

## Opinion: 'Sleeping giant,' Latino voters, awakened by social media

By Marcela Davison Aviles Special to the Mercury News San Jose Mercury News

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With the Inauguration days away, and with it the opportunity to hear the nation's first Gay Latino Inaugural Poet, it's a good time to reflect on our American identities.

In 2012, some commentators observe, the "Sleeping Giant" that is the Latino voter awoke from its 150 year nap and, once awakened to the fact that the Mexican-American war was over, promptly re-elected Barack Obama.

Next, El Gigante got the Kennedy Center to admit its exclusion of Latinos in selecting honorees, threw a chancleta at two college sororities for stereotyping Mexicans at social events and kept the country far from the fiscal cliff with over a trillion dollars in consumer spending.

El Gigante Dormido is now El Gigante Despierto. Having "awakened" from our long slumber, and learned that Cinco de Mayo is a national holiday and salsa the national condiment, we can learn the new official language: HTML.

Hey baby -- que pasó?

Media social is what happened. Modern ideas about heritage are more and more informed by a virtual discourse, with narrative threads weaving a complex tapestry of identity and ethnic pride.

Back in the day, identity was often defined by labels. I was once asked if I was a wetback. Later, as an executive director in Latino philanthropy, I reviewed the usage of terms such as "Latino," "Hispanic," "Mexican-American" and "Chicano" to try to answer the question: Who are we? Today, the discourse on social media asks that question daily.

So — is social media the Great Illuminator? And is that new sunshine affecting how individuals behave? To answer this question I turned to my local social media expert and Latina Princess — my daughter, Alejandra. Here is her response:

"As a daughter of the digital age and one fortunate enough to attend schools where diversity and tolerance were given the same priority as academic success, I was never forced to defend my heritage. I've never been called a wetback. I've never been victimized. I always felt like I belonged.

"I have, however, harbored an internal conflict about how I personally identify with my ethnicity, and I feel this has shaped how others regard me.

"Growing up, I felt the need to choose some sort of standardized understanding of race, whether checking a box for school and job applications or answering questions about the letter "j" in my first name.

"The Internet is a more forgiving frontier. My online footprint is an organic sense of identity that's integral to my day to day lifestyle and transparent to friends, family and the public. But I am the curator of my identity. I choose how and when to celebrate my Latino/Hispanic roots depending on what articles, jokes and musings I share. There are millions like me, changing the face of identity daily, hourly, constantly.

"The internet plays a substantial role in how people self-identify. A web presence solicits users to seriously

consider their self-image. The Internet also discloses how this presence is received, and it provokes communities to defend themselves in the face of misunderstanding. Dialogue ensues. Communities engage.

"How do I fit into a greater social fabric? 'Mexican,' 'Latina,' 'Chicana' and 'Hispanic' are terms charged with meaning. Taken together they form a consumer market and voting bloc. They can also be confusing. If I have relatives that are both Spanish and Mexican, why should I have to prioritize one heritage over another?"

"Thankfully, the language of the Internet and the social media platforms I use don't force me to. My name is Alejandra with a 'j'. I celebrate quien soy: myself."

Marcela Davison Aviles is executive producer of VivaFest, the annual Mexican heritage and mariachi festival in San Jose. Her daughter, Alejandra Dean, is a senior at Harvard University. They wrote this for this newspaper.