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Hispanic Heritage Month 2022

As a young kid in Mexico, I dreamed of being a doctor... and a professional dancer, an actor, a teacher, and living close to Disneyland, and attending an Ivy League, and ... The list went on and on. These dreams were met with a simple “that’s great” from all the adults that saw the reality of our surroundings: a border town run by drug cartels. Years later, we moved to Los Angeles and my dream of living close to Disneyland and near a beach became a reality. This began a journey of constant trade-offs in order to maneuver existing in this new environment.

When learning to exist in a new environment, you run into this constant juggling of old and new ways, I call it assimilation gymnastics. Elementary school-aged children will trade the gallo pinto lunch for lunchables, teenagers will adopt trends that are ahead of those in their home countries, and slowly but surely, both your native and new tongues mix to create a new one that creeps into your everyday vernacular (Spanglish). Give it enough time and you’ll forget how to speak your native language. These changes are part of the indoctrination into being Hispanic, a combination of your culture, and all other Spanish-speaking cultures south of the border. A strange amalgam that leaves you belonging neither here nor there, but somewhere in between. While I remain Mexican to my family and other Latinos, the Hispanic blanket places me in a grouped identity that mutes individuality. Suddenly we’re no longer barely visible while we work behind the scenes as farmhands, janitors, cooks and dishwashers. We are also indistinguishable physically and culturally as we get grouped into one.

Hispanic Heritage Month is bittersweet. A celebration of your heritage, and all the other Spanish speaking countries. It’s a reminder of your beautiful homeland and how you’re not there, and how even if you were, you’d no longer fit in. It’s a never-ending litany of reality and what could’ve been.

It’s longing
It’s bright colors and vibrant music
It’s kids in cages
It’s rich food, too spicy for some palates
It’s planes to Martha’s Vineyard
It’s being one of two in your cohort at Columbia.

It’s teaching yourself English, doing everything within your power to make your family’s journey worthwhile
It’s hearing a cry for diversity, without actual infrastructure to support it
It’s being the only Latino in the room
It’s being asked to speak for Latinos, because you are the only one in the room.
It’s a pacifier to say you’re celebrated, but not necessarily welcomed.
It’s standing by and supporting changes in the country’s turbulent racial climate, but being unable to fully benefit because of your migratory status- our rights are hardly a topic of conversation. And before you ask, yes, I’m in the country legally.
It’s not Mexican, Nicaraguan, or Chilean.
It’s not Latino as in from Latin America.
It’s Hispanic as in non-native English speaker, regardless of how many generations your family has been in the US.
It’s about skin color.

I have been very fortunate in my American journey, and would like to think that the young kid in Mexico version of myself is proud. I have managed to fulfill all of those young boy dreams, except being a doctor, but I’m working on that. This program felt far-fetched and inaccessible, and even after acceptance, I wondered if it was the right program for someone like me. Something like 4% of people with graduate degrees are Latinos, even fewer are Physical Therapists, and even fewer have Ivy League degrees. This made my placement in this program that much more poignant. While it’s less than ideal to be one of a kind in a group of people (at least in this case), that won’t change unless someone does it first. Someone has to take care of the people no one thinks of, the ones that get lost in the shuffle of marginalized categorization. This won’t happen until operational systems such as resource accessibility, cultural awareness, and income inequality are changed. Until then, happy Hispanic Heritage Month.