

COFFEE WITH CREAM: GROWING UP BIRACIAL WITH LATINA AND AMERICAN IDENTITIES

Sofia Deatherage
Creighton University

When Mom told me I should fill out “Hispanic” on those standardized test sheets, I did as I was told. Around 4th grade I started questioning if I could *really* do that though. I would ask her, “Mom, are you sure I’m allowed to fill that in? Isn’t that kind of cheating? *María Sofía*,” she’d respond, using my full name to emphasize her seriousness, “You *are* Hispanic. So you fill out Hispanic.” “I’m *half* Hispanic,” I’d mutter, unable to hide my skepticism of her claim. “You came out of a Mexican womb, sweetie, you’re a full Mexican. *No digas esas tonterías*. Don’t say foolish things like that.”

Growing up, I’d often question my cultural identity in this way. My “halfness” confused me. What roles did my white and Mexican cultures play in my life? This autoethnographic project explores a few of my life experiences that illustrate my identity crisis as half-Latina and half-White. Young describes the “doubleness” of two emerging “voices” that often ping-pong back and forth in the minds of those who identify as biracial.¹ Those caught in the middle of this conflict may choose to respond differently to the question of self-identification. My perspective of identity, though different from others, can hopefully illuminate the internal struggles of those with conflicting cultural or racial identities and their interactions with the rest of their community. Through my own experiences, I hope to

¹ Stephanie L. Young, "Half and Half: An (Auto)ethnography of Hybrid Identities in a Korean American Mother-Daughter Relationship." *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 2, no. 2 (2002): 141.

comfort and connect to other biracial people who feel similarly conflicted in their daily lives. I offer a new perspective to those who hold a singular identity or feel secure in their identity.

This essay narratively retells personal stories from my life that capture my experience as a biracial young adult. I separated this work into three main sections that depict the conflict, struggle, and resolution throughout my life regarding my identity in a non-chronological sequence of stories. At the end of the piece I use literature to connect my own stories to the overarching experience of biracial identity in the hopes of connecting with others who share this experience.

Coffee with Cream

Bitter and brown
It goes down
The throat with difficulty

Stains the mouth
With a bold residue
An unwanted aftertaste

Not like cream
Sweet and sensational
So it would seem

Refreshing, familiar
A preferred taste
So fair

An easy flavor
Stirred up by
A passionate punch

I look at myself
A blend of *bitter* and *sweet* is what I see
Not brown
Not white
My coffee with cream.

-Sofia Deatherage, 2016

Legado Latino

This is it, I think to myself. This is where I start over. This is where I'll get back on track, where I'll find what I've been looking for. THIS HAS TO BE IT.

This is the mantra I chant in my head as I shuffle to the other side of the empty, echoey hallway 15 minutes after school ended. My backpack, ready to burst like the fattened sacrificial calf from the PowerPoint presentation in my Comparative Religions class that day, was starting to leave indentations in my shoulders. Every step I take is another burst of energy expended from carrying my loaded backpack, lead block of a saxophone case, and empty yet cumbersome lunchbox to the other side of campus to reach my final destination. My breath shallow, my mind racing about what will happen when I finally get there. The journey feels longer and more arduous than usual. The weight of my baggage bears down on my weak freshman frame that cannot andle another agonizing step.

At last, I arrive with 10 minutes to spare, as is freshman custom. Wiping the sweat from my forehead I take a deep breath and mentally prepare myself. I hesitantly peek into the room selected to host the first of many Legado Latino meetings. Having not taken a Spanish language class yet, the room feels foreign. The colorful map of Mexico displayed on the far wall, the sombrero perched on the back desk, the Spanish alphabet advocating for the existence of "ñ" as a letter, and the massive "BIENVENIDOS" scrawled on the board in fancy letters send a cool wave of relief and familiarity over my weary self. A stout, wise looking woman with rhinestone glasses and an earthy, flowy skirt sits at her desk in the back corner. Her eyes are fixed on the handwriting she has to decipher from that day's Spanish quiz.

"*Hola,*" I manage to croak out, shifting into my Spanish accent after a long day of English speaking.

"*Ah, bienvenida! Qué tal? Tu eres un freshman?*" It takes me a few seconds to adjust but my brain catches up to the language that my mouth is trying to speak.

"*Hola Señora! Me llamo Sofia, si, soy un freshman. ¿Éste es Legado Latino?*" I ask, knowing full well this is the right room for Legado

Latino, yet asking anyways because I'm such a paranoid little freshman.

"¡Sí sí! Soy Señora, mucho gusto! ¡Siéntate, agárrate un pedazo de pan de dulce! ¡Vamos a empezar muy pronto!" Upon her suggestion I look across the room to the pile of *pan de dulce*, traditional sweet Mexican bread with sugar, and without a second thought grab a piece, already feeling more at home. It's probably no surprise that I settle myself in the back of the room, releasing the weight of my \$15,000 education from my shoulders as I sling it off my back and onto the floor. I plop down, take a deep breath, and tear into the bread. The crumbly powder from the Pepto-pink sugar sprinkles all over the desk. When it vanishes and I am left with grainy fingers, I begin to get up to grab another, when a girl in a high ponytail and a tall boy in a soccer jersey saunter in. They're both dark-haired, dark-skinned, dark-eyed. Two of the first Mexicans I've met so far at my high school.

"Hey, I'm Maya, this is Andrés. We're the club leaders, it's good to have you here!" She exclaims in a peppy voice. Andres gives a slight head nod.

I thank them from my little corner and go back to contemplating whether or not I should grab another piece of bread. Just then a swarm of Latinos fills the room with quick-paced Spanish chatter and brown bodies. I decide to stay right where I am. Why do I suddenly feel so small? I never feel quite this minuscule in a room full of English speakers, I'd grown so accustomed to it.

Does everyone here speak Spanish? Are the meetings in Spanish? Will I be able to keep up? What if I embarrass myself if I try to communicate in Spanish?

Within a few Mexican-minutes the bread disappears. The front rows become occupied with lively Latino students, and Carmen starts waving animatedly to get everyone's attention.

"Okay guys, welcome to the first Legado Latino meeting!" Whoops and shouts ensue.

"We're going to go over some of the events we want to do this year. Starting with a Mexican Independence Day celebration and *Día de los Muertos* in October. . ."

As she speaks side conversations bubble among the other members. Friend groups already seem to exist within the realm of this space I had thought would've been fair game. Conversations in Spanish and English whirl around in my mind. Phrases from both

languages pound against my head as my brain tries to decipher the barrage of words rushing past me. The tightness in my shoulders returns, pushing down on my back like a second backpack I cannot remove. What's happening?

I take a few deep breaths, trying to ease the throbbing in my head and the rapid beating of my heart rate. A few sips of water later and I can tolerate the mayhem inside my mind. I focus on what Carmen says, trying to get myself excited for decorating the school for *Día de los Muertos*, organizing the annual Crusader Cup soccer tournament, and the service we plan to do. I want to give this a chance. I have to give it a chance. *It's okay*, I dictate to myself in my own personal pep-talk, *it's the first day. It may seem overwhelming now but soon I'll be a part of this community too. I'll have Latino friends who I can talk about Enrique Iglesias and arroz con leche and visiting Mexico.* I want so badly to be accepted in this room. With these people. For them to look at me and think, *she's one of us. She is Latina too.*

"*Cállate, cabrón,*" I hear from a few seats next to me. My eyes widen a bit, that is definitely a word I wouldn't call someone so lightly. I strain to hear the rest of their conversation.

"Yeah, she's such a *gringa*, white trash. Have you heard her try speaking Spanish in class? It's embarrassing. Like, *puta*, just stop!" This remark elicits resounding laughter from the people around her, along with the chantings of "*puta*" and "*gringa*," both fairly vulgar terms. I can't laugh at this, my stomach feels weird. *Should this be funny to me?* I tune out of their conversation when another catches my attention.

"Yeah, this school's just so frickin white, it's sad really how many dumb white kids there are. We just gotta stick together." I look down at my desk. *Am I one of those "dumb white kids,"* I contemplate, *or should I "stick together" with them?* There are definitely a lot of white kids at our high school, there's no questioning that. Most of my friends here are white, I only have one friend who's full Latina, and one who's also half. Is it really wrong that I hang out with so many "dumb white kids?"

Am I betraying the limited Latina community that exists here? Will having more Hispanic friends make me more Hispanic?

Losing myself in my thoughts for the rest of the meeting, I ignore the rest of the conversations around me. I leave the room that day with a whole new load on my mind. Wondering how I will connect

with the other members, how I can appear “more Latina” to people. Worried that if I don’t, I will never find that place where I can express my culture. I want to give the club a chance, but I think more than anything I want to give myself a chance.

* * *

It’s the week before *Día de los Muertos*, Day of the Dead, and we’re making decorations to put up around the school. More specifically, we’re sculpting skulls out of modeling clay and coloring them. I brought my friend Drew with me this time to keep me company. I know better by now that I won’t be very social anyways. We each grab a pinch of clay along with some markers and take our seats in the back of the classroom.

“Okay hold still, I’m using your head as a model,” I say, as I hold the lump of clay up to his head, closing one eye for focus.

“I’m warning you, it’s kind of oblong. No promises it’ll turn out right.”

I laugh and begin to shape my clay, opting to use the example skulls as a reference instead of his “oblong” head.

As we work, a group of girls, all of them white, poke their heads in to see what we’re doing. They step inside to get a closer look.

“What’s this?” asks one of the girls, a strange look on her face as she points to one of the clay skulls.

“It’s for the Day of the Dead,” explains Maya. “They’re skulls. We’re going to decorate the school with them. Do you want to join us?”

The girls look at each other with wondering looks. “Is it ok for us to?” I hear on girl say under her breath to the girl next to her. “I’m not sure,” says another. “It might just be *their* thing,” she replies. At this point a few of the other club members perk up, clearly listing in.

“No thank you,” says one of the girls in a cheery voice, “but thanks anyways!” They walk off, giggling to themselves as they leave.

“Basic white girls,” I hear a girl next to me say. She rolls her eyes in annoyance.

“See, this is why we have this space,” says a boy. “To get away from the white *putas* around here. They’re so clueless.”

I look over at Drew, unsure as to what to say. He has a confused look on his face, but turns to me and says, “I guess I’m safe since I’m Asian then,” and continues to shape his skull.

* * *

I gave it a chance. I sat through the meetings, I did service with the group, and I tried to start conversations whenever I could. I wish I could say I found what I was looking for, but I just couldn't connect with anybody. I can't speak Spanish as well or as fast. I don't come from a family of two Hispanic parents. I don't know enough of the slang. I don't listen to enough Hispanic artists. I just didn't feel "Latina enough" to make any sort of meaningful connection with the members of this club who were strong in their Hispanic identities. To be honest, I felt like I was acting like someone else. I was holding myself back from being the bubbly, social, vibrant person I usually am. As the days, weeks, months passed, I found myself less and less motivated to rush over to the club every other Thursday after school. By my sophomore year I could no longer call myself a regular attendee of Legado Latino. I was welcomed, encouraged, and given chances, but I just didn't feel like I belonged there. He thought of my "half-ness" reminded me that I wasn't like the other club members. Though I couldn't help my ethnicity, I still blamed myself for being unable to identify with my Hispanic peers. In a sense, I felt like a disappointment. A burden being pulled along while everyone else was miles ahead of me. Sometimes I wish it had worked out for me, maybe I really would have felt more immersed in my Mexican culture. But at the same time, I found other ways to satiate my thirst for cultural acceptance of myself. Not every experience will be what I want, but that doesn't mean I don't belong.

Mexico

Sobre Mesa

Muévete, tenemos que poner la mesa

She rushes past me with a tray full of *carne*

Corre, corre, necesito una toalla

Petite caramel people leap over a puddle of spilled water

Dame una cuchara, pruébate esta salsa

A dozen ears of corn are rubbed down in *chile*

Siéntense todos, vamos a rezar

Nine hungry *frijoles* cram around a table

Come más ensalada, hay suficiente para todos

Lively chatter commences as brown hands fly

Sirve más arroz a tú tía, pásame la sal
The banter and feast continue late into the breezy night
Date cuenta como tú familia es una bendición.
-Sofía Deatherage, 2018

April 2018

“Y usted qué quiere, Señorita?” It took me a second to adjust my ears to comprehend what the man was saying to me. After a quick switch flipped in my brain, I responded:

“Tres tacos al pastor con todo y horchata, gracias.” It was a little clumsily slurred, but my Mexican accent still came through enough to pass for a native; not as American who had just landed at the Mexican airport an hour earlier.

My uncle, *Tío Nacho*, had picked me and my parents up and took us to this local place known for its *tacos al pastor*, tacos with very tender, slow roasted pork. I look up to watch the *fútbol* game playing on the tv screen above the kitchen door. I’m not one to find much interest in watching sports, but I like hearing the crowd chant so animatedly and listening along to the sports commentators. I try to can pick up words or phrases. Looking at the menus and signs on the walls, I scarcely see any English. I am so ready to immerse myself in Spanish, this is going to be great practice for me.

The waiter sets the tray of *tacos* down in front of me, and my mouth waters. They look just like the food Mom makes, so fresh and homemade. Corn tortillas, not the flour tortillas that most restaurants in the US serve. This is the real deal. I savor the explosion of flavor from the saltiness of the pork, to the tanginess of the lime, the spice of the salsa, and the freshness of the cilantro, comforted by the familiar flavors that taste so much better now that I am here.

After this first amazing meal of many to come, I stare out the window of the car. It is my eyes’ turn to feast. I absorb all the graffitied buildings, packed-together cars, bakeries, toy stores, billboards advertising 7 different brands of beer (yes, I counted), and the occasional pedestrian with a stroller walking down the sidewalk as *Tío Nacho* drives us home. This is our first stop on our trip to Puebla, where we will be attending an anniversary celebration for one of my mom’s best friends whom I call my *Tía*, or aunt, Claudia. We’re staying with my mom’s sister, *Tía Alma*, her husband, *Tío Nacho*,

their children Santiago, age 10, and Renata, who's 7, and Yeyis, my *abuela*. We pull up to the house, concealed by a large concrete wall. Like every other house in the neighborhood it's a security, a fortress protecting precious inhabitants. As I walk through the open door, the very distinctive scent of the house greets me, welcoming me *home*.

"Sofi!" Two pairs of brown skinny legs run down the stairs, located on the outside of the house, and nearly trip over each other to greet me and my family.

"Santi! Rena!" I mimic their cheerfulness, excited to see their smiling young faces again.

"*Por favor, deja que Nacho te ayude con tus maletas,*" says Tía Alma, insisting that Tío Nacho carry our bags. She shows us to our rooms, I get to sleep in Yeyis's room with her. *Yes, sleepover!* After we get our bags to our rooms and settle in, I wander into the kitchen, knowing exactly what's about to follow upon our arrival.

"*Sofi, compramos mucho pan de dulce, por favor, come lo que quieras! Si quieres algo más hay mucha comida en el refri también. Todo es para ti.* Just help yourself." She gestures to the large pile of *pan de dulce* on the table and tells me it's fair game, including anything in the fridge. My stomach growls as I reach for a *concha*, a soft bread with white sugar adorning the top. I bite into it voraciously, thrilled to taste this traditional pastry that has been a staple treat of my childhood. Tastes like *home*.

"*María Sofía, don't eat too much, your Tía Alma is making parrillada tonight,*" says Mom, noticing the amount of *pan* I am stuffing into my mouth. My eyes widen.

"*Babiada?!*" I muffle, mouth full of bread. *Parrillada* is the precious gift to this world that is Mexican barbecue. I picture the assortment of thinly sliced meats, the onions, the peppers, the melted cheese, the tortillas, the salsa, all of it homemade. Suddenly the taste of *carne asada* and *chicharrón* bless my imagination. I leave the kitchen, allowing my stomach to rest until the feast. I walk outside to the stairs that lead up to the added-on second floor of the house. I pass the orange tree; its green leaves fanned out. The plump, juicy oranges contrast beautifully with the blue of the sky. Passing the humble living area and kitchen, I wander into Santi's room, where he and Renata are watching *Shark Boy and Lava Girl* in Spanish.

"*Niños, a cenar!*" I hear my mom yelling from downstairs after a while, indicating dinner time. We know what's in store for us, so we

bolt down the stairs and swiftly land in our chairs. The spread on the table in front of me is a sight I will never forget. The meats, the cheese, the onions, the peppers, tortillas, *chicharrón*, salsa, all as I imagined and more. *Tío Nacho* puts a few strips of meat on the table-top barbecue, the sizzling a symphony to my ears. I feel not only my stomach but my heart skip a step at the sight of the bounty before me. I realize I am about to share a meal with my *family*, in my *home*, feeling an overwhelming sense of love and belonging in this moment. Food has always been an essential part of familial and communal bonding in my family, and in the Mexican culture in general. We say a prayer, thanking God for bringing our family together again and for our safe travels. I say an extra “thank you” to God for the peace in my heart. Then starts the lively chatter as we catch up with each other, laugh about the past, dream about the future, all over a home-cooked meal. After everyone eats their fill and then some, we move on to *sobremesa*. Very common in Latin cultures, *sobremesa* is when we continue to converse well after we eat. No electronics, no awkward silences, no arguments. Just family and food.

Once the food has been eaten, the table gets cleared, and the conversations subside, my cousins and I go back upstairs. We watch *Teen Titans Go!* on the Spanish dubbed Cartoon Network. I guess I hadn’t really noticed before how many American cartoons my cousins watch. They sound kind of funny in Spanish, but I’m grateful for the chance to work on my Spanish ear-training. I follow along with basically all the conversations, and I swell with pride. Soon it’s time for the kids to go to bed since they have school tomorrow, so I head to bed too. As I lay next to *Yeyis*, who is already asleep, a smile is plastered on my face. I feel an unbreakable elation that warms my entire body like a hug from a family member I haven’t seen in far too long. Blessed to be *home*, I sleep peacefully through the night. It’s a still, dreamless sleep.

* * *

Two days later.

The giant colorful letters spelling out “Puebla” greet us as we enter the city in *Tío Nacho’s* car. There is far less traffic, less graffiti, less concrete, and more open spaces. It’s *homely*. As we pull up to the grand, white house in the gated community, a short, light-brown skinned woman rushes out with open arms and a dazzling smile on her face.

"Roquis!" She exclaims, which is the pet-name for my mom that she's had since they were kids. We park the car and we begin to unload the luggage, when Tía Claudia approaches my mom and gives her a loving, long-awaited hug. She then turns to me.

"Hola Sofi! You look so beautiful, just like your *Mami!*" I blush at this and smile, she's too kind. She offers me a hug and I happily accept, her loving warmth squeezing my lungs. We take our bags inside the house, and her daughter, my "cousin," Maria comes to greet us with more hugs. I haven't seen her since she was a baby. She's 13 now. A slight melancholy fills my mind, wishing I hadn't missed making so many memories with her. It's been too long since I've been here. After I take my suitcase upstairs to Maria's room where I'm staying for the next few days, I look at the homework I brought with me. But I just want to be here. I don't even care if I don't do anything, I just want to *be*, to *exist*, in Mexico. I flop down on the bed and rest my eyes, letting myself drift off into a peaceful, uninhibited sleep. I wake up to Maria standing above me, lightly shaking my shoulder.

"Sofi, it's time for dinner," she says, conscious of my not-so-perfect Spanish. *I wish she'd talk to me in Spanish more.* She's wearing a purple sweatshirt that used to be mine and I grin. Mom has been giving her my old clothes since she was a toddler. We go downstairs and eat a meal of home-made quesadillas and rice, the perfect comfort food. Pablo and Miguel, two of Maria's four brothers, join us for dinner. They're older, both attending universities, but have come home for the weekend for *Tia Claudia* and *Tio Pepe's* 25th wedding anniversary celebration. The other two, Andres and Julian, will join us at the ceremony tomorrow.

Tía Claudia isn't much of a cook, but Mom, a master chef, helps her out, and the food comes out delicious. It tastes better when prepared with authentic Mexican ingredients in a Spanish-speaking household.

* * *

The following day.

We pull up in front of the entrance of the small, open church where the vow renewal ceremony will take place. I straighten out my sundress and hop out of the car, in awe of the natural beauty that surrounds the humble little church. Tall oaks and fluffy bushels of pink rhododendrons frame the church, encasing the building in a

postcard-worthy bubble of nature amid the city. I feel safe, I feel at *home*.

I spend the next few hours tying ribbons to chairs, putting candy in jars, setting name-cards on plates, arranging chairs, and putting up family photos around the reception area. Once the finishing touches are made, we head back to the church. The service is entirely in Spanish, which I am both delighted at and admittedly anxious about. I know a few prayers in Spanish, but definitely not the entire mass. Awkwardly lip-syncing the prayer, I sweat nervously as the people around me recite the "Nicene Creed." I hope no one notices that no actual words are coming out of my mouth. Looking around I realize I don't know very many people. My parents are here, and of course Tía Claudia and her family. But the other people around me may as well have blank faces. I think about the reception and tighten my hands into fists, mentally preparing myself for the social anxiety I suspect I will face later tonight. Shame creeps into my mind as I scold myself for not speaking enough Spanish.

Why am I such an embarrassment?

The ceremony ends and everyone makes their way to the reception, eager to mingle and catch up with family and friends. I gingerly take my seat next to Mom, staying mostly silent throughout the three-course meal.

Appetizer: I look up and notice how the poles of the massive tent intersect to form interesting patterns that resemble the diagrams I used to solve in sophomore geometry.

Main course: Mom gives me a look that appears to say, *Talk to someone, ANYONE*, and I promptly excuse myself to the restroom. My darn bladder.

Dessert: Some relative or friend of Tía Claudia asks me, in English, how I like school. I reply in Spanish that I enjoy my classes. She continues the conversation in English. My self-esteem somehow sinks even deeper into the grass.

Once the food is gone and I am thoroughly uncomfortable, the adults at my table stay and mingle, so I excuse myself to go stand awkwardly in some corner on my phone to avoid having to speak and reveal my limited Spanish. I see a table of young adults, probably early twenties, and move along, intimidated by their only slight seniority. I sit down on a beach chair on the lawn. A few people around me are mingling. I am so immersed in my game of mobile

solitaire that I jump in my seat when Maria and a few other kids around her age approach me.

"Come sit with us, Sofi," she offers, noticing my social discomfort.

Should I talk to them in English or Spanish? They all speak English, so it would be easier to communicate, but I want to practice my Spanish. But my Spanish sucks, I'll just embarrass myself. But if I don't even try, I'll seem like such an outsider. . .

My internal dialogue continues until I find myself getting up from my perch and wordlessly follow them to a table where they're playing a card game. Pablo explains how to play it in English. We play a few rounds of the game until the familiar Latin beat of *Reggaetón* dance music comes on, and the kids start making their way to the dance floor. I freeze a little, uncertain about going with them. Maria and her friend Laura take my hands and pull me along with them. I see a karaoke screen and my heart skips a beat. I don't really know many of these songs. The beat of a song all of these kids seem to know starts, and the words flash onto the screen as the kids start to sing together. I trip over the lyrics, stumbling all over the song, praying silently that no one notices my difficulty keeping up.

My face reddens a bit. My heartbeat races. People are watching. They all know I don't know what I'm doing. They all know I can't read that fast. They all know I'm different, that I'm a gringa, that I don't belong here. But I keep going, faking it until I look like I know what I'm doing. Forcing myself to belong. I want to belong.

The song ends, and the dancing begins. This I can work with, you don't need words to dance. One of the older girls, probably in her twenties, comes up and leads us in a sort of line-dance that everyone follows. I pick up on it pretty quickly. As we all move together, I feel relieved. Though I may not be able to speak the part, I can still dance like a Latina.

Once the party winds down and people start to leave, Maria's friends walk up to me.

"It was nice meeting you," says Laura. I smile.

"You're pretty cool for a half-gringa," says a boy teasingly. I feel only half-flattered by this but hey, I'll take it.

"Hasta luego," says another girl. Thrilled that she talked to me in Spanish, I reply with,

"Nos vemos, I'll see you."

* * *

Sacramento, California. This is where I was born. Portland, Oregon. This is where I was raised. Omaha, Nebraska. This is where I live now. Mexico City, Mexico. What exactly is this? My mother calls this home, where she was born, raised, learned to walk, drive, love, fear, and become independent. Her first home. What does it mean to me?

I have only been to Mexico a handful of times, but every time I go, I find more things to love, cherish, and yearn to understand. It's a different soil, but my roots still want to reach out and dig deeper into it. The hospitality and attempts at making me feel included make me feel accepted; reassuring me that though I may be a "half-gringa," I still have a *home* here. I may never feel like I can fully blend into the crowd. I may be afraid of rejection from a half of my life I am proud of. But I know that I am still loved and wanted. This is *home*.

Dia de los Muertos

October 2019

It's not as elaborate as I'd like, but it will absolutely do, I think to myself as I place the final touches — an assortment of coconut, chocolate, and caramel Mexican candies I had grown up with — on the skull-patterned tablecloth. I stand back to admire my work, feeling a sense of pride swell up in me for keeping this family tradition alive despite being across the county. Although I feel like an over-cooked baked potato from the heating system in the neutral zone on Swanson 9, a refreshing reassurance soothes my weary, sleep-deprived body. Pops of pink, green, purple, and blue create a miniature carnival amid the grays, browns, and army-greens of the stuffy neutral zone. My shrine for the dead brings the room to life.

The skull banner I hung up by myself droops a bit lower on one side than the other, but otherwise the *ofrenda* looks pretty well done. I make a mental note to thank Mom again for sending everything in the mail and giving me advice on how to set it up. She's always had a knack for holiday decorating; Martha Stewart couldn't hold a candle to my mom's decorative skills. As I trace the thin, slightly wrinkled *papel picado* spread out on the altar with my index finger, I can't help but be brought back to my childhood days of celebrating *Dia de los Muertos* with my family and

at school. The memories light up in my head like flashbulbs, illuminating bits and pieces of scenes from past celebrations.

* * *

October 2009

“Who messed up the flower arrangement in the *ofrenda*?!”

I stumble down the stairs from my room, partially interested in the racket going on downstairs and partially eager to get back to my toys. Only mom’s yelling could ever tear me away from such an intense affair.

I peer down into the front room from the banister to find mom wading in a sea of bubble wrap and tissue paper. She was already setting up the *ofrenda*! I eagerly hop down the stairs and dive into the mass of boxes, wrappings, fake flowers, *papel picado*, skulls, and various other essentials that make an appearance on our shrine every year.

“Maria Sofia please be careful, I’m spending a lot of time setting this up. *No seas Chiva Loca!*” she says, calling me a Crazy Goat as she does out of annoyance yet affection.

“It wasn’t me, *Mami*, really,” I insist, addressing her with the Spanish form of “Mom.”

“Well, just be careful. I’m still working on it. I’ve made a lot of progress while you were at school today.”

“It looks really nice, *Mami*! I love it!” I stand up and admire the half-finished *ofrenda* adorned with the paper-maché *Catrin*as (skeletons dressed up as high-class women), candles sporting Our Lady of Guadalupe, Jesus, Pope Saint John Paul II, and other various saints, and the fake pink and gold marigolds neatly arranged on the floor in a path leading to the window. Well, the *once* neatly arranged marigolds. *This year’s is going to be the best one yet*, I tell myself as I do every year.

“*Ven, nena*, help me unfold the *papel picado*.”

I’m thrilled to be given the opportunity to assist her with the shrine, especially with a task as precarious and important as handling the *papel picado*, thin, fragile tissue-paper banners depicting images of skeletons and *Catrin*as that resemble those cut-and-fold paper snowflakes. I pinch the paper between my thumb and index finger, being extra careful to keep it intact. Although I am only ten, I know how difficult it is to get the *papel picado* not to tear while transporting

it in a suitcase from Mexico. We stand up slowly, I stay in place while Mom walks the banner out slowly, skillfully avoiding the boxes and skulls scattered on the floor, and in a matter of seconds, the bright pink paper banner is sprawled out, ready to be hung. Approaching the *ofrenda* with the utmost caution, I station myself on one end and hold as still as my eager and fidgety little body possibly can. Mom tears off a piece of blue tape with her teeth—like a pro—and attaches her end of the *papel* to the fireplace mantle. She meanders around the clutter over to where I am standing still-ish and secures my side to the mantle as well.

“Hmm does it look straight to you?” She asks.

“I think so”

“It looks a bit crooked. I think I’ll adjust it a bit.” I smile. It definitely looks straight to me, but I know Mom has always had a better eye for detail than me.

When she’s satisfied with the *papel’s* position, she moves back to the floor and empties a bag of rice, lentils and beans onto the floor in a colorful array of uncooked Latin American staples. This is my favorite part. I watch for a while in fascination as she separates the dry goods into their respective piles. I know what’s coming next. Soon the grains will transform into the finest artisanal tiles that create a magnificent mosaic cross on the carpet with my mother as the Renaissance woman. But my idle nine-year-old brain begins to wander as I eye the Mexican candy along with the *Abuelita’s* hot chocolate. I decide that food sounds like a pretty good idea. I leave mom to her work and saunter into the kitchen for a snack.

The next day when Mom and I come home from school, I run to the front room where a larger-than-life *ofrenda*, the most beautiful I have ever seen, greets my widening eyes with a warm, familiar embrace. I reverently approach the altar and take in every detail, from the salt in the little bowl for purifying the souls, to the array of Mexican breads for the souls to eat, to the mementos and pictures of passed loved ones (and loved-dog), and to the colorful sugar and chocolate skulls to remind us that death is to be sweetly celebrated, not feared. The mosaic cross on the floor looks fantastic, a true work of art. The flowers are perfectly arranged. And it’s mine.

Later that night I wander downstairs to admire the *ofrenda* and notice something by the shrine. By the flowers, actually. I slowly creep up, and a fluffy, white dog comes into my line of view.

“Ruffus!” He jumps with a start and turns to me, a bright yellow marigold caught in his fur. Before I can snatch it from his snout he runs off. I make a note to hunt him down later. With that mystery solved, I crouch down by the *ofrenda*, close my eyes, and say a prayer for the souls honored by the shrine.

I was old enough to understand that my other friends didn’t celebrate *Día de los Muertos*. My family was unique in this practice. As a young girl I felt special that I was the only one of my friends who had this array of color, lights, flowers and food in her home, always eager to show them the shrine when they came over for playdates. To me, it was normal, at least in my own little world. It was just another part of the year, like Christmas or Thanksgiving. But the fact that a small minority of people in my life celebrated *Día de los Muertos* made it feel like it was a sacred family tradition that I could choose to either share or suppress. It was up to me to decide how I wanted this family cultural tradition to affect the rest of my life.

* * *

October 2018

I am way too uncoordinated for this, I think to myself as I maneuver my cumbersome load of a book-filled backpack, lunchbox, and a large plastic tote-bag full of bread, miniature coffins, and *ofrenda* decorations clutched in each arm around the parked cars in the parking lot of my high school. Mom offered to help, but I’ve done this every year since elementary school. I can handle this annual Olympic feat of strength, endurance and dexterity by now. At least that’s what I tell myself as I struggle to open the door.

“Do you need some help, girly?” my friend Lana asks from behind me, her eyes full of concern for my drooping arms and labored breath.

“That would actually be really great,” I muster. I let out a breath as she lifts one of the bags from my noodle-arms and follows me down the hall to my locker.

“Is this for Day of the Dead?”

“Yeah, I’m delivering the *pan de muertos* and these little coffins from Mexico to my teachers today.”

“Do you think you’ll have any extra bread? This is the one with the cinnamon, right?”

“Haha yeah, I did bring a few extra to share with you guys. Yes, it’s the cinnamon one”

“Awesome! I look forward to it every year!”

My face lights up, it’s nice to hear that something as simple as bread can make someone excited about my cultural celebrations. Her validation revitalizes me with a new positive energy. I start to feel more giddy when a girl passes us in the hall and stares with a bewildered expression at our loaded bags. She rolls her eyes. I stare straight ahead. But I already noticed her expression along with my mood starting to deflate.

I get to my locker and let out a sigh of relief as take inventory of the bag’s contents:

- 16 loaves of *pan de muertos* (with each recipient’s name listed by it)
- 10 miniature sugar coffins (with each recipient’s name listed by it)
- 4 religious candles
- 1 string of *papel picado*
- 2 plastic *calaveras* (skulls)
- Assorted Mexican toys and candy

I take out the slip of torn notebook paper and make a mental note of which gifts I need to take with me for the first half of the day and head off to my first class at the ring of the bell. Walking up to my first period teacher with the round, bumpy piece of bread and the little sugar coffin, I am comforted by the fact that I’ve had her as a teacher before. I won’t need to explain why I am handing her a piece of bread with a bone pattern on top and a miniature coffin made entirely of sugar. As much as I love sharing my culture with my teachers, I’ve always worried about being that annoying kid who overtly flaunts it any time she can.

Maybe that’s why I dreaded going to fifth period that day. I knew I’d need to do some explaining to my teacher who isn’t very familiar with my customs or annual gifts. Not to mention the stares of confusion and judgment I expect to receive from the people in that class who don’t know me or my heritage. I walk in and gingerly hand him the cellophane bag of sugary culture.

“This is in celebration of Day of the Dead,” I say, consciously choosing to use the English phrasing instead of showing off my Spanish accent with *Día de los Muertos*.

“The bread is specially for Day of the Dead, the bumps on top are supposed to be bones. And this coffin is made of sugar, it’s from Mexico and made to mock the seriousness of death.”

“Well thank you, this is pretty interesting. Are you Mexican or Spanish then?” I swallow my pride. I don’t blame him that he’s surprised.

“I’m half Mexican. My mom is from Mexico, we celebrate Day of the Dead every year at home.” My face reddens slightly as some people in the front row start to turn their attention towards our conversation. I pray that they don’t sense the nerves behind my wavering voice.

“Well thank you, this is pretty interesting, I’m glad you could share this.”

I give an “of course, I’m happy to” and eagerly take my seat, wishing that my face wouldn’t get so red. Wishing I didn’t feel so many eyes on me. Wishing I didn’t feel so uncomfortable in my own skin. As pleased as I am that he liked the gifts, I can’t help but hear the words, “Are you Mexican?” replay in my head like a broken record.

Should he have known I was Mexican? Should I act more Mexican? Why does this bother me so much? Is my identity really contingent on how other people perceive my ethnicity?

The class goes by in a blur of rapid thoughts blended with fragments of the lesson. Soon it’s time for lunch, and my spirits lift when I realize I get to share *pan de muertos* with my friends. I arrive at our usual spot outside the performing arts center building and remove the lumpy loaves of bread from their protective bags, tearing the soft, sugary bread into smaller pieces to share. I walk up to my friend Anthony first, who is also half Mexican. We often like to say that in being half white and half Mexican, we make a full white person *and* a full Mexican.

“You get the first piece, bud” I hand him the bread and his eyes light up, just as delighted as I am to partake in anything related to the other half of our lives. I understand how he feels, this being one of the few times during the year we have an excuse to do “Mexican things” in public. He needs that first piece.

“This is great, thanks! I love this stuff!”

I hand out the rest of the pieces to my other friends, me eager to share a piece of myself with them, them eager to receive my sweet,

soft offering. The bell signals the end of lunch and I gather my bag of treats, rejuvenated and ready to deliver the remaining bread and coffins to the rest of my teachers.

The rest of the day flies by in a blur of “thank-you-so-much” and “oh tell me more about this bread” and “very cool” until what I had been waiting for all day finally comes – setting up the school *ofrenda*. I stop by one of the Spanish classrooms to pick up the supplies I had dropped off that morning along with a note reading: *para el ofrenda* (for the shrine). When I reached for the bag I noticed someone had crossed out the *el* and written *la* instead next to it. Upon realizing my basic and foolish Spanish error, I could feel my face surge with a hot, red pulse of embarrassment along with, what was it, shame? Yes, I think it was a twinge of shame. Swallowing my pride and accepting the simple mistake, I grip the bag handles tightly and make my way to the school chapel, trying not to be so deterred.

When I arrive at the chapel, a few of the *Orgulla Latino* club are unfolding the table and taking out the tablecloth. After securing the table and laying out the large white cloth, we begin to arrange the candles, toys, *calaveras*, fake flowers and candy, and hang the banners and *papel picado* until we are satisfied with the finished product. As a finishing touch we add our own photos of deceased loved ones.

“I love the banners you brought, they’re really festive,” says Gabby, a newer member.

“The skulls are pretty cool too,” adds Dani, a frequent member of the club.

I smile, content knowing that my contribution is noticed and appreciated, even if I haven’t been to a club meeting in so long. It was rewarding to get validation from other Latinos my age. Looking back now I realize how much I wanted the other Latino students to accept me despite my half-heritage. I wanted to show them that I knew just as much about *Día de los Muertos* as they did, and maybe then I would feel like I could be “as Latina” as my peers. This is one of my favorite holidays of the year, and I want to do it justice like a “real” Mexican.

* * *

October 2019

It’s the night of October 31st. I can’t light real candles in my resident hall, so I light the plastic candles with a flick of my finger and watch the soft artificial light twinkle its soft artificial glow. Though fake, the candles really do add a touch of authenticity and comfort to

my humble *ofrenda*. I set out the cookies and fruit on the altar for the spirits to enjoy when they visit tonight, and open the windows in the neutral zone to ensure they can get to the shrine. Since I don't have flowers to guide the spirits with their fresh, sweet scent, I spray a few airy clouds of body mist over and around the shrine. It's done. I stretch and let out a yawn, tired but overall proud of my work. After texting Mom a picture of the shrine, I approach it. My eyes fall on the pictures of *Yeyis*, and I can feel a few stinging tears prick the corners of my eyes. This is the first year that she's on the *ofrenda*. I hold back the tears, reminding myself that *Día de los Muertos* is a happy time for celebrating the lives of loved ones. Missing my grandmother just reminds me how much I miss being home. This is the first *Día de los Muertos* that I'm spending away from home. The first time I'm not setting up the *papel picado* with Mom. The first time I don't have *pan de muertos* to give.

She's alive again tonight, I should be happy. I should be proud that I made this shrine in her honor. But I miss her so much. I miss being home. I should be home to comfort mom, she's probably a wreck right now. She needs me. I need her. I need to be home.

These thoughts whirl around in my mind as my head spins in a dizzying vertigo. I take a deep breath. With another look at the shrine, I see years of family tradition that I honor with this humble *ofrenda* I have built. This shrine may not be able to grow wings and fly me home to see my family, but it functions as a sort of looking-glass allowing me to gaze into another world that I can lovingly call my own. Whether people understand or not the reason I left a tray of cookies out to go stale, turned candles on to wear out the batteries, or put up decorations to crowd the NZ table, I can only hope that people will have the understanding and interest to try. A few people did comment to me about how they really like it and think it's cool, which flatters me. The paranoia of people getting annoyed with my "over exertion of culture" still haunts the back of my mind, discouraging me from trying to live out my culture in my predominantly non-Hispanic environment. At the same time the doubt that I don't do enough to express my culture creeps its way into my mind, making me doubt my ability to "act Mexican." But the voice that comes through the loudest to me says, "*No te preocupes, nena, eras mi hija, eres Mexicana.*"

Don't worry, little girl, you are my daughter, you are Mexican.

A Dual Identity

It's 50/50 if a Hispanic will address me in Spanish instead of English. I look brown to some people, I look white to others. But that moment someone realizes I can communicate with them in their native language, I see their gaze soften. Their tone shifts. Their Latin hospitality is triggered, as one of their own is now among them. I am *family*. At least, I am with those who have the patience to give me a chance. The act of carefully selecting in which situations I use English versus Spanish relates to the phenomenon known as "code switching," which involves the active switching of languages between master identity groups.² Tracy and Robles describe a "master identity" as an unchanging, fairly stable aspect of one's identity, such as "gender, ethnicity, age, national and regional origins".³ While master identities operate as fixed identities that generally do not change between social situations, "interactional identities" in a sense "interact" with the environment, meaning that a person's role shifts depending on the relationships they have with the people in that specific group.⁴ Though still internal and reflective of personal identity, interactional identities are dependent on the relationship with the people associated with in a certain group.⁵ Code switching essentially acts as an intermediary between master and interactional identities, as a certain identity becomes revealed depending on the language chosen to express.⁶ When I actively choose to respond to native speakers and other Hispanics in Spanish, I make the conscious choice to reveal the Latina aspect of my identity more apparent as a form of bonding and solidarity with other Spanish-speaking individuals.

The ability to speak the language itself and reveal points of identity contact, however, may still not be enough when attempting to fit into the identity of a native within the community. Tracy and

² Karen Tracy and Jessica S. Robles, *Everyday Talk: Building and Reflecting Identities* (New York, NY: Guilford Press. 2013), 21- 25, 121-22, 153.

³ Ibid, 21.

⁴ Ibid, 22.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid, 153.

Robles further discuss the idea of “dialect,” “an identifiable and characteristic way of speaking the language,” when identifying a member of a community.⁷ Dialect, according to the authors, involves “vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation or accent” to indicate consistency with a certain distinctive community that can serve as a master identity.⁸ In my own experience, mastering the dialect becomes a sign of belonging into the community on a level much deeper than a communicative one. Practically speaking, a shared language allows a group of people to interact in a way in which is unique to their ethnicity and culture. Among native speakers, the identity piece comes into play when the language itself, the dialect itself, becomes a physical, observable facet of identity. It becomes a sign of solidarity, a factor that says, “I not only understand what you are saying, but I also understand our shared experiences, our shared culture, our shared beliefs, understandings, and pride” that remains sacred to that group and only that group. Language’s power to indicate identity has served as both a blessing and a curse for me. My Spanish, as I’ve previously mentioned, is not perfect. My grammar needs work, as I mix up conjugations all the time. My vocabulary remains limited to what I have ever needed to say to my family or in stores. My pronunciation and accent though apparent still struggle as I often trip over my words or find the need to repeat myself to people. I have been told before that I do not need to speak Spanish to join this or that club, or to identify as Latina, or to even survive in a Spanish-speaking country. However, I argue that dialect becomes essential in the reassurance and solidification of master identity, especially when jargon and slang become included into the conversation.

“Jargon” refers to a specialized vocabulary that accompanies specific occupations, organizations, hobbies, or groups of people, while “slang,” or “sociolects,” refers to particular ways of speaking that are “shared by social groups.”⁹ Slang in particular indicates belonging to a group due to the shift, especially generationally, in the slang terms used by members of that shared ethnic identity group.¹⁰ In *Legado Latino*, I had a lack of slang and delayed Spanish-speaking

⁷ Ibid, 121.

⁸ Ibid, 121-22.

⁹ Ibid, 122.

¹⁰ Ibid.

working against me in a roomful of kids who just wanted to feel that familiarity by being around people who acted and looked like them. Since I primarily communicated with English speakers, I was not exposed to the slang used by the more well-versed members of the club who were able to communicate with each other not just fluently, but with these little “secret phrases” of which I was unaware. Maybe I sort of looked like them, but I did not sound like them or relate to them culturally.

According to Alcoff, racial identity goes beyond aesthetic features such as hair, eye and skin color. Language, tradition, religion, nationality and culture “mediate” the extent of an ethnicity to which people identify.¹¹ I tend to agree that racial identity includes your own experience with tradition and culture, as interpersonal identification comes from the willing attitude to own that identity. Yet, there’s a sense of direction in looking how you think you should look and speaking how you perceive you should be able to speak. I’ve never been quite sure if I belong to that typical Hispanic image. Sure, I have the brown eyes, brown hair, and I’m not terribly pale. But I’ve been told by a variety of people,

“Really? You look Spanish to me.”

“Seriously? I thought you were Romanian.”

“You totally could pass for Greek though.”

“You’re not Italian? Not at all?” I’m not one to get offended by the question, “What’s your ethnicity?” But when I need to explain myself so often, I feel the need to justify my heritage.

“Oh, I’m half. That’s why I look so white, haha.”

“No, no, you’re good. I know I’m pale.”

“I’m just a mutt.”

I suppose this is the type of internal conflict biracial people are burdened with from the get-go. People without a “coherent identity” are susceptible to losing their sense of agency, feeling inferior in their insecurities of not belonging to a definite identity.¹² Though coexisting, the multiple identities are at odds with each other. One does not outmatch the other, trapping the person in a sort of stalemate. The conflict appears when the interactional identities

¹¹ Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York, NY: Oxford. 2006), 48, 269.

¹² *Ibid*, 269.

become tangled and restless. I often find myself wondering how much of a certain ethnic identity I should show in certain situations that may warrant only one or the other. Because of this indecision and confusion on how I should be perceived by both my white, English-speaking identity and my Latina, Spanish-speaking identity, I still find myself feeling disconnected from both sides. When I'm around other Hispanics, I become extra self-conscious about what cultural mannerisms I show, how I speak Spanish, what slang I can or cannot use. When I'm interacting with English speakers and a topic pertaining to my Latina identity comes up, I struggle to determine how much of my ethnic identity is socially acceptable to show in that instance. Though it may seem so surface-level, cultural identity really matters when addressing other people in either identity group. I know I am liked and appreciated for who I am. But I also know that who I am, half-white, is different. Incoherence poses a real, ambiguous conundrum to the biracial individual who struggles to assimilate fully into either side. Thus, I felt trapped in the *Legado Latino* club at school. I felt obligated to try, but I was forcing an identity on myself with which I could not fully identify.

We often hear about a cultural "switch" that we use among different groups of people, showing different parts of ourselves to whom we choose. I find this especially true being biracial. And as my Mexican-American identity makes up most of my identity, the stakes of having to maintain those identities in each respective group feel higher. Living with a "plural personality" can be exhausting, as the values of each group differ from each other.¹³ As Anzaldúa explains, mixed people can often feel conflicted as to which culture to be guided by, which voice to listen to, which side of yourself to reveal to your closest companions.¹⁴ The culture and language become a sort of compass that influences the words, actions, and beliefs of the individual to the point of becoming second nature. Certain actions and ways of living even become expected by both insiders and outsiders, as Tracy and Robles describe the concept of face. "Face" includes a person's "likeability" and the ways in which a person is

¹³ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books. 1987), 78-79.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 78.

perceived by others.¹⁵ Face becomes a sort of acrobatic act wherein a person performing “facework,” the active, everyday maintenance of face through interaction, strives to maintain their identities, especially when those identities may become threatened.¹⁶ People practice facework when communicating strategically within their identity groups, and the actions of others within that group, and are often the judges of whether that person has maintained face.¹⁷ I feel the need to work extra hard to maintain my own face within Hispanic identity groups, as I know I am expected to act a certain way and view the full-Hispanics in that group as the judges of my performance. In instances in which I attempt to speak and act like them, I try to uphold a knowledge and competence of, in this case, the Spanish language and Mexican culture and tradition.¹⁸ Remaining likeable and relatable ties back to my attempts at finding approval within the group as I struggle to keep a positive face in both English and Spanish-speaking identity groups of which I am a part. The more I can think and act like these respective groups, the closer I feel towards finding comradery and deeper relationships that validate my own master and interactional identities.

The strain from the balancing act accompanied by facework and discernment process of interactional identity selection poses both comfort and conflict. Young sees the hybrid experience as “indefinable,” a pliable identity that changes between social interactions.¹⁹ This pliable identity can be seen as both a flexibility that allows me to seamlessly blend into other groups, but also an overlapping script that demands compliance of that script and denial of the other. Stepping into that classroom when I went to *Legado Latino*, my identity became pliable. I would flick my switch and release that “Latina side” of myself. The same phenomenon would occur as soon as I landed in Mexico. My “Mexican mode” was activated. Suddenly I was a lump of clay, molding myself to fit into the world around me. Conversely, throughout most of my day, I maintain the customs and discourses of everyday American life with

¹⁵ Tracy, 24.

¹⁶ Ibid, 24-25.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid, 24.

¹⁹ Young, 141.

which I have grown up and maintained thoughtlessly for my entire life. Though the Latina passion, sociability, compassion, skepticism, and mannerisms in my DNA may sometimes peek from behind the curtains of white culture and socialization, for the most part my two halves scarcely interact outside their respective spheres. Biracial people get to experience multiple worlds, which can be exciting. But it also gives us multiple identities to think about. Which identity do we reveal to the people in our lives? We learn to juggle these identities, selecting which one we want to showcase to each person. It is as we are performing, acting in certain ways to entertain two audiences with different demands and levels of satisfaction. But as tiring as it can be, it is also exciting to be able to highlight a unique and personal part of myself to someone unfamiliar with that side of me. I also found a great joy in sharing the *pan de muertos* with my friends at school, or showing my friends pictures from my trips to Mexico, or explaining how to decorate an *ofrenda*. My Latina heritage is a gift I want to share with the ones I care about, and though I still balance on the narrow fishing line of my dual identities, I look ahead to the ways I can celebrate myself with the reassurance of the safety net of friend and familial acceptance below me.

As if my Latina and white ethnicities pulling my identity and security in different directions wasn't already enough to think about, the complexity of my Latina identity itself and implications of being Mexican add another layer of tension to my personal identity. In his highly introspective analysis of the Mexican experience, *El laberinto de la soledad* (*The Labyrinth of Solitude*), Octavio Paz starts off by comparing the identity crisis of the adolescent to nations and groups of people who seek to answer the ever-exhausting question of, "what are we, and how can we fulfill our obligations to ourselves as we are?"²⁰ Much like the adolescent's search for both conformity and individuality, young nations also work to define their culture, customs, language, and overall national identity. Specifically, Mexico possesses an extensive, often messy history of imperialism, conquest, revolution, and tyranny that has engrained both a deep national pride and tumultuous sense of identity within the country and its people. Paz claims that in reevaluating the history of a people, the individual

²⁰ Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, trans. Lysander Kemp (New York, NY: Grove Press 1961), 9-10.

can then begin to realize how they themselves exist in the world and how the struggles to form a national and ethnic identity of the past still surface among groups and individuals today.²¹ In revisiting the history of Mexico and shifting characteristics, I am able to dig deeper down to my roots as a Latina, yet also get lost in the entanglement of identities presented by Spanish colonialism.

Mexican history in a brief sense highlights the unique identity of the Mexican through the internal and external battle for a national identity among Spanish and North American influences. Paz describes how the Spanish conquests of Hernán Cortés created a chain of events that set Mexico on its journey of definition and discovery as its own independent nation, keeping with the old traditions of Aztec ritual while adapting to the changing world of Christian westernization.²² Reevaluation and incorporation, the balance between indigenous and Spanish, the *criollo* (a person of pure Spanish blood living in the Americas) and *mestizo* (a person of mixed Spanish and Indian blood) created a cross-cultural world in which today the products of such a national are still apparent. The Day of the Dead, for example, incorporates the traditional Aztec rituals of sacrifice, altar worship, and veneration of ancestry, and remains as one of the most celebrated holidays in Mexico to this day. On the other hand, as of 2014, 81% of Mexican adults identify as Catholic, revealing the very present remnants of Spanish Catholic influence to this day.²³ I find the contrast of tradition and progression in Mexican history and contemporary culture bittersweet. The sacrifice of centuries of tradition and forceful compliance with colonial forces reminds me of the fragile, dehumanizing past of the Mexican people, yet the strength and promise of the Revolution instills within me a sense of pride and immense longing to further my knowledge of Mexico's past. Much like the Zapatistas who fought to redefine the colonized Mexican nation in the name of tradition and the country's roots, I too long to rediscover my own identity through the lens of my beautiful second

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid, 103-104.

²³ Michael Lipka, "A Snapshot of Mexico, Pope Francis's Next Stop." *Pew Research Center*, (2016). <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/02/10/a-snapshot-of-catholics-in-mexico-pope-francis-next-stop/>

home, my second history. As a biracial individual living in a country that demands I embrace only half of myself, I often have difficulty identifying with my Mexican history and the tension between Spanish and indigenous culture and history. Do I have a right to feel so deeply, bleed so profusely, for a past with which only a mere half of myself can identify? I often have to remind myself that I am just as much Mexican as I am American, which provides me with a vault of culture, passion, and tradition filled to the brim with a rich identity worth more than any treasure in the world.

One of my primary aims of articulating my stories of growing up biracial was to, in addition to relaying an unfamiliar experience to those who seek understanding and insight, reach those who can relate to and connect with my experiences in some form or another. A biracial identity includes both the tense, tumultuous struggle to define one's identity, yet also the celebration of differences and the excitement of two unique, precious identities to unpack and explore. The need to explore is especially imperative now, as the number of biracial individuals continues to increase. In 2015, 27% of Hispanic marriages in the United States were interracial, and 42% of interracial marriages were between one Hispanic and one White person.²⁴ Both these numbers have only been growing since 1980. They are projected to keep slowly but surely increasing as interracial marriages become more prevalent in the United States. An increase in acceptance of interracial marriages will be inevitably accompanied by this mixture of cultural identities; more people like me trying to navigate life with a fork in the road pointing multiple ways. The important distinction is whether we have a choice. Autonomy is essential in the rational identity of a person. Consciously choosing to belong rather than going along with a tradition because it's ingrained in our DNA only leads to further uncertainty.²⁵ Throughout my life I have actively chosen to embrace both sides, being careful one doesn't overpower the other. I celebrate holidays like *Día de los Muertos* with my family, bring my culture to school with me, try to find more of "my people," and

²⁴ Gretchen Livingston and Anna Brown, "Trends and Patterns in Inter-marriage." *Pew Research Center: Social and Demographic Trends*, (2017). www.pewsocialtrends.org/2017/05/18/intermarriage-in-the-u-s-50-years-after-loving-v-virginia/

²⁵ Alcott, 48.

immerse myself as much as I can when I'm in Spanish-speaking environments. My cultural identity will not just come to me, I must actively seek it out, especially when I can just as easily give up on myself and live like a typical American white girl. But I choose to lovingly embrace my tangled, conflicting, enriched genes. My identity gives me communal meals with *parrillada* and *sobre mesa*. It gives me the chance to explain what the sugar coffins mean to my teachers and peers. And it gives me a second country I can call *home*. My hope is that other biracial individuals will search for peace with the interactions of their dual identities as I continue to search for my own, as we must think with multiple minds, love with multiple hearts, and find stability in multiple identities.

* * *

My mother, born and raised in Mexico, affectionately calls me, "*café con leche*," "coffee with cream," a balanced and classic mixture of two different but complimentary ingredients; herself being the coffee, with her tanned skin and bold Latina passion, and my father embodying the role of cream, with his pale skin and ability to compliment her boldness with his calm, cool demeanor. I have decided that while posing twice the identity crisis, it also provides twice the excitement. It is a part of me that I have always had in the back of my mind trying to decide who it wants me to be, and it is ever shifting. The way I see it, being half Mexican and half white is an experience—a multifaceted experience, but nonetheless an entire, cohesive experience in and of itself that a multitude of people around the world live out. Being a mixture of two, maybe more, cultures that both play essential roles in identity formation will have an impact on someone's view of the world and of themselves. This is the time in my life when I am becoming an independent adult who has to make some of my most crucial life choices. I rely on my multicultural experiences to solidify my personal identity and make decisions based off who I believe myself to be. The "mutt experience," as I so often half-heartedly tease myself about, is still shaping my life today. As I recall the past, experience the present, and speculate the future, I will keep in mind that I belong to two worlds that have burrowed their ways into the very core of who I am. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alcoff, Linda Martín, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*. New York, NY: Oxford, 2006.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 1987.
- Lipka, Michael, "A Snapshot of Mexico, Pope Francis's Next Stop." *Pew Research Center*, (2016). <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/02/10/a-snapshot-of-catholics-in-mexico-pope-francis-next-stop/>
- Livingston, Gretchen, and Anna Brown, "Trends and Patterns in Inter-marriage." *Pew Research Center: Social and Demographic Trends*, 2017. www.pewsocialtrends.org/2017/05/18/intermarriage-in-the-u-s-50-years-after-loving-v-virginia/
- Paz, Octavio, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. Translated by Kemp, Lysander. New York, NY: Grove Press, 1961.
- Tracy, Karen and Robles, Karen, *Everyday Talk: Building and Reflecting Identities*, New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2013.
- Young, Stephanie L, "Half and Half: An (Auto)ethnography of Hybrid Identities in a Korean American Mother-Daughter Relationship." *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 2, no. 2 (2002): 141.