

In essence, clothing is an extension of who we are, alive, just like us.

While we have dominion over the fabric we wear, there are certain inalienable aspects of our identities we cannot escape, which still rule over us.

Sexual orientation, religion, tradition, race: all these make up who we are. These cause us to hide our true selves out of shame, to finally spread our wings, to fully step into ourselves.

But there are some rulers which prove to hold an iron grip on us.

Culture is something we hold inside of us, something we wear everywhere we go, but it can be just as suffocating as it is beautiful.

It can feel like a prison we are born into or it can feel like a fire, bolstering our pride.



Now, Izaguirre and Acevedo scoff at their younger selves.

The former has found the internet to be a source of empowerment to play with Mexican fashion from the late 80s and 90s, embracing the Chola stereotype and pulling inspiration from old telenovelas. She's found "freedom and comfortability" being surrounded by Latines in San Marcos, which allows her the opportunity to incorporate cultural elements into her style.

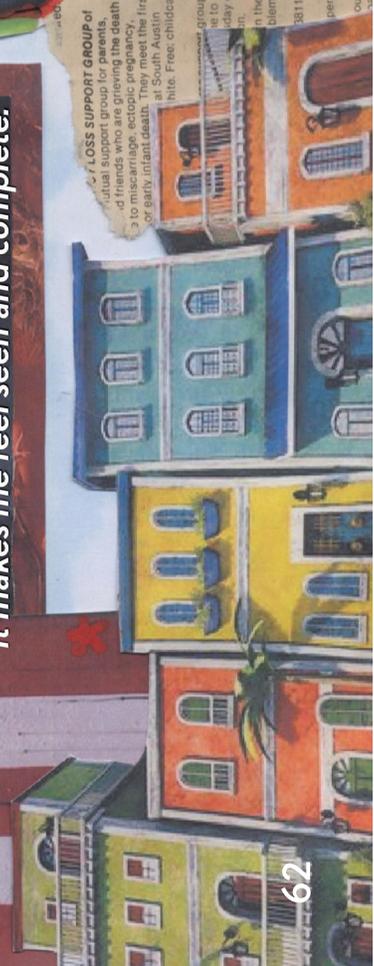
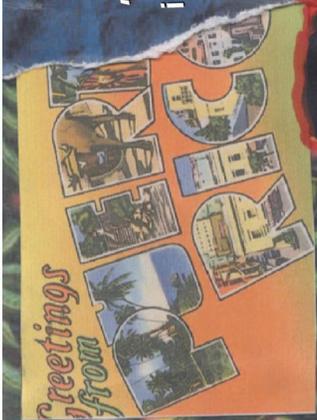
Wearing cultural dress, whether formal or modern adaptation, makes Izaguirre feel proud. "Especially having parents who are immigrants, it makes me feel like I am representing all of their hard work."



To Acevedo,
cultural dress
affirms her identity.

"It makes me feel seen and complete."

"You always felt
invisible, and you
felt like you were
never going to be
seen, but
dressing in the
same styles as
your parents or
just your
community,
you finally feel
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yourself."



While Johnny Dao's Vietnamese culture brings him pride, it also constrains his willingness to experiment with dress.



He has even worn it to dinners with the President of Texas State University and on the field as a candidate for Homecoming King. However, Dao said the áo dài (pronounced ow yai) is one of the only cultural garments he owns.

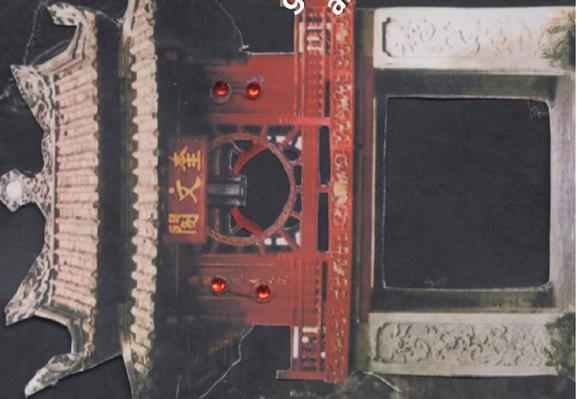
"I wear my Áo Dài any chance I can get," Doa said when asked how he feels in traditional Vietnamese clothing. "It gives me the chance to educate others."

However, Dao said Vietnamese culture strictly enforces gender norms, hindering him from exploring his femininity.



Although he feels comfortable presenting his masculinity,

he has wondered what it would be like to fully shatter this wall between genders into a spectrum, able to be toyed with.



Dao's preppy clothing choices come from his mother, born and raised with etiquette training which she also passed down.



Izaguirre, Acevedo and Dao are all proud of their culture. They use clothing to commemorate this part of their identity and use it as a guidepost for their personal styles, to bring their pride wherever they go.

Their navigation of culture showcases a powerful lesson:

We cannot escape our culture, but clothing helps us find our proper place when we do not quite fit into the box it constructs for us.

Lewk encourages all the nonconformers to do the same. Carve out your place in your culture. Do not sacrifice any part of yourself. Clothing is the perfect avenue to express your culture on your terms.

Own it. Engulf yourself in it.