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Tales of a Rugged *Viejito*: Reflecting Upon Mis Cuatro Años in this Comunidad *Fuerza*

My younger brother Andy once came to visit from Syracuse University and spent an evening at the Latino Living Center. Over the course of the night, after spending some time watching members of the community joke, laugh, and dance to bachata and salsa, Andy remarked “This is exactly what you would imagine the Latino Living Center to be like.” I was initially off put by that remark, wondering if this was a sentiment shared by a broader white/non-latinx populace of Cornell.

What was that supposed to mean? Were we too stereotypically “Latinx”? After reflecting for a bit while watching the fun continue, I felt an immense amount of pride and ownership over that remark. I simply smiled, looked at my brother and said “Thank you.”

There is no other community like Cornell’s Latinx community. Members of our comunidad hail from all over the country and all over the world. The flags on the walls of the LLC main lounge reflect the distinct nationalities and cultures of the people who congregate there every evening, either to study or to dance or to eat or to sleep. In truth, I didn’t find my place of belonging within this community until my sophomore spring, when I joined the Sabor Latino Dance Ensemble. It was that semester that I made the decision to declare my LSP minor and really

explore my identity as a Latino artistically, academically, and interpersonally.

Perhaps it was because I did not yet have the confidence to spend time in the beautiful community space that is the main lounge. Perhaps it was because I was lacking confidence in the full expression of my identity and felt embarrassed by my lack of dance skills or my broken Spanish. Until that semester, for whatever reason, I was completely uncomfortable with the idea of engaging with the community.

At the core of that insecurity was that feeling of being *“ni de aquí, ni de allá.”*

Many folks may not think so, but it’s a brave step for the culturally conflicted to steer into that messy identity. I chose to do that here and found beauty in that mess. Much to my surprise and relief, I found that the spaces at Cornell that were carved out for me by students that came before me were, by nature, specifically tailored for this identity. Many of the community members I know have passionately related to being positioned as *“ni de aquí, ni de allá”*, and these interactions with my peers and upperclassmen provided me groundbreaking validation that liberated me. Since that very first semester of college I began doing the things I that felt were the “right” steps to take in becoming a “real” latino, including enrolling in a latin dance class and making a fool of myself “salsa dancing” at the Big Red Barn and Agava. It wasn’t until that groundbreaking

semester, however, that I felt comfortable in my culturally mixed identity and spoke that mix into the wonderful existence it has become today.

In gaining that confidence, I have become more at home with this community and view it as my source of strength and perseverance. I have been with this comunidad through beautiful moments of resistance via existence, seen in every night we spend dancing, both in the suites and in the club, and every evening of intense study sessions interwoven with intense study breaks. Spending time with those in this comunidad has become my primary form of self-care, and LSP and the LLC have become a refuge to turn to when I am weak, tired, unfocused, unmotivated, and discouraged from continuing forward. Every single I time I engage with any member of this community, I grow stronger in my cultural identity and in my ability to move forward.

I have leaned on you all during a time of grief after a member of our community, Angel Hierro, unexpectedly passed away. That was a difficult time for every one of us, and for the first time in my life I had to confront grieving the passing of a good friend. For weeks our main lounge became a place to both grieve and heal. We did so by watching movies, petting dogs that came to visit, eating pupusas and food from Pizza Aroma, and having intense snowball fights on the only snow day Cornell has had in twenty-four years.

I leaned on you all in the days following an egregious showing of hatred and bigotry from the Zeta Psi fraternity. For days our GroupMe lit up with messages of support, solidarity, warning, and care as we quickly rallied to defend our home. In the midst of a vile and racist attack that hurt so many of us, I relied on you all as a collective to carry forward our anger and activism and fearlessly advocate for our humanity and dignity. As a senior, I look to those who I have spent one, two, or three years with as my rock to lean on no matter what comes my way, and for that strength I will forever be grateful.

***Esperanza*** There is a bittersweetness that comes with senior year, and the sweetest part of this year so far has been meeting the new first year students. There is a feeling I think every upperclassman can relate to, which is that of seeing new students come into Cornell and being able to identify them by the amount of hope that they have in their eyes. I have already met so many wonderful characters and can share so many stories. There are students who curiously ask what Wegmans is (and call it Weg-MANS), students who come in wondering where the best parties are at, students who barge in through Cornell's gates eager, driven, and energetic. I remember being that first-year student and having upperclassmen look at me, envy in their eyes and bags under them, and call me "the future." It wasn't until now that I truly understood what that was supposed

to mean. To put this in context I will draw upon my favorite thing in the whole wide world: ***theater***.

Anyone who has spent all of five minutes with me knows that I am a playwright and an actor and I take great pride in that line of work. My life's mission is to create theatrical work that represents us, the latinx community living in the United States, and tells the stories that burst from our existences. The first play that I ever wrote was a ten-minute play called *Sangre y Agua*, about a single mother and her two adult children struggling to decide if college is the right decision for their future. The play called for three latinx actors, and coming into the semester I was deeply concerned that there weren't enough actors to fill these parts as there were only two active latinxs in the Cornell theater scene and both of us were already preoccupied with another show. As soon as I arrived on campus, almost as if by divine intervention, I met students like Alejandro Flores, Natalia Hernandez, and Luis Delgadillo. Alongside sophomore Lange Navarro, all four of these students auditioned for my play. Three of them were cast, Alejandro booked another ten-minute play for the same ten-minute play festival, and needless to say I fell in love. I was touched and energized by the sheer amount of enthusiasm these young performers had for the stage, and delighted by how new it was for them. Even more, I was excited for what the future held in store. They

don't yet know if they want to do theater for the rest of their lives and that's completely okay. Nonetheless, I was floored by the power they projected by taking the spotlight on stage, knowing full well that the amount of latinx actors at Cornell had tripled in a matter of months. Outside of theater, there are so many more students in this community who are plugged into different fields of study and extracurriculars, and who have brought me joy and love every single day this year.

I often quip that college has been 99.999% defined by interpersonal and social interactions and rehearsal, with academic work inconveniently squeezed in. I won't remember the horrible parts of this place – the moments where I was cold, hungry, on two hours of sleep and trudging through slippery terrain while openly muttering “this is no way for a human being to live” to myself. (Well maybe I will remember those moments.) To me, I will look back on my time at Cornell and remember this comunidad all of the people that make it up: students pulling all-nighters studying for exams; *rachetxs* who blast music all night long; people who are tired of the music and just want to go to sleep; students who came to this Ivy League institution shooting their shot for that degree. We are community so large and powerful that we cannot be confined to a building or to half of a floor at the top Rockefeller Hall.

To any visitor who happens to pop into the Latino Living Center, or to any other space on campus where two or more of us happen to congregate: yes, this community is *exactly* what you would expect it to be like.