

“We’re Not” : Why Not . . . ?

by Andrea Roman

“*No somos pobres, Andrea. Para que tienes que prestar ropa?*” These were the words I heard continually from my mother as I grew up. My parents, being immigrants from Bolivia during the eighties, experienced a complete culture clash when they arrived in America. One would think that language would be the biggest barriers for immigrants but in my mother’s case, the biggest obstacles were the small cultural differences. Sooner or later, this became a generic formula for strict rules given by my parents: “We’re not _____, Andrea. Why do you have to _____?” Typically, the first blank was filled in by the word “American,” while the second invariably changed. My mother could not understand that certain unacceptable actions in our culture were quite acceptable here in the States.

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I was eleven years old when I first showed up to my house with an article of clothing that was not mine. I had spilled hot chocolate all over my sweater during lunch that day. Luckily, my best friend Emily had an extra zip-up in her locker. As any good friend would do, she offered me her sweater to wear for the rest of the day since it was the middle of December. Logically, I accepted the sweater with gratitude and went on with my day as if nothing strange had happened. Little did I know, when my mother picked me up from school, I would receive the familiar speech about how embarrassing my act had been.

“*De quien es esa chompa?!?*” Those were the very first words that came out of my mother’s mouth. Not a breath, not an intake of air, just these words in a ridiculing tone: “Who’s sweater is that?!” I remained clueless and answered the question, simply, “Emily’s . . .” Immediately after my answer, my mother gave me one of the longest speeches I have ever heard.

“We’re not poor, Andrea. Why do you have to borrow clothes? I buy you clothes. You have sweaters. You wore one this morning!” I could not grasp the magnitude of my mother’s anger or disturbance as I did not see what the big deal was in borrowing a sweater. Kids in my class did it all the time without any problem. They’d borrow a sweater one day and give it back the other. It was as simple as that - but not to my mother. “In Bolivia,” my mother said, “we do not borrow clothes from other people. It is seen as an insult to the family in saying that we cannot afford to take care of our family. It’s a want of an unnecessary thing seeing as you already have your own.” The speech went on and on, usually repeating the same points, until I finally got a word in: “I stained my sweater. I had nothing to wear and was cold. I just don’t see why it’s such a big deal.” Boy, was that a mistake. Talking back to my mother was the worst thing I could have done. The second I got home I got a good deep mouth washing with dishwasher soap as punishment.

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“We’re not American, Andrea. Why do you want a sleepover?” Sleepovers were a big no to my family. In fact, they were unheard of. “You want to sleep where?” If my girlfriends were having a slumber party over the weekend, I knew better than to ask for permission. I learned this through multiple attempts and failed experiences: “*Mami, puedo ir a dormir donde la Caroline este viernes, porfa?*” . . . “*Para que . . .*” Great. Every time I asked to sleep over a friend’s house my mother’s response was always, “Why . . .”

So I would then respond, “Because all my friends are sleeping over and it’s going to be fun and her parents said we could all spend the night.”

“Mmm then no.”

“*Pero porque???*”

“Te dije que no.”

And just like that my attempt to go to a sleepover would end.

“We’re not American, Andrea. We don’t do that in Bolivia. Everyone has their own house for a reason. If you want to go over to Caroline’s your father will gladly take you and pick you up later tonight, but don’t try to convince him to stay over because it just won’t work.”

I suppose my mother letting me go to Caroline’s for some time was better than nothing, yet I always longed for that sleepover. Growing up, I quickly learned that what my mother said was the rule in the household. After several attempts to attend a sleepover, I gave up - not because I didn’t want to sleepover, but because I began to understand why my mother didn’t want me to stay over.

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Sunday, 1:00 PM. My family is just getting out of church and deciding where to go for lunch, when all of a sudden I remember that a six page paper is due in class on Monday. I assume I had a stunned look on my face, because my mother asked what was wrong.

“Oh nothing . . . I just remembered that I had an essay due tomorrow, so I’ll probably have to start working on that rather soon, if that influences our lunch decision”

“You mean to say that you left all your homework due Monday to do today?”

“Yeah . . .”

“Why would you do that? Don’t you know Sunday is family day? A day to worship God and be thankful for family?”

“Yes . . .”

“Ok then so you don’t have any work due tomorrow right?”

“No Mami, I just said I have an essay due.”

“Sundays are not the day to leave homework for. That’s why you get Friday and Saturday. You have two days to complete it; there is no reason why you need Sunday, too.”

Geesh. My mother sure did accumulate rules over the years.

“Ok, Mami, but I really have to do this essay now.”

“Well you should have thought of that sooner, no?”

Silence overtook the car on our way home and I could feel the disappointment on my mother’s face.

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When I first arrived at Boston College on September 2, 2010, I immediately knew that my conservative cultural position would have to become more open-minded. I knew that not everyone had grown up with strict Bolivian parents, as I had. I would not have to lose my cultural identity, however.

As I lay in my new bed for the very first time in an unfamiliar room filled with familiar things, I started to ask myself the same question that my hall mates confronted me with: “Why do you have such a big American flag?” This question constantly arose when I met someone. Why *did* I have an American flag next to my Bolivian one? My mother instilled Bolivian values in me; Bolivian culture was the only thing I had ever been exposed to, and I loved it. I had just bought this American flag a week before move-in day for my room decorations.

Through my mother’s multiple rules, I had become comfortable enough with my identity and culture that showing pride in another country would not take away from my heritage. I now borrow clothes, have sleepovers, and do a ton of work on Sundays, but I have not left behind that little Bolivian girl who received the mouth-washing with dishwasher soap, no matter what flag hangs on my wall.