

November 2016

*Junk Drawer*

As first semester freshman year rolled to a close I received a formal invitation in the mail. The type was in cursive, the letters embossed, congratulating me for ranking in the top 5 GPA for Latino students in my grade. My mother beamed with pride, but I couldn't echo the sentiment. Instead my heart sank, the words reverberating in my head: Latino Student Achievement Award. Hastily shoving the envelope in the depths of my junk drawer, I neglected to acknowledge its existence.

With a French father and a Salvadorian-American mother I was raised speaking both French and Spanish at home. This strange household dynamic of two cultures under one roof created friction and division, both languages eternally fighting for the top spot.

With my mother's family I'll get lost in deafeningly loud music, all the while singing and dancing to La Bala, Menudo, and reggaeton. Lights will flash at their extravagant parties; meanwhile, distant aunt after distant uncle greet my siblings and me with wet kisses and perfumed hugs. With my dad's family and close friends I'll sit at a long wooden table with overflowing platters of bread, cheeses, and chocolate. With faces dimly lit by the warm glow of my grandmother's porch light, everybody drunkenly chants along to George Brassens and Jacques Brel with a bottle of rosé in hand.

Flash back to the day I received the letter. Because I've always considered myself to be a melding of multiple cultures, I had never self-identified as Latina. In my eyes that title, a label I hadn't asked for, was suppressive and dismissed my French background. Underneath that sentiment was a layer of denial, an ugly form of self-loathing.

Despite my parents' efforts to raise me with equal love for both cultures, I had an underlying rejection of my Latino identity. I was in denial of my other half. This is when I started to feel shame in myself. Not ashamed that I was Latina, but that part of me resented it.

Perhaps these feelings stemmed from the fact that I was exposed to more positive aspects of France than Latin America. After all, my dad ensured that I attend a French-immersion school for 10 years in the hopes of preserving his heritage. Although this experience provided me with mental flexibility and a fondness for Franco-Belgian comic books and prominent writers like Molière and Jules Verne, it created imbalance.

I confided in my mom these transgressive thoughts, but she couldn't wrap her head around my inner conflict. Instead I saw her face fall. What she understood was that I was burdened with a culture, an identity, a look that I didn't want to be associated with, and she was to blame.

With the face of America forever changing, recent events have shed light to the plea of the Black Lives Matter movement and the reintroduction of the idea that "Black is Beautiful" and diversity itself should be celebrated rather than disregarded. Beyonce, cementing her role as a cultural icon, embraced this identity in *Lemonade*; meanwhile, comedian Aziz Ansari, self-identifying with Indian culture, ensured that his show *Master of None* addressed Hollywood's lack of diversity. I related to these topics of conversation because ingrained in me as a child were the recurring roles of Latinos in the media as criminals, gardeners, and housekeepers, barely ever given a position of power.

This shift in awareness has challenged me to actively consume more representative forms of media through platforms like Latino-specific YouTube channels. Subsequently, finding

content creators that cater to a Latino audience and relay the conflict of being biracial has helped me overcome these racial insecurities. This has instilled in me a sense of belonging, pride slowly coming to fruition. I hope to continue along this path, further deepening my understanding of different cultures and promoting change in our perceptions of race through the study of human interaction and journalistic communication.