PLACAS

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“Legally, we are Banda’s.”

The foundation of my family was built on a false identity. My great-grandfather immigrated to the United States from Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, illiterate, but in search for a fulfilled life for what would become a family. My great-grandfather was raised by his step-father, last name *Banda.* He lived his life with an unknown disconnection with his biological father*,* the birth of my grandmother was stamped with the legal name, Banda. The fourteenth year of her life, her father discovered his biological name was Ortega. Throughout his life, he was residing in a foreign country, pining for an identity in America, his own place that would become the roots for the birth of my grandmother, when he learned that the man that he had become was absent of a father and son connection. This yearn for identity and a proud existence led him to search for his relationship with his biological family, the *Ortega’s*.

“Ortega’s in blood.”

There is a continuous and ever-changing battle between pride in one’s ethnic identity and coping with the establishment of taking over new identity in America. New beginnings, but how can the remembrance of one’s past merge with the future? The last name of a family connects many members of an ancestral history, then transforms into a foundation for the continuation of one’s heritage. The last name is the label of a culture, an origin, America is abundant with the mix, the blend of all of these ingredients. The “melting pot”[[1]](#footnote-1) was an American term coined in 1908, by playwright, Israel Zangwill, a metaphor for a society where different types of people,

different races, different religious beliefs and different cultures could harmonize in one setting. Each group of peoples brings a heritage and cultural pride. Each ingredient of this “melting pot” has taken control of their background and manifested an identity.

The nameplate reads “K”, encrusted with a single diamond, it is oversized on the wrist.

Each gold link chained together is the basic construction of united cultures, the richness of Latin communities in America and the history of complex mother-daughter relationships.

The bracelet is motherhood.

The blackletter form “K”, adorned in gold, customized by my grandmother twenty-five years ago, it was a gift, a marking of my mother’s transition from a child to a woman, her fifteenth anniversary of life, a gift that symbolizes her quincenera, the religious and spiritual transition of a girl becoming a woman.

“K” for Katherine Juanita Hernandez, this piece will continue to live with a strong connection to a Mexican culture of tradition. “K” to perform as pride of her identity as a proud Mexican-American woman.

The materiality of the links wrapped around a body, gold. Gold is the realization of preciousness and value, which is imbued on the cost of gold. In Catholicism, there is a direct connection between gold and the presence of God. The nameplate has layers of manifestations with every physical attribute, as it is rooted in pride in ethnicity, religion and origin.

One of the most distinct characteristics of a nameplate piece is the traditional Gothic script that meets in the middle of the gold links. The plate that reads the name, resting on a chest.

Blackletter font, birthed in Europe near the end of the twelfth century, traveled to the New World and formed a strong presence in Mexico, the typeface has evolved into a signage of

contemporary Mexican culture, this is depicted in Christina Paolio’s, “Mexican Blackletter”[[2]](#footnote-2), which provides photographs of Mexico City’s streets abundant with Gothic print.

This contemporary design has reflected Mexico’s relationship with historical Spain and has a strong connection to Christianity within Mexican culture. The continuance of this letter application represents the secular ideas of everyday tasks and signs seen on the streets of Mexico City, the complexity of the stroke and the anatomical contrasts of the shapes embody the importance to these crafts and livelihoods that are advertised.

In an interview with François Chastanet, “an architect, graphic designer, typographer and photographer from France, has spent much of his time documenting graffiti and its relationship to architecture,” there is a dissection of *Cholo* writing, a typographic language that, “originally constitutes the vernacular hand style created by the Mexican gangs in Los Angeles as far back as the 1940s: a neglected phenomenon that has a specific place in the history and development of the urban graffiti of the Western world, it is probably the oldest form of the “graffiti of names” in the 20th century, with its own aesthetic, evident long before the explosion in the early 1970s in New York. Cholo writing or *placas* can be seen as cousins of the baroque gothic calligraphies typical of Mexico, as a genuine expression of a border culture between Mexico and the United States.”[[3]](#footnote-3) From the bridging of two nations’ cultures, manifested a way of communicating these two specific identities.

The permanence of graffiti and branding property embodies honor of Mexican culture in America, the nameplate has become an embodiment of carrying one’s ancestral history and ethnic background, but in a format that is not “offensive” and specific to each individual.

With Mexico’s rich and visceral use of Blackletter, the nameplate only becomes heavier with symbolism and patriotism among the marrying of two countries. From a contemporary culture of tradition in Latin American cultures, “ghetto” culture, the nameplate accessory has

since become appropriated to a fashion trend, but the metal worn around a neck or wrapped around a wrist adorned with blackletter form, customized design communicates one’s identity.

Gloria Anzaldua explores definitive cultural activities and aesthetics of Latin America, the book explores the impacts of Latin culture by surfacing appropriation of traditions and culture in, “Light in the Dark: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality”[[4]](#footnote-4).

From a symbol weaved within Latin tradition and aesthetics this article has globalized onto the necks of any culture in the world. There is a shift in ownership and the popularization of this article has diverged from a traditional piece to a trend. In Collier Meyerson’s article for Splinter News, she exclaims the fashion trend that has become of a jewelry piece that was once related to belonging of the “ghetto” community of minorities.[[5]](#footnote-5) The nameplate trend derived from around the neck of HBO’s *Sex in the City’s,* Carrie Bradshaw, played by Sarah Jessica Parker. The character is a Caucasian female that has no connection to the necklace’s origin.

Meyerson connects the direct relationship to minority aesthetics and appropriation, which have bridged the old and the ever-changing industry of fashion and trend. With the spread and appropriation of a culture, there is a loss in ownership in this melting pot of a country.

Meyerson states, “For most black and brown girls, nameplates meant growing up… The girls I knew had names that were long and original and hard for some people to pronounce—the names you don't see on keychains in gift shops. So, getting gold jewelry at the mall with your proud American, Latinx, West Indian, African name was an insistence on gaudiness and the

inviolability of our names.”[[6]](#footnote-6), the commercialization of Carrie Bradshaw’s necklace had taken away this proud cultural aspect that was owned by people of color.

This piece of jewelry was once a way to perform identity in America, which can sometimes be lost when exploring ways to express your ethnicity while maintaining patriotism in America.

Although the nameplate, bridged with the idea of a physical and wearable representation of identity and pride holds heavy significance within Latina culture, the Middle-age Europeans depended on garments and accessories to perform an identity. Through knight-ware, hat shapes and garment color people of established communities could publicly identify status and surname. Ranks of royal court were distinguished by headdresses, gold belts and embroidery. The use of language, the surname, was the most concrete communication of one’s occupation, which subjected one’s socioeconomic status. Within this time period, there was a major shift of purpose for a brooch, prior to the middle ages, a brooch was used for the fastening of garments, typically worn on the breast of the fabrics, there was a cultural shift, a brooch had now become an accessory for vanity, memorial, adorned for beauty, the brooch had become “Romanized”.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Throughout history and continuously evolving, the wearing of specific garments and extensions of a body can communicate one’s morals and values, what one consumer spends copious amounts of money establishes status while acting as a performance, because what the outsiders see is limited to what he or she chooses to wear.

Roland Barthes dissects fashion culture and its impact on politics and societal norms in “The Language of Fashion”, he states, “It seems to be extremely useful, by way of an analogy to clothing, to identify an institutional, fundamentally social, reality, which, independent of the individual, is like the systematic, normative reserve from which the individual draws their own clothing,”, the decisions of who to wear, what to wear and how to wear are all founded on identity and how one wants to be perceived in the world. So, with the fast fashion and the dynamic forecasts of trends in this industry, the nameplate accessory has just become a trend, the popularity of this object is just that, an object.

The moment Carrie Bradshaw was played on screen across America, the necklace became a fad and all cultural ownership was wiped from the Latinas, African Americans, West Indian communities of this melting pot. Following the extensive and explosive trend, celebrities, *not* of color gained new credits and ownership of something that never belonged to this group primitively.

If America is a melting pot of diverse cultures and peoples, if this country is depicted as the sanctuary for every person of color, there must be a responsibility to unquestionably gift ownership where ownership belongs. With the neglect to respect cultural richness, there is no way to maintain America’s goal to become and marriage between many cultures and ethnicities, the individuality of each culture is appropriated and lost in trends and fad, there is a disregard of history and credit to the people that have introduced these new ideas.

The modern Mexican tradition amongst mothers and their daughters has been erased because of the desensitizing of cultural awareness. As the introduction of new cultural activities and aesthetics are brought to the surface of the Land of the Free, it is impertinent to be aware of the origin of these ideas and continue to marry identities, cultures, religions and communities.

As I continue to wear the gold links joined by the letter, “K”, I am reminded of my role as a Mexican American in this melting pot.

1. Isreal Zangwill, *The Melting Pot* (New York: The Macmillan Company) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. # Christina Paoli. *Mexican Blackletter* (New York: Mark Batty, 2007)

   [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. # François Chastanet, interview by Steven Heller, *AIGA: Marking in L.A.: An Interview with François Chastanet*, AIGA, November 18, 2009

   [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Gloria Anzaldua, *Light in the Dark: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* (Durham: Duke University, 2015) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Collier Meyerson, “[Nameplate necklaces: This shit is for us](https://splinternews.com/nameplate-necklaces-this-shit-is-for-us-1793863356).” Splinter News.

   November 11, 2016. https://splinternews.com/nameplate-necklaces-this-shit-is-for-us-1793863356 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Roland Barthes*, The Language of Fashion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), page 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Martin, T. F. and R. Weech. *Dress and Society Contributions from Archaeology.* (Oxford:Oxbow Books, 2017) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)