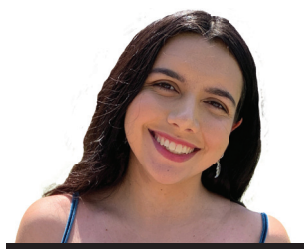


ILLUSTRATION BY TRACY ESCOBEDO

# I love celebrating my Hispanic heritage



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I am a disgrace to my Mexican heritage.

I repeated this mantra into mirrors, windows, bodies of water, anything with a reflective enough surface to see my disappointing self.

However, after years of internal discovery and educating myself, I stopped believing I was a disappointment to my ancestors.

Forcing myself to confront my biracial identity crisis and learn all aspects of my Hispanic culture was the best thing I've ever done.

I'm the textbook stereotype of a Latin woman with thick hair, dark eyes and a light tan. My name carries the slightest hint of an accent that Starbucks baristas never seem to get right.

Despite this, I felt I was parading myself around in a facade of assumed culture and identity. I was an imposter. I didn't fit into my skin.

Experiencing the identity crisis of growing up biracial isn't a unique experience. Around the nation, 24.8 million Americans identified as multiracial in the 2020 census, according to an Oct. 8, 2021 article by the Washington Post. I can't imagine that I'm the only one who struggled with their cultural identity, yet I never heard anyone else express the same sentiments.

No one in my social circle talked about how they were grappling with being accepted by a community they couldn't relate to but also belonged to. It felt wrong calling myself Mexican, like I was

grasping at the smallest of strings to be different and special.

I was able to skirt many instances of racist remarks thrown at me and horrors of being discriminated against. I was perceived as white, which gave me some semblance of privilege. For that, I am grateful, but it came at a cost.

Growing up in limbo between being too white for one side of your identity and being too brown for the other can tear someone apart.

No one was ever surprised when they saw me with either one of my parents. I was stereotypical enough to look like my Mexican father's daughter and just white-washed enough to walk around with my midwestern mother without a second glance from others.

blond hair and surfer slang was the standard, I stuck out.

The friends I made were never outright cruel, but they made it clear that I was different.

These girls had Mexican dinners every night, listened to songs I couldn't understand, had quinceañeras and a family party every weekend.

I desperately wanted to be like them. My teenage self longed for a sense of culture and community. As I sat daydreaming in my bedroom, I thought of all of the experiences I was lacking. All I knew about my culture was that we have a holiday called Día de los Muertos and we like the famous singer Vicente Fernández.

Día de los Muertos is a holiday celebrated in Mexico to honor the dead

language. As I grew, I came to understand why. My father was "othered" in his youth. He was surrounded by peers in his formative years that didn't look or speak like him.

My father was one of the only non-white children to attend his prestigious high school, which he could only afford to go to because of the generosity of a stranger. He sheltered his children from any stories of racist remarks he received as a child, but I have no doubt they were hurled at him from time to time.

In my father's effort to protect us however, I became othered.

I didn't speak Spanish. I had never heard of half of our cultural dishes. My 15th birthday wasn't celebrated with a quinceañera. I didn't celebrate Mexican holidays.

I was embraced in my culture for the first time in almost two decades, hundreds of miles away from the border I grew up next to.

I wasn't called a "fake Mexican," like my ex-boyfriend branded me, as I navigated through my identity crisis and culture shock.

I stumbled my way through learning my cultural language. The four years of Spanish classes in high school were absolutely useless. I still have no idea how I passed the AP exam for it.

While my grammar still isn't perfect and I don't always understand when someone speaks a bit too fast, my Spanish has vastly improved. I can proudly report that I can survive a day in a Spanish-speaking country without whipping

lack of proper educational resources and inclusion.

Many Mexican children who were born in the United States might feel like they have no true connection to their heritage. Translating tax documents to your parents is a much different experience than growing up on a rancho or in the bustling cities of Mexico.

We even are separated with our title, Chicano, a description of our unique experience.

Oxford English Dictionary defines Chicano as a person living in the United States of Mexican origin or descent. This title felt as though I was further separated from my family's motherland, but still gave me an identity.

Being torn between two countries and cultures, holding love and pride for both, but not truly belonging to either can push anyone to feel like an imposter.

With Hispanic Heritage Month just beginning, I'm reflecting on this journey of learning to love my stereotypical Mexican appearance without feeling like I'm parading around in a costume.

The right to your Mexican heritage isn't given after meeting a list of unattainable qualifications. It isn't a job application that you pray is accepted. Being a part of Mexican culture is a learning process. Being biracial isn't a crime against your family.

Oh, and to that ex-boyfriend; screw you. I worked hard to learn and love my Mexican side, and no one can ever take that from me again.

## Growing up in limbo between being too white for one side of your identity and being too brown for the other can tear someone apart.

I grew up 40 minutes north of the Mexico border in Southern California, yet I didn't learn my family's native language until I left home for college.

My childhood consisted of American dinners, Disney Channel and ballet dancing. Unlike some of my friends, I had no personal or emotional connection to Mexican culture until I was a teenager.

The title "no sabo kid" plagued me when I entered high school.

"No sabo" refers to a young person with Hispanic heritage that doesn't speak or understand Spanish and was used as an insult, according to a Sept. 16 article from NBC. "No sabo" is a poor and incorrect conjugation of the phrase "no se" which means I don't know.

I gravitated toward the other Latin girls in my class, wanting to find a home around people who looked like me. Coming from a coastal Southern California town where

and welcome back to the world of the living for a day, according to a Oct. 27, 2022 article from the New York Times.

The only culture in me was my name. I carry the name of a grandmother I never met. Even if I had met her, I would have never been able to understand her.

My father didn't teach any of his children Spanish. My mother, a white woman from Illinois with the best intentions, tried to teach six-year-old me Spanish from a big yellow picture book. Considering neither of us knew how to pronounce the words, it went as well as you can expect.

I learned to sit quietly at the dinner table during holidays with my father's side of the family while my tías and tíos gossiped around me. I was an outsider in a place that should have been my home.

I don't hold anger or resentment against my father for not teaching my brothers and I our native

I wasn't Catholic. I wasn't even fully Mexican, just biracial.

I wasn't good enough to call myself Mexican.

That's what I told myself every time I struggled in my Spanish classes in high school. I would cry in my tia's guest room after visiting my grandfather and step-grandmother because I couldn't speak to them without a translator.

This translator was a cousin named Cielo. Her name means sky or heaven, which I find fitting, as she dragged me into my own form of heaven when I moved closer to her at 19.

After I moved to San José for my sophomore year of college, I quickly latched onto Cielo. She was my lifeline and connection to the culture I was frantically searching for.

Cielo's house became my sanctuary. Her parents became mine while I was away from home. She became my tutor for folklorico, a traditional Mexican dance. My tío and tía became my Spanish professors.

out Google Translate.

I found myself cradled in supportive love the longer I resided in San José. My partner, family and new friends encouraged me to embrace my Mexican heritage. They patiently tutored me in language, recipes, dance and acceptance.

Instead of being excluded and taunted, I was brought to holidays with extended relatives. I was pulled into a dance company that remains steadfast in their mission to teach me, one of the most uncoordinated dancers of their ranks, how to move my folklorico skirt just right.

My identity crisis was swept away far easier than I expected as soon as I surrounded myself with an accepting community.

The hardest realization was that I was never a disgrace to my culture, I was just surrounded by people who treated me like one.

Growing up a "no sabo kid" is not a crime against my ancestors, but instead a



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