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Too Much of Everything and Not Enough

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From my point of view, I never really belonged anywhere. I believed that definitive and all-encompassing labels, when applied to individuals, were degrading in their limitations and generalizations of the uniqueness of lived experience. I was all at once too much and yet somehow never enough.

I had a crisis of identity, which led to a struggle to understand who I was and how this was reflected in the person others perceived, assumed, and expected me to be. Constant nagging feelings of “not belonging” were followed by discomfort, doubt, shame, anger, and ultimately, defeat. I hung my head low and avoided meeting anyone’s gaze for fear of being questioned and outed. How could I respond to confrontation when even I had no answers? Unable to address the anxiety this caused me, I deceived myself into denial and continued hoping for the best. I wanted to believe that it would get better—eventually. But by not talking about it and not knowing where to start nor whom to confide in, I was actually spiraled into further confusion. It wasn’t until I arrived at LMU that I began to understand—I was not a singular case.

On a Wednesday afternoon in mid-May of 1994, I became the first and only one of my mom’s children to be born in the United States. This is a fact she has never let me forget, for it was she who first introduced the word “privilege” into my vocabulary. My half-siblings were born and raised in Mexico, and have established families of their own. Their lives were and continue to be shaped by a reality far different than mine—I am reminded to be grateful. For the past twenty-three years, my mom has spoken to them on the phone and seen photos of them, but has not been able to hug them or even stand before them. She missed out on them growing up and has since then also missed the birth of her first three grandchildren. My mom was not there when her own mom passed away. I had never seen her cry so much.

For my entire childhood, I felt like I had a secret. And since it wasn’t my own, I carried a bigger burden to ensure at all costs that nobody would find out about it. I was afraid to admit that my mother and father were both undocumented immigrants living and working in the United States. I was afraid that a slip of the tongue would lead to our separation and it would all be my fault. The law does not treat us equally and goes so far as to call them “illegal.” Their hard labor, sacrifice, and tax-paying contributions seem to mean nothing because they lack a seal of approval. As a first-generation U.S. American, citizenship rights were automatically bestowed to me upon my birth, through no merit of my own. Before the eyes of the law, I am an “American”—whatever that means—but somehow my parents are not. How in the hell am I supposed to feel like I belong here when my parents are told that they do not?

There is a great sense of disparity between my birthplace and the place of my cultural origins. Although I was born in the United States, *mis raices estan en Mexico*, my roots are deeply grounded in Mexico. If I were to chronicle my life,

that is where my story would have to begin, for it is where my mother and father were born and our foremothers and forefathers before them. Intentionally or not, the way in which my mother educated me was founded on principles based on the heritage of our ancestors. The traditions, beliefs, and values I practice in my life (and will pass on to my own children) are tied to Mexico; culture is a key element in parenting and child-rearing. Growing up, Aesop's fables and Disney fairytales were replaced by the *cuentos y dichos* that *un padesito* (an elderly priest) had once told my grandmother Tomasa when she was young. In turn, she had passed those stories on to my mother who then passed them on to me—an oral inheritance early received. Year after year, Santa Claus came and went, but everyone knew that the real players during the holidays were *Los Reyes Magos y el Niño Dios*. And when I came down with a sickness, my mother was able to whip up a herbal home remedy—*un remedio casero*—that proved to be more effective than prescription drugs. *Mis raíces están en México*, but not just in the way that mother raised me. Mexico is in the traceable indigeneity of my face, the earth complexion of my skin and, thanks to my mother's unbreakable faith, you can even hear it in my name.

I consider Mexico to be the birthplace of my soul even though I myself was not born on Mexican soil. The time I first stepped foot in the country, I remember being overcome by a wave of inexplicable homesickness and nostalgia that left my heart feeling heavy and numb all at once. My subconscious seemed to recognize this as a familiar place from which I had been away for far too long. It wasn't just because the people looked like me or spoke my native tongue colloquially on the streets—there was something beyond the superficial that tugged at my heartstrings. In the rugged terrain of the land, in the rolling hills spotted with small, humble homes, and in the colorful spirit of the communities, I was able to see my mother reflected.

I grew up terribly confused. I knew that I was Mexican (yet not Mexican enough), but I was continually reminded that I was American (yet not American enough). This dynamic of two cultures blurred any clear sense of identity I could associate myself with. *Ni de aquí*, because of my brown culture and upbringing, *y ni de allá*, because I was born in the United States and undeniably shaped by American influences. I'm therefore a displaced child from neither here nor there—I don't belong anywhere—and growing up that was not something I could articulate, for fear and confusion. I didn't know that this is actually how many first-generation U.S.-born children feel.

To further add to this identity crisis, I was raised in San Gabriel, CA. Named after the Mission San Gabriel Archangel founded by the missionary priest Junipero Serra, the city is the historical birthplace of the Los Angeles region. Although cultural diversity has always been significant, recent decades have reflected a major shift in racial demographics dominated by a large Asian and

Asian-American presence. Growing up, the majority of my closest friends and classmates reflected this changing face of the city. In many cases, I would be the only Latina/o in my classes of 30+ students. I saw it and everyone else did too—I was the only brown “not-quite Mexican, not-quite American” kid in the room. It came to the point that in order to survive the academic rigor and social environment of my classes I had to negotiate my identities. Speaking Spanish and bringing up the Mexican influences in my life separated me from a group of peers that were not familiar with these practices, traditions, and beliefs, and so I slowly began to withdraw from that part of myself. Instead, I sought to learn more about the Asian and Asian-American (primarily Chinese) culture. I began adopting customs, interests, and mannerisms that were undoubtedly founded on their culture. In eighth grade, I enrolled in a Chinese language class and was enthralled by the notion of counting to ten in Mandarin, writing words and sentences in pinyin and characters, and being able to speak simple phrases. But despite my efforts, I would never be Chinese enough either.

In every situation, I felt like I didn’t belong. Not Mexican or Latina enough, not American enough, not Asian enough—too much of everything and never enough.

My personal struggle with language is a good indicator of the identity conflict I experienced and that has since marked me. Spanish was my first language because my immigrant parents, wanting to be able to communicate with their daughter, taught me that. I have come to be grateful for their decision and now actually have a preference for Spanish because of its intensity. From experience, I can tell you that the most aggressive arguments are fought and the most passionate love is felt in Spanish. At the age of three, I was first exposed to English at the local community center’s preschool program my mom enrolled me in. It was there that I learned about the 26 character alphabet, one which excluded *piñatas*, *piña coladas*, *niñas* and *niños* – anything with ñ (pronounced *enye*) because apparently, it was not a letter in the English language. Absurd! Like with my parents, the United States seemed to have a hard time recognizing the legitimacy of this letter and all words containing it. But even during that phase of my life, Spanish was the first language for a lot of the other kids at this preschool, so we continually switched between English and Spanish. It was the epitome of a cultural and linguistic fusion, where two worlds met and collided to shape our realities. We may have only been three or four, but they too understood what it meant to not have a space to belong, so we created one in the playground. We spoke Spanglish.

However, as I began to be immersed in a formal public system, I started to see Spanish as a complete deficit. Because English was not my first language, there were remnants of an accent whenever I would try to pronounce certain words. In elementary school, I was made fun of because people couldn’t tell when

I was referring to the color “yellow” and when I wanted to talk about the dessert food “jello.” I was deeply embarrassed and refrained from speaking my native language at school. I didn’t feel a need to either, because the curriculum was solely based in English anyways. It became ingrained in my mind that this was the education that would get me into a good college and eventually a good life. School did not offer me a place to value my Mexican culture and everything that I had learned from my mother. I was forced to draw a clear divide between my home “self” (affiliated with Mexico) and my school “self” (affiliated with the U.S.) At home I was “Lupita,” but at school I was always “Guadalupe” or “Guada” because my name was too long and inconvenient to say. These divides began to form a border within myself, and I would have to make the trek across and back again every single day. Can you see how this could be confusing?

I became ashamed of expressing my own first-generation Mexican heritage, especially in the classroom. I was taking AP and Honors classes and rarely would I see another brown student. Was I even supposed to be there? Maybe brown students weren’t supposed to be taking these classes. Where were the brown kids? To be successful and go to college, maybe I needed to shed my Mexican self. Would that include the experience of my own parents? How could that even be possible?

But then in 11th grade, my teacher Mr. Facher gave me the space to find myself. Having been assigned to read *Bless Me, Ultima*, an important piece of Chicana/o literature, I found that I had a lot to say because of my experiences growing up. In many instances, I was teaching the class about the language, customs, and traditions that informed the text. “College me” would say that the curriculum Mr. Facher emphasized was counterhegemonic and allowed me to resist the social structures that told me my experience with culture didn’t matter. “College me” would have used theory to express how badass that class actually was. But “college me” is armed with way more tools and weapons than I was in high school. Meeting so many first-generation American and first-generation college students at LMU, who are proud of the complex mosaic of cultures that make up their identity, has given my strength. I have learned to come to terms with my complexities, for that is what makes me unique. But in high school, “11th grade me” simply appreciated that I was given a space to belong. I was given a space where I could speak Spanish, where I could talk about my childhood and where I could talk about my mom. Mr. Facher allowed me to identify with the text and make it relevant to me, the only first-generation Mexican-American, first generation college-bound student in that class. Up to that point, I didn’t know that could be possible.

Identity, I have learned, shouldn’t be simple. There is no simple way of describing a person’s experiences without undermining their struggles and triumphs along the way. Being at LMU, I have come to terms with the fact that I

am Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicana, first-generation American, daughter of undocumented immigrants, a first-generation college student, a native of San Gabriel and so much more. I am all that and more—and I am proud.