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Spanglish Whirls

“Don’t speak to me *en Inglés, hablame en Español. No entiendo English,*” I teased my three six-year-old cousins as they pranced around the living room in candy stained t-shirts and pungent smelling Spider-Man socks. It was the middle of June. All three, were in their early stages of English learning development. All three, were beginning to learn the inert verbal powers of the English language. *Los poderes* that their awakening English tongues were to wield like both sword and shield as they aged. Internally, it concerned me that they were suddenly speaking to me in English. They had only been in school for at least a year. Only a couple of years prior to their elementary schooling, they had been speaking to me in our shared native Spanish tongue. I felt as though they were trading their Spanish roots for those of the English. A sense of conflicted nostalgia arose within me.

The moment I was born, I was doomed to *nacer* on that strange edge of the world. On a horizontal line that divides the globe in half: on the equator of bilingualism. Spanish and English. English or Spanish? I grew up learning both languages in a Spanish-speaking household of first generation immigrants. My mother and her family immigrated to the United States in the 1990s from the southern side of Mexico, Michoacán. This, in hopes of attaining *un mejor* job and

a life opportunity that expanded beyond the troubles of deprivation. In their migration to *El Norte*, they took the only intangible force that they could flee with, their *Español* language.

In Kindergarten, I unconsciously learned to exchange the Spanish vowels in my name for those in the English language. My family had raised me to pronounce the beginning letters of my name, *yi*, with the Spanish vowel *i* (pronounced like the English vowel *e*). This made the pronunciation of my name essentially *isel*, or e-sel in English. School taught me to strip the Latin origin vowels away from my name and replace it with the Anglo-Saxon vowels instead. The teacher, *Señora* Johnson, a woman of about forty-years of age and a stickler of ‘good behavior’ would reward those who knew the most English words with gold-star stickers. Those who didn’t know as many English words as their English-only speaking counterparts, would be placed in a separate class by her. “They need improvement. Their assignments are consistently incomplete!” Mrs. Johnson would hopelessly say to the only bilingual paraeducator in a school of around 400 kids. Those who needed “improvement” had come from *familias* like my own who had recently settled into the United States. I was among one of those students who were sent into a bleak, dimly-lit room to take an English Identification Test. The *examen*, or rather, *prueba*, did not ask for grammatical error usage, neither did it ask about syntax. It simply asked to write in English what a toy and a plant was. To my surprise, I amongst a few others, passed the test and were sent back into the vibrant colorful classroom. However, the rest of my Spanish-speaking friends remained in that stale room for a few more troubling years.

As I entered my pubescent years in middle school, I learned that to speak Spanish was to know a secret gift. A gift that could provide a shared home-bound sphere of intimacy amongst friends. A miniature community within a community. Around lunchtime, I and a group of friends who were born on the same bilingual equator began to congregate around a round table

fit for eight people. “Hey! ¿Cómo estás?” Paola would ask me as I approached the lunch table. Her parents had emigrated from the South-Eastern side of Mexico, Veracruz. The town from which her parents were from spoke Spanish, as well as the indigenous language of Nahuatl. “Stressed, *estoy faillando* math. ¿Y tu?” I asked her as I slumped into the cold chair that stood empty beside her. *Faillando*, wasn’t even a real word. Yet, we both knew what I meant by it. It was an English word (to fail) that we had subconsciously conjugated into Spanish. It was then that I realized that we were bonded to each other not only because of our ethnic roots, but rather, because of a flexible and contagious language that we were creating. A hybrid of two languages derived from both the Northern and Southern hemispheres. From Spanish conquistadors to English colonizers. We spoke to each other in a chirpy Spanglish. A language that neither our parents, nor our peers could understand. There were no grammatical rules. No mistakes. It was a table that encompassed both the internal Spanish and external English powers of a newfound bilingual identity.

It wasn’t until I was in my sophomore year of high school that the image of my bilingual identity had begun to deteriorate. My Spanish tongue aroused a slight anxiety from those who could no longer understand the strange consonance of sounds that were coming out from my mouth and attempting to infiltrate their guarded ears. To speak Spanish in the years preceding 2016, was to be seen as a sudden stranger in your own country. It indicated that you were foreign, unwanted, and a threat to the Anglo-Saxon founding fathers of America who colonized North America in the all-or-nothing language of English. To these intolerant people, those who spoke in a different language meant they were defiling a virgin nation of pure-bred English. Viral videos began trending on every social media platform. People fitted in a rage screamed at people who did them no harm. Within these videos, all kinds of adults shamelessly yelled the same

chant, “Speak English. This is America. In America, we don’t speak your spic language!” They were right. This was America. A land that was stolen from Native Americans who didn’t speak English but rather, were cheated by the language. Then, however, I did not defend my ‘spic’ language. I kept my candid mouth shut and avoided speaking Spanish in public. In fact, I went as far as denying to myself that I had any correlation to it. While I internalized the oppression of racism, a part of me faded. I became what my Spanish-speaking friends started considering as white-washed. They did not know that I was fearing that someone would tell us to “go back to our countries.” “Where you alien Spanish fucks belong.” I began to treat English literature with a cautious bird’s-eye view. I slowly trapped myself in a vortex of metaphors, similes, dictions, tones, moods, atmospheres, and about anything else I could think of The vibrant southern hemisphere in which the Spanish language resided was no longer a place upon which I could freely flutter in and out of. It was here that I learned that language was a living entity that could be used to oppress, cheat, and strip someone of their identity—of their humanity.

Four years later, I found my mindset to be undergoing a recurring convoluted change in my collegiate *educación*. This time, however, it was my writing skills that hindered the perception of my bilingual identity. After taking my first English class in college—Writing 101—I noticed that my writing and English speaking skills had not been as perfect as my English high school teachers had made it out to be. Rather, I realized that I didn’t know jack squat about how to write in Standard English. Let alone speak it fluently and eloquently with grandiose intellectual sounding words. I began to feel inferior to my classmates. My English word bank was limited whereas theirs was limitless. It was in these moments in which I rediscovered that words that I didn’t know in English, I had known in Spanish. Oddly enough, if I didn’t know what something was called in Spanish, but I did in English, I would take the word and conjugate

it in Spanish. Take for instance the word rock. I would say *rocka*. When in reality, it's *piedra* not *rocka*. I had used it so often at home that even my brother and mother adapted the mutilated word. Perhaps, knowing Spanish was a burden, I thought. Had my family known English, my life would have been *más fácil*. Then, I took my second writing class and it was in that class that I learned that I could write in English, if I put in the extra work. "Writing will always be a work in progress," the professor said aloud as he circled in between the tiny space between the chairs and the wall of a cramped room, "there will always be something new to revise in your papers." I had been blaming my rancid English writing skills on my bilingual linguistic abilities. I took the statement to heart. It meant that being bilingual was not an obstacle or a challenge to my writing skills. Writing was a matter of hard work and effort. The more I wrote, the more I understood the importance of independent clauses and sentence fragments. It was then that I learned that knowing a different language would not help me fix the grammatical errors in my papers. But, it was also not hindering my writing abilities in English. Thus, I began to recognize my Spanglish *identidad* once more as a true evolving *tesoro*.

Over the span of my life, I have seen and felt all the ups and downs that come with a bilingual identity. In the inside of *mi hogar*, I spoke Spanish. Outside of my house, I spoke English. Spanglish too, at least, where I could. There is a dynamic pull of inner and outer identities that come together by the force of two languages. There is the inner Spanish, and the outer English. Or, Spanglish. In which case they both work together to combine formulated words and bring together an intertwined community. *La comunidad* that was born on the fine line that cut into the world of language; the equator that divided English and Spanish. Though not everything about being bilingual remains positive, however, and it is important to recognize this aspect of language. There are moments in which language can be used to categorize people into a

realm of disorientation. It can be used to cut into people's very souls. To undermine and to deceive others into believing that any other language besides the so-called elite language should be disregarded. This in itself is problematic because language is tied not only to communication, but to identity. It is connected to who we are as individuals. To who we are as humans. Having been born on the equator of two languages has taught me that we are all speaking about the same things. There is no real humane indifference. *Todos somos humanos.*