

The Star-Spanglish Banner

When I was in the fourth grade, my class watched a film about Martin Luther King Junior that left me distressed. I posed my problem to the girl whom I considered to be the smartest student in our class. “I have a question,” I asked tentatively. “In the movie, right, I saw...black and white people in the Civil Rights Movement, but I mean...what happened to people like me?”

She thought about it for a moment before replying dismissively: “I think your people had their own island somewhere.”

Being left out of the story left me devastated. My people, mis Latinos, my parents and I, we were never going to be the writers or the heroes of any American stories. We were forgettable footnotes in the essay of race in America. My brownness served only to muddy up the spectrum, and for a long time, my vibrant culture and skin color represented to me the unbearable lightness of being in the middle.

Why is it that being in the middle – of colors, cultures, races, languages– is so awful?

When I was younger, my parents feared that the household tug of war of languages would wreak havoc on my budding mind and thus discouraged me from speaking Spanglish, a mixture of Spanish and English. I wrestled with both languages, existing in one world and then another.

Language grapples with crises of existence. In history, it has been said that language follows power. That power struggle reaches even inside me as an individual. If I think about Shakespeare in English but tell my Mami and Papi that I love them in Spanish, how do I reconcile the two sides of myself?

The only language that I feel gives me the agency to decide between English and Español is Spanglish, which has earned the vendetta of the Spanish Academy for being a “deformity” of vocabulary and grammar but that expresses, so sweetly, the feeling of being in the middle. When I was fourteen, I attended a soccer game between the US Men’s National Team and the Panamanian National Team. Luckily, red and blue are colors belonging to the flags of both countries, so when I sat down in the Panamanian section with my parents and their friends, no one called me a traicionera, a traitor. When the game started, however, I was stumped. “Who do we cheer for?” I asked my friend, who was in a similar boat. “Easy,” he said confidently. “Cheer for the Americans in English and for the Panamanians in Spanish.” And so, it became a game for us, switching languages again and again every time the soccer ball moved until we cheered for the two beloved countries that had made us in perfectly imperfect Spanglish, blending together the red, white, and blue of both nations and creating a powerful palette of language.

At college, I have surrounded myself with people who maneuver the middle ground between two extremes, two cultures, or two languages – those who were born in one country and reborn in another; those who were born in America but believe in their hearts

that they belong in another; those who have one language for their mind and another for their heart. These are people who struggle with the questions of “Where do I belong? Whose side am I on? For which team do I cheer at the fútbol game?”

This speech is for all of those people, mi gente. The ones who believe that the language that they speak is a “deformity”, who believe that their identity depends on their passports, who like me who are not “American” enough to be this or “ethnic” enough to be that. This one is for the people who live in cultural no man’s land. Here is my message to all of you: embrace the ambiguity of cultural limbo. I am not governed by “either/or”, and neither are you. No one should have to live with the question of whether they belong to one country or another, because the answer is that you belong to neither of them. And that is okay. The middle ground between cultures, between countries, and between languages is a world all its own, one that you should feel proud of, because I do. Cada uno de nosotros tenemos nuestro propio Spanglish. We each have our own Spanglish. Speak yours proudly.