. She understands that both experiences are different, given the privileges that come with having U.S. citizenship. Jesus, who identifies as Mexican-American, identifies these privileges when he says:

> And it's just made me like feel like that being Americans like kind of like a privilege because a lot of people are leaving their, their country to come here through like a, very, like long route. So it hasn't made me like, patriotic or anything, but it just made me like feel, acknowledge, like some of the privilege associated to be American, to have the citizenship.

Jesus recognizes that his U.S. citizenship grants him access to resources and opportunities such as economic opportunities, political stability, access to education and healthcare, and freedoms that many immigrants coming to the U.S. are looking for. In this quote, he is conscious of his positionality as a U.S. citizen and what that entails. It is also important to note that recognizing his privilege does not necessarily translate into feelings of patriotism. Understanding the positionality and privileges tied to U.S. citizenship is something that Emily also talks about. She says,

> I have to– being abroad has definitely shaped like how I present myself and how I interact with people because when you're from the United States you okay, like here in the United States, you carry an oppressed identity but like, you also We live in an imperial state. And so you have, I guess you have to be cognizant of like how, how you present yourself in, I don't want to say like the global South, but like, in these countries that have been imperialized by the United States.

She recognizes the significance of being from the United States and how it shapes perceptions of her, both domestically and internationally. Her consideration of her national identity, the influence of the U.S.'s actions on global perceptions, and her efforts to navigate these dynamics respectfully while abroad reflect her nuanced understanding of power and privilege. Judith also expresses the privileges of her U.S. citizenship when she says,

> “I mean, being back in the US it's like damn like that like being American like legally is like super. It's a sign of privilege. It's it's having a U.S. passport, I feel like I said this before. It's like it holds a lot. It holds a lot of power in any context.” But beyond citizenship, it is also recognizing the opportunities that they have been given. Emily says, “I have a lot of respect for, like the education I received in the United States and how it has shaped like, my American identity.”

Similarly, Raul expresses that being in the U.S. has given him access to different cultural resources and experiences. He says,

> “It changed my values and my, my willingness and my, like, I just get so excited when I learn about other people, and other cultures. And for me, it's so much easier to do that here [U.S.] than it was over there [Latin America]”.

But despite the recognition of their U.S. privilege and the resources it grants them, they repeatedly say that they do not feel any patriotic pride in their American nationality. Jesus makes note of that in his reflection but Judith does too when she explicitly states, “And I really felt like I was never patriotic. And I'm not”. Making it clear that for them being American just means having a U.S. citizenship. She makes note of this later on when she says,

> But in terms of like my American identity, what it means to be American for me, it's just truly being born here that’s it. There's not so much like, I bleed red, blue and white. No appreciation [inaudiable] it truly it just means being born here and I think Yeah.”

This same feeling was expressed by Jesus who says “For me, being American is like, like having a passport. Being able to work freely. And yeah, having a lot more like luxuries afforded to me and yeah, I think so.” All of this shows that there is a distance between themselves and their

American identities. But acknowledging their American privileges is important because it is acknowledging their experience as Mexicans in the U.S., which altogether leads to how they use their identities as a means of resistance.

Emily notes, “my Mexican-American identity is always been like questioned”, what this statement implies is that her experiences are shaped by the stereotypes, racialization, and discrimination she has faced based on her cultural identity. It suggests that she has had to navigate societal expectations or judgments about her background. How she and the others navigate these structures and institutions that marginalize them is by taking agency in their identity as a form of resistance. Emily shows an example of this resistance when she says,

> I think living in both of those worlds I feel more grounded as a as a Chicana, Mexican-American woman. But I'm also like, I know that I like being here. I'm still gonna question it, if that makes sense.

By expressing that she feels more grounded as a Chicana, Mexican-American woman, Emily asserts a sense of rootedness and belonging within her cultural identity. This identity assertion can be seen as a resistance against external forces that may seek to marginalize, question, or erase her cultural background. Overall, the statement reflects Emily’s acknowledgment of the complexity of her identity and her agency in navigating and asserting it. By embracing her identity while also maintaining a critical perspective, she demonstrates resistance against societal pressures to conform to narrow definitions of identity and belonging. Other forms of resistance that were mentioned in these interviews were based on the students' agency to explain their experiences through their identities. In conversation with Melanie she said,

> Yeah. And I feel like when we are celebrating those holidays, or whatever it may be differently than they are in like, various parts of Mexico. It's Mexican, and American but with not those white ties. It's like this own kind of creation.

Melanie acknowledges the fusion of Mexican and American cultural elements in her celebrations. By emphasizing that her celebration of certain holidays differs from those in various parts of Mexico, she asserts a unique hybrid identity that reflects both her Mexican heritage and her American upbringing or experience. The mention of "not those white ties" suggests a rejection of the dominant white cultural norms that often shape celebrations and cultural practices. This can be seen as a resistance against assimilation into white cultural norms and a reclaiming of cultural authenticity. Melanie also describes the celebrations as "this own kind of creation," indicating a process of actively shaping and defining her cultural identity on her terms. This act of creation can again be viewed as a form of resistance against attempts to homogenize or erase diverse cultural expressions in favor of dominant narratives. Overall she shows the importance of cultural autonomy and self-definition in the face of societal pressures to conform to narrow cultural standards. On a similar note, Jesus says “I identify as Mexican American because I was born in America. And both my parents are from Mexico”. This statement can be seen as a form of resistance through individual agency as Jesus affirms his identity which reflects both cultural heritage and individual experience. The recognition of his parent’s nationality is significant as it honors the experiences and identities of his parents, demonstrating an appreciation for their background without erasing or minimizing their experiences. In demonstrating his autonomy he is defining his own identity and resisting external pressures to conform to narrow or oversimplified notions of identity. Avoiding the oversimplified notions of identity is something that Raul also reflected on. He said, “We're in a position where

we can't have both at the same time. And I guess thats how I would factor it, American identity, into that question". This statement reflects resistance through individual agency by asserting Raul's autonomy in navigating and defining his own identity amidst societal expectations and perceived limitations. It highlights the importance of active engagement and critical reflection in the process of identity formation, resisting oversimplified narratives and embracing the complexity of personal identity. In a final reflection about her identity, Melanie notes:

> …just existing like the internal who I am, I feel like is more concrete versus like, the external definitions of like putting a label on myself. I'm like, well, the labels still don't really work. But like, I just think, knowing who I am more. Yeah.

Her reflection exemplifies resistance through individual agency by prioritizing internal identity, rejecting external labels, asserting self-knowledge, and prioritizing self-definition. It underscores the importance of autonomy and self-determination in the process of identity formation, resisting societal pressures to conform to predefined labels or categories.

Yet another avenue through which students have exhibited their resistance is in their questioning of specific cultural traditions like Catholicism. Many traditions in Mexican culture come from Catholicism, but interviewees like Raul call out the colonialism that is embedded in the practice and how it has contributed to the erasure of Indigenous communities in Latin America. Raul says,

> And again, like, I'm not a religious person, either, but like when I went back to Mexico, it was like, my family is still very much Catholic. And I just couldn't look at it the same. I've never looked at it the same, since I like, learned how to read. But like, I'm like, dang. Now I really can't look at the same. Because it's not as- I didn't

> have someone to tell me that history in Mexico but I had it in Ecuador. But the history still applies to Mexico.

Raul's reflection reveals a form of resistance to his family's religious beliefs and practices, particularly in the context of his visit to Mexico. Despite being raised in a Catholic family and Catholicism being a big part of Mexican traditions, Raul expresses a detachment from religion, stating that he is not a religious person. This suggests a divergence from the religious norms and values upheld by his family and community. By acknowledging his inability to view Catholicism in the same way as his family members, Raul challenges the traditional religious authority and beliefs within his cultural context. His reflection suggests a form of intellectual resistance wherein he questions and reevaluates the religious narratives and practices that have been ingrained in his upbringing. Overall demonstrates that stepping away from Catholicism does not make him any less Mexican, but rather, he reasserts his identity by alluding to his curiosity of learning more about the history of his cultural identity. Emily also provides a direct example of resistance when she says,

> So I guess, like, [laughs] low key, like more internal hate for myself. [laughs] Just like, "oh, you suck!", because you're from the United States. But also, I guess, like, there's a lot of, because you're from the United States, you do have a little bit of power and influence, and especially on like, the issues I was working with in Peru, I was like, Okay, I'm from the United States. And I go to this elitist college, I have the influence of sharing what I'm learning here and like making people aware of like, what I learned in Peru, and you know, the oppression indigenous people face there.

Emily's reflection showcases a nuanced form of resistance, encompassing both internal struggle and external action. Initially, she expresses a sense of self-deprecation and internal conflict, referring to "internal hate" directed towards herself because of her American identity. This internal resistance reflects a critical self-awareness and a rejection of the privileges and power associated with being from the United States. However, Emily's narrative also reveals a form of resistance through her recognition of the influence and power afforded to her as an American, particularly within the context of her educational background and experiences in Peru. Despite her internal struggles, she acknowledges the potential impact she can have in raising awareness about social justice issues, particularly regarding the oppression faced by indigenous people in Peru. By leveraging her position of privilege and influence, she demonstrates a proactive form of resistance against systems of oppression and inequality. She embraces her role as an advocate and ally, using her platform as a tool for advocating for justice and equity.

Certain interviewees revealed a deeper insight into how they showed resistance through language. When discussing language expectations, interviewees acknowledged the stereotype of being seen as a "no sabo kid." This reflects the stereotype of Mexican-Americans as not fully proficient in Spanish due to the dominant influence of English in the U.S. Yet some of them demonstrated how they challenged these cultural expectations and embraced their Spanish proficiency. Speaking with Nicole, she says, "And it's also like, I wasn't born in a Spanish-speaking country. So if I mess up, I mess up. That's not a bad thing". Here, Nicole highlights a perspective on language learning in the U.S. By acknowledging that she wasn't born in a Spanish-speaking country, she embraces the inevitability of making mistakes while speaking Spanish. Also justifying how her mistakes are not a reflection of being a "no sabo kid," which is imposed upon many Mexican-American youth in the U.S. This attitude suggests a healthy

detachment from perfectionism and cultural expectations and a willingness to learn and grow despite linguistic imperfections.

Raul also expresses his resistance to the cultural expectation of speaking Spanish proficiently when he says, "So I guess coming back here, like little things that I take for granted…listening to my music or talking Spanish. The way I talk Spanish. I just appreciate them a little bit more." By saying "the way I talk Spanish," Raul is implicitly saying that he recognizes that his Spanish might not be perfect, that it may not meet cultural expectations, but he speaks it the way he wants to speak it. His levels of proficiency do not make him more or less Mexican.

Overall, the Mexican-American students interviewed demonstrated a profound sense of identity that transcended societal pressures to assimilate, racialization, and systemic inequality, as well as cultural expectations imposed on them. Their strong identification with their Mexican-American heritage served as a form of resistance against prevailing narratives and structures. Despite facing challenges and discrimination and balancing the expectations of their cultural identities, they asserted their agency in defining their identities, refusing to be confined by external labels or expectations. Acknowledging their American privileges, they did not feel a strong sense of patriotism towards their American nationality. Instead, they recognized the importance of their Mexican heritage and used their identities as a means of resistance against marginalization. In the same way, they connected and acknowledged their Mexican identities but did not claim Mexican nationality nor shy away from challeneging the cultural expectations that are a part of the Mexican identity. By navigating the complexities of their identities and asserting their autonomy, they challenged dominant narratives and reclaimed what it meant to be

Mexican-American for them. Their experiences exemplify the power of individual agency in shaping identity and resisting societal pressures.

Discussion:

My research sought to explore how Mexican-Americans assert their agency and utilize their identity as a means of resistance against U.S. societal structures and culture. What I presented in my findings first outlined the societal structures and cultures that made the Mexican-American students I interviewed feel distant from their 'American' identities. Then using Telles and Sue's (2019) conceptual framework of the 'ethnic core' I showed the factors that influence and deepen the students' connection to their Mexican identities. I expand on Telles and Sues' (2019) framework by adding that as college students, being in Latin America for an extended period was another factor that contributed to the students' deeper connection and appreciation for their Mexican identities. This was partly attributed to the student's sense of belonging and feeling at home experiences less common in the U.S. due to the racialization and marginalization they face. Ultimately, this exposure illuminated the pervasive influence of racism in their daily lives in the U.S. and provided them with an opportunity to solidify their identities as Mexicans.

Telles and Sue (2019) found that the Mexican-American millennials they interviewed in 2003-2004 who were second-, third-, and fourth-generation immigrants, while having a strong connection to their Mexican identities at various levels, they exhibited a great connection and patriotism to their American identity. However, my findings show that my interviewees felt no connection of patriotism to their American identities. To them being American meant having a U.S. passport and being born in the U.S. While they did acknowledge the privileges that came with being a U.S. citizen, they all distanced themselves from the patriotism and nationalism that

comes with being American. This disconnection from their American identities may have resulted from the historical events they have lived throughout their lives. Witnessing the election and resurgence of white supremacy through Donald Trump's election, living through the COVID-19 pandemic, and seeing the protests and racial reckoning that surged worldwide after the murder of George Floyd. Unlike the interviewees in Telles and Sue's study, who grew up before 9/11 and witnessed the trauma and mourning that came after, my interviewees grew up in the U.S. post 9/11 where heightened security measures criminalized and continue to criminalize Mexicans of all generations.

Additionally, while Telles and Sue (2019) provide a framework that helps to explain why Mexican-Americans are grounded in their cultural identities, the concept of the ethnic core falls short of highlighting just how nuanced the Mexican-American identity actually is. The interviewees in this study understand these nuances and speak to or allude to the tensions that are present in their Mexican-American identities. Being grounded in their Mexican identities doesn't mean they see eye to eye with Mexican traditions or cultural expectations, nor that they claim a Mexican nationality. Growing up in the U.S. does not mean that they feel patriotic to the U.S. They acknowledge the resources and privileges that their U.S. citizenship has given them, but they also acknowledge that their experiences in the U.S. have been racialized, which makes them feel like foreigners in their place of birth. To better understand these feelings, we can define them through the use of the term ambivalence. Boccagni and Kivisto 2019 define the term as "the double pull of emotion. There is both the tendency to love and to hate. Love is always on the border line of hate and hate on the border line of love … the fact that there is this double pull or opposite tendencies [sic] illustrates the relation of emotion to conflict" (4). This double pull or tension represents some of the pulls and tensions in the Mexican-American identity. Navigating

the complexities of dual identity isn't a straightforward process of selecting one identity over the other; rather, it entails an ongoing struggle to embody both simultaneously. This tension is vividly depicted by Kivisto and Faist 2010, who describe how immigrants find themselves torn between two temporalities, two countries, and two sets of conditions. Wherein individuals are perpetually caught between worlds, compelled to navigate the complexities of simultaneously belonging to two societies. With this profound sense of ambivalence, the Mexican-Americans in this study are continuously grappling with the juxtaposition of "here" and "there," as they strive to assert their identities and establish belonging in both realms. Yet, in the midst of this ongoing struggle, they are confronted with the reality that they will never be fully satisfied and they will always be balancing both of these identities and experiences.

To highlight some of these feelings of ambivalence, Raul speaks on the experience of trying to define what it means to be Mexican and American. He says,

"I guess it's just being American would be different than being Mexican. I don't think those two can coexist, or at least let me not put it that way. But when I went back to Mexico, my cousins saw me differently. You know, why? I don't really know. But I think we just had a very different, paths in life. When I went back to Mexico. I kind of realized, my whole family, they're examples of what I could have been if I stayed. But I didn't. I was brought to America. I had an education. I went to college. And I feel like I wouldn't have been able to do that if I didn't come to America. So that's what I consider to be the American influence in me. But again, I feel that's more like access to a resources and like possibilities. Because as much as I love Mexico, that wouldn't have happened there. And my family is an example of that. I'm the only one in my family who has gone to college. And yeah, I mean, it does cause a barrier because I could

understand and relate to them when I was eight. But now that I'm like, 20 I'm like, we've had very different lives.

This narrative illustrates ambivalence through the complex negotiation of identity and belonging experienced by Raul, who identifies as both Mexican and being from the U.S. The speaker grapples with the perceived dichotomy between these two identities, expressing uncertainty about their coexistence. The experience of returning to Mexico highlights a sense of dissonance, as Raul's family perceives him differently due to their divergent life paths. This realization prompts reflection on the opportunities afforded by being in America, such as access to education and resources, which are perceived as emblematic of the American influence in their life. However, despite recognizing the benefits of their American experience, Raul also acknowledges a sense of loss or disconnection from his Mexican heritage and family, particularly as his life experiences diverge from those of his relatives. This tension between gratitude for American opportunities and a sense of estrangement from his Mexican roots reflects the ambivalence inherent in navigating dual cultural identities. In a later part of his interview Raul more explicitly states,

> Because when I was in Ecuador, I didn't have America, the people, the food, the culture, and all that. In Mexico I didn't have it [American culture]. And now that I'm here I don't have everything from Latin America. So long story short, you can't- We're in a position where we can't have both at the same time.

Again, Raul is highlighting the tensions that exist with being Mexican-American. This sense of longing for what is missing and the acknowledgment of the impossibility of fully integrating both cultural identities demonstrates the ambivalence inherent in navigating dual cultural

belonging. Raul is confronted with the challenge of reconciling his desire for connection to both cultures with the reality of his fragmented identity.

On a similar note, Melanie talks about the tensions that are created when having U.S. citizenship or growing up in the U.S. and how these tensions may be more exasperated when being abroad. She first begins by saying,

> One of my aunts and uncles that don't have the opportunity to go back to Mexico still, like ask me, I feel like I'm kind of like, I don't know, like I like, yeah, not that I shut down. But it's like, hard to talk about.

Her statement reveals a profound sense of ambivalence rooted in her experience of straddling two cultures. The mention of her relatives who lack the opportunity to return to Mexico underscores the privilege she possesses in being able to move between the two countries. However, this privilege also brings with it a burden of responsibility and guilt, as indicated by her difficulty in discussing her experiences with her relatives. This difficulty in communication could stem from a fear of being perceived as boastful or insensitive about her opportunities compared to her relatives' limitations. Overall, Melanie's narrative highlights the ambivalence inherent in navigating privilege and guilt associated with her Mexican-American identity. Lastly, Judith gives an example of ambivalence by speaking to how immigrants, regardless of generation, allude to alternative highlights when trying to balance being here and there. She says,

> But I guess just like being over there. It's like, wow, like, I mean, maybe my version of myself in America is like a diluted version of me. But over here, it's like it's super, the most concentrated. If that makes sense. It's kind of made me realize like wow, like, What would life be like if you know something happened or didn't?

In this reflection, she highlights the ambivalence in contemplating the hypothetical scenario of "something happened or didn't," indicating a sense of existential questioning and uncertainty about the paths not taken. Here, Judith highlights the tensions and experiences of her Mexican-American identity by questioning if being in the U.S. has "diluted" or compromised her Mexican identity. And questions how her experience might have been different if her family had decided to stay in Mexico. Again, showcasing this balance between here and there and the ambivalence in the experiences of immigrants, no matter what generation they are a part of.

Overall, the Mexican-American identity is filled with nuances. The ambivalence present throughout the testimonials of the interviewees in this study represents the tensions that exist with having both of these identities and lived experiences. While these students are in a period of transition, a period of young adulthood, they are trying to navigate the question, “Who am I?” and in doing so, they are uncovering the ambivalence in the Mexican-American experience. Ultimately, revealing that their identities are fluid and they are willing to constantly question who they are and how their experiences shape them. Even through their ambivalence, they are showcasing a resistance to something greater than themselves.

Ultimately, these experiences have led the Mexican-American students I interviewed to take agency in their lives and use their identities as a form of resistance against these societal structures and institutions that racialize them. By calling themselves Mexican-American they are taking agency in acknowledging that their identity reflects their lived experiences. By heightening their connection to their Mexican identities, they are expressing resistance to the oppressive and structural forces that racialize them and want them to assimilate into ‘American’ or white norms and standards as well as the cultural expectations that are placed on them through

their Mexican identities. Calling themselves Mexican-Americans is a way to say they belong, they are present, and that the U.S. cannot erase or diminish their cultural identities.

Conclusion:

My research sought to answer the question: To what extent does resistance manifest in the assertion of ethnic identity and the cultivation of agency among Mexican-Americans? How do experiences abroad contribute to the development of agency and the assertion of ethnic identity among Mexican-Americans? Following the frameworks of various scholars like Flores-Gonzalez (2010) and Telles and Sue (2019), I found that Mexican-American Gen Zers use their Mexican-American identities as a form of resistance to racialization and expected assimilation practices by asserting their groundedness in their Mexican identities.

While Telles and Sue (2019) find that the Mexican-Americans they interviewed also showed a strong connection and attachment to their American identity, my interviewees showed a disconnection from their American identity as a result of the context in which they grew up and the racialization they have experienced in their own lives. While they recognize the privileges that come with being a U.S. citizen they ultimately show a stronger connection to their Mexican identities. These experiences thus lead the Mexican-American students I interviewed to take agency in their lives and use their identities as a form of resistance against these societal structures and institutions that racialize them.

To further expand on the concept of the “ethnic core” coined by Telles and Sue (2019), I bring the experience of studying abroad in Latin America as an additional factor that contributes to the strong ties of the Mexican identity and distance from the American identity, without disregarding the privilege that identity holds. By bringing this factor into question, it helps to see how prolonged periods in a space where Mexican-Americans feel belonging and connection

illuminated the pervasive influence of racism in their daily lives in the U.S. and impacted how they understood and used their Mexican-American identities as a form of resistance.

Through asserting their cultural identity and rejecting assimilation into dominant norms, these students exemplify the power of individual agency in challenging oppressive structures. My findings speak to how Mexican-Americans in the U.S. define their own identities and experiences, and how identity is impacted by the social forces that surround us, either nurturing or harming our identities. Despite the racial reckoning that occurred after the murder of George Floyd, racism persists within the Latine community in the U.S., continually reconstituted.

In essence, to combat the racialization they encounter in the U.S., Mexican-American students prioritize their Mexican identities over their American identity. They acknowledge the privileges of U.S. citizenship while embracing the complexities of being Mexican or Latine in the U.S. For them, being Mexican-American embodies this nuanced experience, demonstrating their resistance to conventional assimilation practices and racialization. It's a declaration of belonging, existence, and defiance against erasure.

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