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Mi Idioma Y Cultura

As freshman move-in day approached, I eagerly scattered around the tiny apartment I had called home for the last 18 years meticulously checking every closet, cabinet, and drawer to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything. That night, the anticipation of officially becoming a college student kept me up. I arrived on campus feeling like I was on top of the world, ready to finally live through this new and unfamiliar chapter of my life. My enthusiastic excitement did not last long when I realized college was not at all what I had imagined it to be in my head. I vividly remember the exact moment when I realized that my identity was much different from the majority of the peers that surrounded me. At the very first party of the semester that I attended here at UMass, I instantly noticed the contrast between the environment here and the environment back at home. Half of the night was spent listening to techno remixes of Taylor Swift songs and people asking me if I could recite something in Spanish for them once they found out I could speak it. The rest of the night was then followed by awkward encounters with drunk girls politely asking if they could touch my hair, and sitting in a corner hoping that I would spot someone who may look or sound like me in the crowd. Growing up, there was never a moment where I was not surrounded by someone who spoke the same language as me or shared a similar identity to my own, and arriving on campus turned out to be the complete opposite. Parties back at home were vastly different from the first campus party I had encountered. Back at

home there would be bachata blasting through the speakers so loudly you could feel the vibrations at your feet. There would be groups of people gathered together in the kitchen eating fresh homemade pastelitos and retelling stories about growing up in the campo. The air around you would smell sweet like the habichuelas con dulce cooking on the stovetop but, most importantly, the people there would look and sound just like you.

The inability to find people who shared the same language and latinx identity was an incredibly isolating experience, especially as a first year student. As I watched those around me easily connect with others, I began to suspect that I was the problem. Perhaps my identity and language, which differed from that of the many other students here, was the reason why I was unable to connect with anyone on campus. If my identity and language were holding me back, the only rational solution to me had to be to completely relinquish myself of both. From that point on I never spoke Spanish around anyone but my mother and tried to separate myself from the rest of my culture in any way I could. I felt almost a sense of embarrassment admitting the fact that I was latina and the more I attempted to assimilate myself into a more westernized identity, the more this embarrassment grew. The duality of identity did not seem virtually possible to me at the time as I believed you could possibly hold two identities at once. In her essay *How to Tame a Wild Tongue*, Gloria Anzaldua heavily discusses the silencing of the latinx culture and the erasure of the spanish language and its many variations by others, but what happens when you are the one silencing yourself?

The attempted relinquishment of my hispanic identity did not last long when I finally realized that trying to pretend to not be who you are was much more difficult than I expected. I still constantly found myself speaking Spanish to others, eating cultural foods like arroz con

habichuelas, and listening to Spanish music. It was as if these things were second nature to me and I couldn't not do them even if I tried, they were just a part of me. That is the identity and culture that molded me for over 18 years of my life and it was foolish to think that I could ever undo all of that in a matter of months. This made me wonder what it really meant to have an identity. Even when I tried to deny my latinx culture I was still deep down at my core a latina woman, meaning that despite all of my efforts I had never really shaken that identity. Was it even possible?

Anzaldua's *How to Tame a Wild Tongue* also does an incredible job at accurately highlighting the feeling of exclusion and confusion of the hispanic identity that is felt when you feel as if you cannot acculture to another identity nor live as who you truly are; "Chicanos and other people of color suffer economically for not acculturating. This voluntary (yet forced) alienation makes for psychological conflict, a kind of dual identity - we don't identify with the Anglo-American cultural values and we don't totally identify with the Mexican cultural values. We are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicanness or Angloness. I have so internalized the borderland conflict that sometimes I feel like one cancels out the other and we are zero, nothing, no one. A veces no soy nada ni nadie. Pero hasta cuando no lo soy, lo soy." (43). Here, Anzaldua touches on the reality of bordering two cultural identities and being conflicted on which most correlates to you. These ambivalent feelings towards our identities often leave us feeling as if we are neither, but instead no one at all as Anzaldua mentions in her essay. But, truthfully speaking, you can never really be no one at all. Our identities and our language are what shape us as human beings. They play an essential role in shaping our personalities, our values, our morals, and so much more. Our language is our identity and our

identity is our language and they are so vastly interconnected with one another. Without these two incredibly defining pieces of our being, we lose the substance that has molded us as individuals since the beginning of our lifetime. This is a reality that took me years to grasp and come to terms with. After my failed attempt at relinquishing my identity in its entirety, it dawned on me that the possibility of having more than one identity at once was not as far-fetched as I had initially thought. The duality of our various selves gives us a sense of purpose and meaning and allows for us to share our unique experiences and perspectives with others of another identity.

“Pero hasta cuando no lo soy, lo soy”, a quote from Anzaldua’s essay that resonated with me greatly, in English translates to “Even when I am not, I am”. In the moments where I felt as if my identity invalidated my existence and held me back from opportunities and connections, my identity truly only launched me further in life. The erasure of anyone’s identity, especially the ones of those who have continually been silenced and oppressed throughout history, is the erasure of our culture and our language and all of the unique and valuable resources we bring to the table. Anzaldua makes it a point in her essay to emphasize the strength and willpower of the latinx community, specifically chicanos, and I believe the same holds true for many hispanic communities. From now on I will no longer feel ashamed to speak the slang variation of Spanish that happens to be my native language in a room full of people. I will no longer be ashamed to eat and share my cultural foods with others out of the fear they might reject it. I will no longer be ashamed to stand out in a room full of people unlike me. I am the product of thousands of years of struggle and perseverance by my ancestors and my very existence is the proof and representation of those battles, and the battle for our cultural identities and languages to be seen, acknowledged, and appreciated is a battle we will never surrender.