The bright lights were shining from afar. After six long hours sitting on the back of a bus, trying to contain excitement and anxiety, I could finally see the skyscrapers of New York City. “We’re here,” Andrea said with a nostalgic tone in her voice. Andrea, my Mexican friend, had invited me to stay with her during our Thanksgiving break because it was too expensive for me to go back home to Puerto Rico. I had mixed feelings about going to Andrea’s home since I honestly just wanted to go to my own. Still, it was a relief to go with her and explore the city for the first time rather than staying in my dorm alone in Syracuse, while everybody else enjoyed their vacations with their families. I have to admit that the transition to a whole new world—college life—was not easy, but I wanted to try something new.

We got off the bus and took a taxi to the Lower East Side. I could see how the environment changed from one place to another. As we got closer to our destination, a brownish color began to take hold of the surroundings, the lights started to get dimmer, the skyscrapers turned into tenement buildings, and the Olive Gardens and McDonald’s turned into taco kiosks and Spanish restaurants.

The cab dropped us off on Second Avenue, where I felt strangely comfortable after hearing almost everyone speaking Spanish. When I saw the Puerto Rican flag hanging outside a restaurant called Casa Adela near Andrea’s home, my heart felt warm and cozy. The three red stripes on the flag reminded me of the never-changing, 90 degree weather on the island; the two white stripes reminded me of the bright sun that you
can always spot in the sky; and the one lone star reminded me of my small but beautiful island, and of course, my cultural pride.

No matter where Puerto Ricans go, we take our flag and, with it, our identity. I felt a sudden urge to run to that restaurant so that I could get a little piece of home. As we went up to the fifth floor, I could see excitement on Andrea’s face. Her brother welcomed her, and as I went inside I saw a Mexican flag, hung with pride in the middle of the kitchen. I realized the importance of having something that reminds you of who you are and where you come from.

Her mom greeted me in Spanish because, even though she’d been living in NYC for more than 20 years, she never learned English. Later on, I had the audacity to ask her if she understood English, to which she answered in Spanish: “I had the chance to learn English; I just chose not to. When I came here, I was terrified of what might happen. I took a risk, I took a chance and soon enough, I found my people, who went through the same stuff and came from the same place.”

Her sister had tamales prepared for us, a staple of Mexican cuisine. Andrea was filled with joy. I tried to pretend that I liked them, but I was used to my own kind of staple—starchy dough filled with beef called pasteles. Although tamales and pasteles are basically the same, they do differ: tamales are made with corn, and pasteles are made with plantains. One night, we had a Puerto Rican dish that consisted of the lower part of the pig, called pernil, for dinner. I asked Andrea where her mom got it. She said it was from a kiosk two blocks away. Later, I noticed that there were a lot of stores and food places representing different races. It turns out that the Lower East Side used to attract immigrants from the working class because of its cheap rent and diversity.

According to The Lower East Side Business Improvement District, the immigration to the
Lower East Side started in the early 1800s, when immigrants from different countries were directed to live there. During these years, the region became a home for low- to middle-class workers who wanted to start a life in the city that never sleeps. Since the 1960s, the Lower East Side has become more Hispanic, due to a large number of immigrants from Latin America. Today, one-third of its residents are Hispanic; they often refer to the Lower East Side as “Loisaida,” derived from the Latino pronunciation of Lower East Side, and are currently trying to keep their culture alive in a neighborhood that is rapidly changing.

During my stay, I heard many stories of what it was like to come to New York City. Andrea’s mom, Luisa, decided to come twenty-four years ago in search of a better life, what some call the “American Dream.” As an illegal immigrant, she left behind her family and her rights. “That’s the price to pay if you come illegally,” she said to me one night while we were enjoying some empanadas, a type of fried stuffed bread. What really surprised me was how many Mexicans lived in the city. I had the opportunity to immerse myself in the culture for a week, and it was fascinating to see the close-knit community that had formed, with people living in the same buildings, going to the same church, and always helping each other out. Andrea once told me that her biggest fear was to be left alone in the U.S.; because she is the only one in her family who was born here, she is the only one who has citizenship. And maybe that fear is one of the reasons they stay together.

I went to a special activity at Andrea’s church on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. She was part of the church chorus, which was a mariachi group. They were all dressed in the traditional “traje de charro,” consisting of a short jacket and pants with metal buttons for the men, skirts for the women, a big bow tie, boots, and a sombrero. I would have never imagined myself singing classic Christian songs to the tune of mariachis. For a moment, I almost felt as if I were in Mexico. And isn’t that what everyone in that church wanted?

To feel like themselves again, to prove to each other that neither time nor location will ever change them? There appeared to be a sense of comfort and pride in many people’s eyes during the mass, whether they were born in Mexico or in the U.S., and whether they’ve been in the U.S. for ten years—or thirty years.

Most of the Mexicans in that church all shared a similar story: they came to the U.S. illegally for a better quality of life. According to the Fiscal Policy Institute, approximately 535,000 illegal immigrants live in New York City. Twenty-seven percent of them are from Mexico and Central America (Fiscal Policy Institute 25). Illegal Mexicans are the most employed of the immigrant group, working as dishwashers, maids, waiters, janitors, and other occupations. They usually get paid less than minimum wage and work more than sixty hours a week. Luisa cleans houses, working flexible hours, sometimes during the holidays. Her boss is also Mexican. Pilar, Andrea’s sister, holds a bachelor’s degree, but works as a waitress at a restaurant, since she doesn’t have a work permit to be able to compete with other candidates for jobs. Her boss and colleagues are all Mexicans.

One morning, we went out to walk her dog. I noticed the different types of symbols representing certain ethnicities that marked a lot of the stores and restaurants. Whether it was a phrase, like “El Castillo de Jagua,” the name of a castle in Cuba, or a painting of a “coqui,” a type of frog that lives in Puerto Rico, the symbols were everywhere, and I could easily identify the Puerto Rican ones. I also noticed the great disparity among different parts of the area. I saw boutiques between bodegas, hotels between housing projects, and luxury condominiums between cramped buildings. I couldn’t help but ask Luisa about this. She told me, “They’re trying to make this place into another area for the rich to hang out. Even if...
everyone here comes from around the world, we all know we are part of a community. We work hard; we share some of each other’s traditions and culture. We have made this place. But, as you can see, we are fighting against the rich who want to destroy what took years of hard work to build,” referring to all the different stores, buildings, restaurants, and companies that the working class has built in the Lower East Side.

Right now, what’s happening on the Lower East Side is called gentrification, which is when a place or neighborhood gets renewed, attracting affluent people and increasing rent prices, leading to a displacement of the poor. The culture of the Lower East Side is made up of dozens of ethnic groups, and although they tend to stick to their own, they all have something in common: they belong to the lower-middle class. Now, as more hipsters and artists come to live there, the essence of the area is vanishing. “Rents are going up, a lot of people are moving to Queens for more space,” Luisa told me, giving me the example of her son, Julio, who moved to Queens seven months ago. The issue is affecting everyone, and people believe that the Spanish culture will slowly disappear if rents continue to rise.

The Saturday after Thanksgiving, I was so homesick I went out to a snack bar where they sold fried Caribbean food. I immediately felt at ease when I saw the lady making the food. Her wavy dark brown hair and accent gave her away immediately; I could tell she was Puerto Rican. She asked me, in Spanish, what I wanted. I guess my own curly hair and facial features gave me away, too. It was a relief to talk to her for a few minutes since, after spending a whole week with Mexicans, I felt like I was beginning to talk like them. It was there that I came to the conclusion that the more time I spent away from my roots, the more they marked me.

On the last day of vacation, Luisa and Pilar said goodbye by giving me one kiss on the cheek, a common ritual in Hispanic cultures. Andrea stopped for a minute to talk to her mom in Spanish. During the ride back home, I was filled with curiosity, so I asked her what it was like to grow up between two worlds. She said it was not a big deal. “Learning two languages was the hardest part. But my school was filled with Latinos, especially Mexicans, so we were all going through the same situation. We were taught to speak to each other in English, but when we were home, everything was in Spanish. It’s way easier when all your friends can relate to you—when you’re not the newcomer, you’re not the exception, and you’re not the weirdo.” And I understood why many of us don’t branch out: it’s because we are terrified of being “the weirdo.” We don’t want to be isolated because we don’t like the same things, or because there is nothing alike between us.

Upon my return to my dorm room after the break, I saw the little Puerto Rican flag on my desk. It reminded me of the Big Apple, the city where you can find the most diversity, and the restaurant near Andrea’s place, Casa Adela, that has been there for more than thirty-five years. The new owner grew up in the streets of the Lower East Side, but his heart belongs to the island of Puerto Rico. The red, green, and white flag hanging in the kitchen of Andrea’s house represents much more than just a country. It represents Luisa’s life, her family’s life, as well as the life of many illegal Mexicans in NYC. Even when you leave your country of origin, you never forget home.

Works Cited