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BECOMING AMERICAN(?): AN AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHIC INQUIRY OF AN ECUADORIAN(-AMERICAN) FAMILY'S IDENTITY FORMATION IN THE FACE OF LONG ISLAND WHITENESS

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

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of

ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES

at

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

New York

by

Tabitha Andrea Benitez

Date Submitted ________________

Date Approved ________________

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Tabitha Andrea Benitez

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Dr. Steven Alvarez

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ABSTRACT

BECOMING AMERICAN(?): AN AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHIC INQUIRY OF AN ECUADORIAN(-AMERICAN) FAMILY'S IDENTITY FORMATION IN THE FACE OF LONG ISLAND WHITENESS

Tabitha Andrea Benitez

This dissertation examines the methods, reasons, and strategies of identity formation within an Ecuadorian(-American) family living on Long Island, New York. This autoethnographic research combines family interviews and the author's own experiences to investigate identity on three prongs: Latinidad, Spanish and English language usage, and honoring and creating homes. Latinidad is both a panethnic term that is assigned to Latinos living within the United States, but is also an identity that is individually practiced by those who identify as Latinos. I investigate the link between Spanish, English, and identity formation to dislodge the supposed link between language and Latinidad. By interrogating the definitions and function of home, I look at how we, Ecuadorian immigrants and children of Ecuadorian immigrants, carve out our lives in the places that we love. Engaging with my cousins and my own experiences living on Long Island provides a dynamic and personal intervention to the monolithic United States perspective of Latinos.

DEDICATION

Momma, this one is for you. For all of my life, you have supported me and been my biggest cheerleader as I tried new and scary things. At many points throughout this process I have felt deeply alone or scared, but you've always had my back. You supported me on my hardest days and pushed me when I needed encouragement. You always taught me that if I chose to pursue something it should not be because other people want it from me, or expect it out of me, but because *I* wanted it. Momma bear, I wanted this so bad. And I've done it. Now I honor you.

Thank you for supporting me, every day, always and forever.

I love you.

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This dissertation would never have come into existence if it was not for the guidance, support, and faith of my dissertation mentor, Dr. Steve Alvarez, and my committee members, Dr. Dohra Ahmad, and Dr. Anne Geller. When I entered each of your classrooms as a first generation graduate student, I was entirely ignorant of the processes of grad school. The first time I heard of the term “imposter syndrome” I was terrified; like I was being outed. I didn’t think someone like me should be in academia, and even more so, I didn’t think that *I* deserved to be here. But your faith in me and my project has helped quell those fears. Thank you for believing in me and helping me believe in myself. Thank you for supporting my ideas and letting me dive into the subjects that I didn’t know could be “academic.” You gave me kind words when I needed them and you pushed me harder when you knew I could do more. This dissertation really would not be here without you because I don’t know if I would have made it through grad school if it wasn’t for you three. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Likewise, this dissertation would never have come to fruition if it wasn’t for the time, energy, and valuable input from my cousins Nikki, Valerie, Jari, and Bryan. You guys know I love you all to death and I’d do anything for you. What you four have given me by sharing your innermost thoughts is something I can never repay. Upon your words, this project was written. But upon your friendship, this project was conceived. Thank you for trusting me. Thank you for always being my friend.

It is only natural that I acknowledge the influence of my family upon this project. Those unnamed cousins, aunts, and uncles sit as my intended audience, because in so

many ways, I wrote this for you. I wrote this for us. This isn’t our whole story, but it’s my attempt to show the world that we are here and we ain’t going nowhere. My brother, Mateo, and my sister, Erika, you two have always been my inspiration to pursue my dreams because I always wanted to show you that if I can do it, so can you. There is no limit, babies. Let your dreams and passions set sail. You can do anything. With their unwavering love and support, my parents, momma, Henry, and papi, believed in me and gloated just the right amount to keep me pushing. Thank you all for your continued support, and thank you for the roasts when I needed to be humbled.

Lastly, I’d like to acknowledge the tremendous presence in this project that is my husband, Connor. Connor, you, above all, have witnessed this process for all the ups and downs that there were. You reminded me that I am, indeed, *not* a workhorse and that I could/should take a break. You listened when something didn’t make sense to me, but, mostly, you learned about this monster that I love so much. When I decided to pursue this journey I thought I would have to do it alone, but you always were right by my side, every step of the way, and we learned together. Together we grew. Thank you for always being my biggest supporter and having faith in me. I love you from this day until the end of my days.

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CHAPTER 1: LIFE IN BETWEEN

After Senior Picture Day, a friend recounted to a group of us that the photographer who took her picture was Black and wore his hair in dreads. "Yea, he was my photographer too! He was so cool," I quickly added. This friend, clearly taken aback by my positive response, announced to the group, "Taby, you're always so accepting of other cultures." I immediately felt defensive. It did not seem outrageous to me to compliment a man who was polite and friendly while doing his job, so to shoot down her backhanded compliment I replied, "I am the other culture."

Everyone laughed.

I did not.

Introduction and Background

If you were to ask my mother what it was like for me to grow up on Long Island, she would tell you about opportunities and friendships I had, maybe she'd tell you about my rebellious streak in my late teens, but she would, at some point in her response, say something along the lines of, "Tabitha had no idea she wasn't white until she was in high school."

To a certain degree, she was right.

Growing up on[1] Long Island during my elementary years through college, I was heavily immersed in my local suburban culture, which was primarily white. I spoke like a

[1] Long Islanders are fully aware of the grammatical incorrectness of the term, "*on* Long Island." But this is how native Long Islanders say it. It is how we tell if someone is from here or if someone is a transplant. It's our own vetting process of belonging.

“white girl,” as some of my relatives would describe my accent, when in reality I spoke the local variety of English used in the schools I was attending at the time. I used “white girl” slang like “legit,” “epic,” and “elite.” I listened to Fall Out Boy, My Chemical Romance, and Paramore just like many of my white peers. I wore heavy black eyeliner and studded belts on top of criminally skinny jeans. I was part of the “emo” crowd. Such was growing up during the 2000s and I was just trying my best to fit in. I was told that all of these things were classified as “white,” therefore, so was I. Of course, I knew I wasn’t white. I understood then that my skin complexion, hair color and texture, and Ecuadorian background was nowhere near whiteness. But, I tried everything I could to assimilate into whiteness anyway. I was a kid and I wanted to be liked. For so long, I buried the part of me that is cumbia, and bachata, and arroz con habicuelas to fit in with white Long Island. I maintained an air of whiteness to get me along my school days and early professional career. But what has become increasingly apparent to me throughout my adult life, and particularly through my research, is that I can never be white. I will never be considered white even though I have assimilated to the point of having forgotten my Spanish, of only learning the steps to dance salsa in my late twenties, of needing to ask my mom how to make ceviche de camarón and then her making it for me any time I attempt it. The attempted assimilation of my youth did not make me white, but it did make me forget a lot of my Latinidad.

Cosplaying as a white, suburban girl led me to a vastly different kind of identity than that of my parents or my elders. Unlike my father who is an immigrant to the United States, I could not thoroughly claim Ecuadorian culture because I had never lived in

Ecuador like he did. Unlike my mother, the first born child to Ecuadorian immigrants, I was not raised in Jamaica, Queens and I did not have an urban, old-school Ecuadorian upbringing. I was, am, ingrained into white, suburban culture but I am also entirely Ecuadorian. I thought that living in between Ecuadorian and white, Long Island culture was an identity tug-o-war where one side would have to win over the other. After much deliberation, I became comfortable being in-between. It is not a stalemate, because identity is intersectional and I can be Latina, Ecuadorian, American, and a Long Islander.

The goal of this project was to investigate the questions I've always had regarding Latindad and belonging and turn to my family to learn how we, Ecuadorian(-Americans), have negotiated our identities while living on Long Island. In order to answer the questions I have, this project needed to be autoethnographic in nature. I use this method because it "attempts to recenter the researcher's experience as vital in and to the research process. [It…] is an observational, participatory, and reflexive research method" (Poulos 4). I am a part of the identity group I studied. I could not ignore my history and my perspective in search of some lofty, so-called objective truth. As in any research focusing on lived experience, "If you [can't] eliminate the influence of the observer on the observed, then no theories or findings could ever be completely free of human values or subjectivity. The investigator would always be implicated in the result" (Bochner and Ellis 35). My position as researcher already implicated me within my data, therefore I dove head first and engaged with my own experiences as well as the experiences of family members across generations.

In this dissertation, there is no objective truth because an objective truth would mean that it would have to be the same across all experiences. In my research, I searched for the subjective truths; linked entirely upon diverse lived experience. Invoking my cousins' experiences provided a deeper look into identity formation for people of Ecuadorian descent living within the white neighborhoods of Long Island. By using this qualitative approach with myself and family members I was able to intimately learn about the experiences of Ecuadorian(-Americans) living on Long Island in ways that mass data collection could not. The truths I learned were personal, subjective, and varied. Although autoethnography may feel like a reiteration of the individualism and personal narrative methodologies of the 1960s and 1970s, it is not. This project focuses on the collective nature of individual experiences to "illuminate human social life" (Poulos 14). Seeking out individual truths shed light on the individual nature of identity formation amongst Long Island Ecuadorian(-Americans). This project could not have reached the vulnerable truth in a survey or in a mass poll. I would not have heard productive answers to my questions with numbers, statistics, or generalized stories. I could not try to make a generalized Ecuadorian or Ecuadorian-American living on Long Island story. There is no one story that can represent all of us. There is no one statistic or poll that can do that either.

At the same time, this project had a goal of dehomogenization. Time and time again, I have heard white Long Islanders bunch up all Latinos into a group they call, "Spanish." Not only is this empirically wrong since many of us are not from Spain, nor do we claim our Spanish ancestry as our foremost identities, but also it erases the nuance that demarcates each Latino culture. In the face of a public that has consistently lumped

me wrongly into a culture I do not belong to, I feel obliged to stand up for my people--whether born in the U.S., Ecuador, or elsewhere. This project takes the proverbial stage and illuminates our lives and experiences. Investigating my cousins' lives dehomogenizes Latinidad as a monolithic identity by describing the variety of lived experiences and identities that have formed over lifetimes.

I am not the first to explore or dehomogenize Latinidad within U.S. borders (Caminero-Santangelo, Rosa, Juan Gonzales, Flores-Gonzales), nor am I the first to explore Latinidad in suburbia (Henríquez, Kalmar, Laura Gonzales), however this investigation will conjoin the fields of translingualism, migration studies and Latinx studies by engaging at the intersection of Ecuadorian heritage, white suburbia, and identity formation. Moreover, I looked at variations of identity between my cousins as a dehomogenizing practice. The individual cannot speak for the group, and it should not. The tolls that living in white suburbia has had on Latino bodies cannot be consolidated into groups. Focusing on Migration Studies, I emphasized the importance of Salman Rushdie's "imaginary homeland" on Ecuadorian(-American)'s sense of identity. I also interrogated Taiye Selasi's and Kristiana Kahakauwila's identity forming practices based on being a local. Together, I looked to both homeland and making homes as a method for situating belonging that leads to a hybrid identity. While not every story can be told out of sheer logistics, this will act as a guide for others to appreciate individual praxis as its own set of assimilatory or resistant acts. Within the field of Latinx Studies, I investigated matters of identity construction as Latinos living in white neighborhoods by turning to my cousins' experiences. I intentionally muddled the Latino narrative by focusing on the Ecuadorian experi-

ence within the United States. Lastly, I followed in the footsteps of Jonathan Rosa, Laura Gonzales, Rebecca Lorimer Leonard, and so many others working within the fields of translingualism and raciolinguistics to dive deeper into individual Long Island-based Latino language practices to disrupt overarching narratives of linguistic assimilation and upward mobility. However, the greatest importance of my research was as a theoretical move against United States whiteness to expose the innumerable experiences that permeate *Americanness*[2].

This project is one of respect and understanding. It supports people like me, who have lived their whole life assimilating but who might still feel on the outside. It sits in the center of personal and professional because there is no other way to conduct this project. It must be done with the utmost care, confianza, and respect just as one family member would give to another.

***America*'s Many Definitions**

When I hear the word "America" I think of red, white, and blue, hamburgers, and fireworks. I was born on the Fourth of July, so my entire life I have shared a birthday with national iconography. My parents almost named me Samantha after World War II propaganda icon, Uncle Sam. I can't help but conflate "America" with patriotic paper plates, singing the "Star Spangled Banner," and backyard barbecues. In short, for me, "America" is the United States.

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[2] Explanation for *Americanness* in italics in the section to come, "*America*'s Many Definitions"

However, this is an appropriation of the idea of America. Within the U.S., we shorten our country's name and forget that we are not America, we are the United States *of* America. We belong to a hemisphere upon which two continents sit, composing The Americas. If I do not interrogate the appropriation of the term, "America," I risk perpetuating the ideology that only certain people get to call themselves Americans. Moreover, we deny all other Americans to rightfully call themselves by their continental or hemispheric identity. People like me, whose ancestry is from South America, cannot call ourselves Americans because that title already belongs to the United States. Certainly, we can call ourselves South Americans if we so choose, but why does a single culture hold ownership of a term that refers to a hemisphere full of people? What is even more striking is that the term "American" reminds me of whiteness and white people. This is most clearly evidenced by my previous example, South Americans. "American" is the standard meanwhile other identities are deviations: Latin Americans, African Americans, Native Americans, and so on. Non-white identities must specify their ancestry, while white folks in the United States do not. *American* has been appropriated by the white United States to refer to itself.

I find this particularly problematic because of my lifelong struggle with identity formation. I assimilated well enough into white, suburban culture, but that never made me feel quite… *American*. If anything, my fourth of July birthday was a great way to assert my *Americanness* because the oozing patriotism of the holiday earned me brownie points amongst white people. However, my family *is* South American. We hail from both indigenous cultures and Spanish culture meaning that my ancestry is linked to The Amer-

icas from even before it was called The Americas. My identity is hemispherically American. But *I* was the one who questioned if I was *American* enough within the United States. My family and other Latinos question our belonging within the United States meanwhile our indigenous ancestry ties us to this hemisphere way before Spanish fleets accidentally landed on our shores in 1492. Indeed, we are all Americans, but only some of us get to call ourselves *American*.

In the spirit of a shared hemispheric identity, I turn to José Martí who first addressed the need for unity in his 1891 article, “Our America/Nuestra América.” In the article, Martí uses the term *America* to refer to all of those residing on the lands now called Las Américas/the Americas as a force for resisting the then colonial powers. Martí’s invokes a new definition of “our America” that seeks “to pair with charitable hearts and the audacity of our founders, the Indian headband and the judicial robe, to undam the Indian, make place for the able black, and tailor liberty to the bodies of those who rose up and triumphed in its name” (7, 10). This is not only a hemispheric approach to redefining America from the United States’s perspective, it also levels the playing field between all of our American ancestors--European, indigenous, and black--and their respective histories without silencing one or the other. To me, this rings as a truer, more just method of defining “America” because it looks at the parts of this land’s history as equals. Martí argues that “the history of America from the Incas to the present must be taught in its smallest detail, even if the Greek Archons go untaught. Our own Greece is preferable to the Greece that is not ours; we need it more” (9). Martí argues that learning and centering our hemispheric history is of the upmost importance if we are to generate a hemispheric

identity. Indeed, focusing on the history of these continents recenters the value of our ancient indigenous civilizations as opposed to focusing on the happenings of antiquity from across the sea. A hemispheric American identity is not focused on its European roots primarily, but its own land. Using Martí's hemispheric definition of America, the U.S.'s appropriation of *American*--as a subject of whiteness and, therefore, Europeanness--unravels. *American*, as the U.S. uses it, can then no longer be able to only refer to the white United States.

Building upon Martí's hemispheric American identity, Walter Mignolo addresses the unified idea of Latin America. Mignolo argues that the idea of Latin America "is actually a hyphenated concept within the hyphen hidden under the magic effect of the ontology of a subcontinent" (57). While North America was defined by its Anglo roots, "'Latin' America was the name adopted to identify the restoration of European Meridional, Catholic, and Latin 'civilization' in South America" (58). The resulting idea of Latin America was an approximation to modern Europeanness that also slipped into the colonial thinking that Martí urged against (Mignolo 58). For Mignolo and Martí both, it is undeniable that The Americas share identity and history. The ways in which both scholars address The Americas expressly decenters the United States's perspective, nor do their mentions of the word, "America" refer to the United States. It is key to note here that José Martí is Cuban, and Walter Mignolo was born and raised in Argentina, but now lives in the United States. These perspectives from outside of the United States demonstrate exactly how the U.S. appropriates the word *American* to refer to itself by providing an entirely different definition and identity for the exact same word.

It is for this reason that I will use the term *America* or *American* in italics when using the term from the white washed, U.S., self-referential perspective. I want to invoke Mignolo and Martí’s hemispheric definitions and highlight the dismissiveness and irony this term has towards people of color within the United States. I will refrain from calling the United States *America* to further dislodge the idea of *American*ness from whiteness. These two things are not one in the same and should not be equated as such, even in language.

Why I Choose Latino

While writing this project I fiercely debated how to refer to myself and my people. I began with Latinx because it felt academic and gender inclusive, however, the more I wrote, the more comfortable I became with Latino. I love and appreciate the mission that Latinx sets out for our non-binary community members, but it is not a word I ever use in speech. It is a word that solely exists in academic language for me. Since this dissertation focuses so heavily on the day-to-day experience of Long Island Ecuadorian(-Americans), I decided to write as I speak and call us Latinos. Throughout this project, I engaged with my cousins regarding their various layers of identity. So to demonstrate the different levels between all these identities, I use Latino for a panethnic identity, and Ecuadorian and/or Long Islander for their regional identities.

Almost interchangeably with Latino, I also use the term Latinidad throughout this project. I use Latinidad to describe Latino identity for Latinos living in the United States, but the idea of Latinidad has its roots in colonialism and (post)colonial identities. In *The*

Idea of Latin America Walter Mignolo proposes that the term Latinidad was born from Central America's, South America's, and the Caribbean's shared history of Spanish colonialism. Mignolo explains,

> "Latinidad" was precisely the ideology under which the identity of ex-Spanish and ex-Portuguese colonies was located (by natives as well as by Europeans) in the new global, modern/colonial world order. When the idea of "Latinidad" was launched it had a particular purpose within European imperial conflicts and a particular function in redrawing the imperial difference. (Mignolo 58)

He states that the idea of Latinidad was a creole response to "create their own postcolonial identity" (Mignolo 59). European transplants and their descendants invoked their Latin roots (European Latin, not U.S. Latino) in order to approximate European power and establish themselves as a unified political identity while also silencing indigenous and enslaved cultures (Mignolo 59). These creoles felt their power threatened when they began to lose their European privileges as they lived longer and longer in the American continents. Therefore, the idea of Latinidad arose to mimic that same kind of assumed European cultural superiority. It was a move away from what they deemed as barbaric. It killed the indigenous and African and formed a new identity.

Within the United States today, Mignolo argues that Latinos have redefined our Latinidad. He proposes that, "Latinos/as in the US cut the umbilical cord that still connects Latins, in South America, to Europe… In short, 'Latinidad.' from its very inception, in the nineteenth century, was an ideology for the colonization of being that Latinos/as in the US are now clearly turning into a decolonizing project" (Mignolo 64). Indeed, for

many U.S. Latinos, myself included, we do not invoke the Latindad of old that sought to approximate Europeanness. We do not feel connected with Europeanness. We are not just the creole superiors of Latin America. Instead, many of us acknowledge that our Latindad is the mezcla of all of our roots--European, Indigenous, and African--and the many vibrant cultures that survived. When we utter the word Latino, it is not an attempt to recapture our Spanish colonial roots, it is an attempt to redefine ourselves away from Europeanness and embody Latin America as our homelands.

My insistence on the term Latino is also founded on Marta Caminero-Santangelo's conviction, "'Latino' or 'Hispanic' has acquired a very real meaning and power in U.S. public discourse, inevitably those named by the category must therefore engage with it somehow" (31). The United States insists on grouping us all together for reasons of convenience and identification but from this we've formed a likeness. Latinidad has already conjoined us and forged us a community together. We have found a common ground with other Latinos. It can be used for political purposes because of power in numbers. It can be used as kinship. It can be used as a rallying cry for us to call for social change. It is a great overarching term, but part of using it is, in fact, knowing that it is an overarching term. It is not the whole story. It, by design, is a stereotype. Each of our own lived experiences dehomogenizes us. I do not believe that there is a need to invent or redefine a term that better suits our identity. The term functions as it was intended to. So, in the spirit of community, I continue to use Latino and Latinidad but I do so with the knowledge that this is not our ultimate identifier.

Statement of the Problem

I have lived on Long Island for so long that I just feel normal here. In a lot of ways, that means I feel white and I forget that, as a Latina, I am different. But my differences come rushing back at me when a stranger stares a little too long, or when a cashier needs a form of identification when I make a big purchase, or when a new acquaintance asks me where I'm from, but doesn't want to know what town I live in. I have struggled with this most throughout my life: growing up in the same neighborhood, going to the same schools, shopping at the same stores, etc. as everyone else in my own little neck of the woods and still being the Other.

There is no doubt in my mind that this otherness stems from my background. Although I am American born, I am of Ecuadorian descent--and I look it. At 5'4" I am the tallest woman in my family. My skin is the color of a café con leche and my hair hangs black and straight all the way down my back. I've often been told (in other words) that I am ethnically ambiguous, but for those who know, I am Ecuadorian looking through and through. The thing is, many of my white peers in my neighborhood do not know. White Long Islanders have a special identity marker, "Spanish," that lumps together anyone with brown skin and a Spanish-sounding surname. This is what I was called for many years of my life. I also referred to myself as Spanish for a long time. This overhomogenization distinguishes us as different from what a Long Islander ought to be/look like. That is, white with an Irish or Italian sounding last name but not *too* Irish or *too* Italian. I don't know many Giuseppes but I know plenty of Josephs. I don't know many Cillians, but I know plenty of Ians. By being given a moniker that assumes our ancestry, but

doesn't align with our actual ancestries, Latinos on Long Islands are considered the Other.

I understand that the color of my skin will always prohibit me from being seen as automatically *American* despite my birthright. At the same time, however, I am an *American* and I do belong here. I should not have to choose between blending into white culture or honoring the traditions of my Ecuadorian ancestry. No Latino should. No immigrant or child of immigrants should. Nor should we allow stereotyping and oversimplifications of our Latinidades to create us into a monolith. We perform the delicate balancing act of belonging to multiple cultures in order to assert our right to identify as we see fit. We deserve to feel like we belong and we should be able to use our own terms to define it. I am not the only one who sits between cultures. I am not the only one who has had to negotiate their belonging. This is the purpose of this research.

This project looks at Latinidad as it functions within white, suburban Long Island. Focusing on Ecuadorian(-Americans) experiences on the Island highlights the individuality of Latinidad and the various ways that Latinos form identity. Each iteration of Latinidad is defined and redefined according to each participant's lived experiences. Latinidad does not look like a single color, a language, a migration trajectory, or lived experience. Latinidad is a varied experience and one that is constantly under redefinition. We are a vibrant group of people unified by the United States's need to taxonomize and organize folks into neat boxes (Caminero-Santangelo 11). We refuse to stay in one box. We permeate every social category, and we carve ourselves a home where we go, even if we face resistance. Latinidad is a practice. We exercise Latindad by embracing our ancestry,

being proud of where we came from, and by fighting for our rightful places here within the United States. We may not be the stereotypical white, *Americans* that are depicted in mainstream media, but we are Americans nevertheless. Our experiences living, working, assimilating, and negotiating our identities awards us a seat at the proverbial *American* table. We are Long Islanders, but we can also be Latinos. The two are not mutually exclusive. This project works against the monolithic vision of Latinos in the United States by examining one family, one generation of people who grew up in one geographical location to scream from the mountaintops, "we are not the same." It is time to unpack the label and look at Latinidad for what it is. Plural and individually formulated.

Research Questions

This autoethnographic research is deeply personal. I look towards my family's and my own experiences as an Ecuadorian-*American* growing up and living on Long Island in order to better know how white Long Island suburbs have permeated our identity formation. Throughout this project I seek to answer the following questions:

1. How do white, Long Island suburbs affect our sense of Latinidad?
2. How do we hold onto our Ecuadorian roots, if at all?
3. Can Latinos also be *Americans*?

I could do a quantitative survey of Ecuadorians on Long Island but the purity and respect between loved ones is incomparable. It is exactly the closeness, the tightness, the shared history that makes this qualitative project possible. I cannot possibly try to over-homogenize Ecuadorians on Long Island (because doing so would be a failure to this

project and entirely undermine its purpose), so I use my resources at hand to my advantage. My cousins' stories, our stories, are the exact key to beginning to understand how Latinos (as a much larger racio-ethnic group) survive on Long Island. It will not paint a full picture. I doubt one work ever could. But this dissertation will provide a bold and emotional start.

Latinidad is Not Essential, It Is a Set of Practices

As far back as I can remember, I have been asking myself, "What does it mean to be Latina?" Actually, until about five years ago I have been asking myself, "What does it mean to be Spanish or Hispanic?" I did not align myself with the term Latina until my graduate years at St. John's University. Previously, I had been using the terminology of my Long Island peers.

A major part of growing up on Long Island has been grappling with the title of my identity, not even just the nature of it. I always knew my family hailed from Ecuador, but to the Long Island public, I was, "Spanish." I never questioned it. I went along with the name and never gave a second thought to the root of the word or the implications. Although my ancestry points me back to Spain, it is not an identity I claim. I do not even know enough about Spain to romanticize it. My lived experiences and my transgenerational culture is staunchly Ecuadorian. The humid beach climate is my homeland across continents. Everything tastes better with lime, salt, and cilantro. Hijueputa is our national curse word. Yes, my experiences are indeed Ecuadorian. Hispanic also feels wrong to me since it too strongly honors the colonial nature of our existence. Latina suits me best. Yet,

“Spanish,” is a term that I hear over and over again within the Long Island sphere. Those who I’ve tried to educate about the matter try to remember, but fall into old habits after a while. I am still guilty of referring to myself as Spanish every once in a while.

The innocence of my youth chalked up being called Spanish into one of three reasons. The first, I believe, was because of how I look--caramel-skinned with black hair. The second was because of my Spanish language skills passed down to me through ancestry, not books or classrooms. This is less likely because I did not often speak in Spanish publicly as a child or teenager. The third, and I know this is a stretch, was because my family migrated to the United States from Ecuador. I know this is a very hopeful reason since many people have followed up the question, “Where are you from?” with “Where is Ecuador?” So, I concluded that throughout my life that I was called “Spanish” because I am Brown.

Latinidad is so much more complex than just skin color, language, or heritage. Brownness is not unique to Latin Americans and certainly not Ecuadorians. There are many different cultures of brown skinned folks all over the globe. The flip side is also true. Not all Latinos or Ecuadorians have brown skin. We come in all shades of skin tone, including the darkest and lightest pigments. So, Latinos cannot be defined by our skin color. The Spanish language also cannot be a marker for Latinidad since it is a language that was forced upon us through Spain’s colonial power. Spanish is also not the only language found in Latin America. There is Portuguese, Creoles, French, English and, of course, indigenous languages that predate genocide and colonialism. Additionally, not all Latinos living in the United States speak Spanish; the reasons for which are numerous

and varied. Therefore, Latinidad based on language similarities is also not the best method for defining the identity. So lastly, I am left with Latin American culture as the defining factor for Latinidad. But I cannot compare Ecuadorian culture to Colombian culture to Dominican culture to Panamanian culture and so on. I cannot compare because I do not know them. There is no homogenous Latinidad across Latin America. The more I think of the ways that I have been assigned the "Spanish" title, the more I realize that it is not a set of characteristics or boxes to check off, but a set of practices that affirm Latinidad.

The first of the Latinidad affirming practices is based on Michel Foucault's theory of bio-power. Foucault theorizes bio-power as a function of how modern governments increase their power by dictating, recording, and exerting control over the physical bodies of its constituents. He writes,

> In the space for movement thus conquered, and broadening and organizing that space, methods of power and knowledge assumed responsibility for the life processes and undertook to control and modify them. Western man was gradually learning what it meant to be a living species in a living world, to have a body, conditions of existence, probabilities of life, an individual and collective welfare, forces that could be modified, and a space in which they could be distributed in an optimal manner. *For the first time in history, no doubt, biological existence was reflected in political existence*... Power would no longer be dealing simply with legal subjects over whom the ultimate dominion was death, but with living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied

at the level of life itself… bio-power to designate what brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life" (Foucault 142-143, my emphasis).

Latinidad and the Latino identity is a consequence of bio-power because it is a socio-political title built within the United States that aims to unify mi gente to the extent that we can be organized, counted, and made into data. This is evidenced by the question, "Race?" on governmental and bureaucratic documents, etc. The "Race?" question is on the U.S. Census, college applications, doctors' patient files, job applications, grant applications, and so on. Within the United States we are constantly bombarded with questions of taxonomy. We are asked to assign ourselves to a box, oftentimes literally. Foucault defines bio-power mainly through the cultural normativity found in laws--particularly heteronormativity and cis-gendering--but also by examining how governing powers "measure, appraise, and hierarchize" life through birth, death, and methods of population control (144). "Latinos are made in the United States," as Marta Caminero-Santangelo says, and it is not because there is an essential, unified identity that literally connects us to one another (20). Instead, Latinos are made in the U.S. because the United States compulsively categorizes and taxonomizes people into identity categories. By using identity categories in official documents, like the census, the United States actively engages in bio-power by measuring, appraising, and hierarchizing our vastly different experiences under one umbrella term that seeks to unify us in the eyes of the law.

Latinidad does not work like these boxes. Like Caminero-Santangelo, I believe that Latinidad, Latinos, Latinas, Latinxs, Hispanics, and "Spanish" folks are born here in

the United States. I believe that it is the United States' pathological need to name its citizens that we exist as a cohesive group at all. Latinos are too diverse to lump all together under other kinds of prerequisite criteria, but because we are all subjected to the United States's bio-power, we are joined together.

Yes, sometimes we stand together because of racism.

Yes, sometimes we stand together because of linguistic or cultural similarities.

Yes, sometimes we do not stand together at all.

The most important fact is that we are *viewed* as a single group by the United States' public, particularly the white public and especially by governing powers. We are under the bio-power of the United States' quantifying agencies, such as the census, and in that we may find unity together, even if it is entirely tenuous. Bio-power is strong enough, socially and politically, to forge a unified identity and influence a homogenous identity. This is the first process in exercising our Latinidad: understanding that we are labeled as such by *others*.

Latinidad, as Marta Caminero-Santangelo notes in her book *On Latinidad,* is a title that is born within the United States (20). Caminero-Santangelo writes that many immigrants to the United States opt to identify according to their home country before identifying with panethnic terms such as Latino or Hispanic because, as one Latin American immigrant states, "well, it just doesn't sound right to me" (Caminero-Santangelo 2). In other words, Mexicans will often self-identify by nationality before identifying as Latinos or Hispanics. Caminero-Santangelo insists that panethnic identities are a consequence of living in the United States for years or generations. She explains that it is the

hyphenated groups--the first, second, and third generations--that adopt terms such as Latino, Hispanic, etc. because "the further removed from the moment of immigration, the *more* likely the person was to use a term like 'Latino' or 'Hispanic' to refer to himself/herself" (Caminero-Santangelo 20). Indeed, the U.S's bio-power influences children of immigrants to begin identifying with panethnic terms. To this, I would like to add that integration into white culture also influences the ways a person refers to themselves, as well as the closeness a person may feel with their home culture. The acceptance of panethnic terms demonstrates the bio-power of the United States because we have internalized and identified with the words that "they call us" (Caminero-Santangelo 3).

The second affirming practice of the U.S.-based Latinidad is accepting the titles we are given. Yes, I am aware that this works almost exactly in contradiction to what I have said above but by fitting into how others see us, we find a community. When I meet another Latino, I immediately want to know their lives' stories--how recently their families have arrived, if they speak Spanish or not, what kinds of major cultural differences are there between our countries of origin, do they view themselves as Latino, too? My mind races with excitement to find someone who is like me. But at the same time, it is an anxious race. What if they only speak Spanish and then think me a phony? What if they are also Ecuadorian and I have to admit that I know little of our shared homeland? What if my insistence on Latinidad is frightening to them and my questions put them in an uncomfortable position? So, if the topic ever comes up at all between myself or other Latinos, I smile and move past it as quickly as possible. Not to ignore the past, but to acknowledge that our lives are very different. We exist in the same place and the same time,

and if without interrogation, our Latinidad is uncomplicated and welcome. We are hermanos living here together in los Estados Unidos. Despite our many cultural, racial, linguistic, and traditional differences, accepting the title of "Latino" forges a community of people with similar experiences. We face similar struggles and successes even if our stories are not singular. We can find pieces of home in people's ancestors who also came from jungles, sierras, mountains, and costas.

After grappling with the roots of bio-power associated with the terms "Latino" and "Latindad" and after having accepted them as a unifying factor for us living within the United States, the final affirming practice of Latinidad is to acknowledge that within the U.S. there is no one right way to be a Latino. There is no quintessential Latino, there are only stereotypes and expectations of what we ought to be. Latinos are intersectional beings. Kimberlé Crenshaw, in her article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," advocates for intersectional analysis into the ways that Black women are subordinated or "theoretically erased" by the law (Crenshaw 139). She writes, "because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (Crenshaw 140). Much like a car crash at a four-way traffic intersection, intersectionality looks at the place where a person's many characteristics, or identities, collide (Crenshaw 149). This is how I suggest thinking about Latinidad. Like Crenshaw explains with the intersection of Black women, Latinos are not just of Latin American descent, or just (possibly) Spanish-speaking, or just dark-skinned, or just immigrants, etc. We are at the intersection of all the different aspects that

make up who we are. There can be no one right way to be a Latino in the United States because we each have our own intersections.

At our intersections, we can break free from the gaze on outside-looking-in and call *ourselves* Latinos. I am not a Latina because the census tells me to write in my ethnicity, or because the Long Island public calls me Spanish. I am a Latina because I exist at the intersection of taking pride in my ancestry, balancing my heritage and my suburban culture, and speaking multiple languages because *I* want to. I take pride in knowing that I look Latina. I do not let one aspect take over the other because I live at the intersection of all these things. This is how *I* embody my Latinidad. This negotiation of identity might function differently for someone else and that is okay. Latinos look, sound, and act different from one another. The most important part of individuality is ending the stereotyping that I was subjected to as a child and teenager and allowing Latinos to come into their Latinidad on their own terms. I should not have been made to feel like a "white girl" because of the way I spoke, dressed, or who I spent time with. The attempt to stuff me into a box of someone else's definition of how a Latina ought to be made me feel small and unworthy of my own identity. I will not do this to others. It is not a cop out to let Latinos find their own path to Latindad, academically or socially. By embracing intersectionality and the multiplicity of lived experiences, Latinos can rupture the stereotypes that fail to acknowledge our differences. I am a Latina because I am a Latina. No one can take that away from me.

Individually drawn intersections is what this project is founded upon. Each Ecuadorian(-American) I've interviewed has developed their own unique understanding

of Latinidad. Some individuals have decided that their Latinidad comes from their Ecuadorian ancestry. For others, Latinidad means holding onto Ecuadorian ideals, like family and pride for homeland. No one mentioned that Latinidad is linked to skin color, or physiological characteristics, or language. Instead, their individually negotiated intersections--deciding where and how and what to keep of their family's traditions while also balancing Long Island suburban culture--is how they enable, invoke, practice, and embody their Latino self-identity.

Latindad is a set of practices. It is the delicate balance of reconciling homeland, heritage, the ways we are perceived by others, and the names that are given to us. It is the reclaiming of the word "Latino" when the term was meant to quantify us and combine us into a cultural homogenous hodgepodge that doesn't actually exist. Latinidad is the process by which each and every person who claims this identity negotiates their daily lives. Each day we decide how we will outwardly present ourselves to the world and how much of ourselves we want to share. Latinidad cannot be tied down to a single definition because it is constantly unmade and remade. It is a survival strategy. It is assimilation. It is honoring our pasts. Latinidad is as individual as it is plural.

Autoethnographic Inquiry is a Must

The goals of this project demands that I invoke autoethnography. "Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experiences (ethno)" (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner 273). To unweave the monolithic "Spanish" identity that

white Long Island has placed upon the bodies of Latinos and seek the truth about identity formation amongst Latinos on Long Island, I must reflect upon and analyze my past experiences as a Latina and as a Long Islander.. Therefore, this project is, in part, autobiographical. In order not to overemphasize my own experience as *the* Latina Long Island experience and further dehomogenize the monolith of Latinidad (particularly on Long Island), I also must investigate the culture I want to know more about using ethnographic methods. For this, I turned to my cousins. My cousins are also of Ecuadorian descent and have lived most of their lives on Long Island. The conglomerate of experiences "offer richer, more complex, more evocative narratives of human social life. Furthermore, autoethnograph[ies] recognize that all social praxis researchers are embedded in the social milieu they are studying. We are all active, self reflexive agents" (Poulos 10). My methodology is a personalizing tactic for both myself as a researcher, and for my cousins, upon whose experiences this dissertation is based.

Pulling from many different experiences, this project weaves together individual stories with scholarly work and theory. I pull from Bochner and Ellis's *Evocative Autoethnographies* and focus on engaging the audience through storytelling. The little I know about Ecuador and my personal history is through stories. I come from a family of storytellers, my father being one of the best storytellers I know. In the tradition that has been passed along to me, I write from a place that exists "between a cold and rational objectivity and a hot and visceral emotionality; between a commitment document the reality of what happened and a desire to make readers feel that truth coursing through their blood and guts" (Bochner and Ellis 66). History and personal history are intertwined to

me. I cannot have one without the other. I am not in search of an objective truth in this project. Indeed, I do not think there can be a single objective truth for the questions I ask. Instead, I am in search of the story of how it all comes together: the feelings, the practices, and the liminal spaces in-between where my cousins and I have found our identities and forged our own notions of belonging. This story may not have an ending, but the plot dictates the process of how we negotiate our Latinidades while living on Long Island. In order to do the stories of my family justice, autoethnography is necessary.

I am not ignorant to the resistance that stands against the autoethnographic methodology. Some may find this qualitative research biased or too subjective. Christopher N. Poulos argues that,

> It is, in fact, biased--in favor of a world view that embraces a practice of qualitative inquiry as subjective, participatory, personal, local, self-reflexive, generative praxis aimed at evoking, interpreting, and critiquing human social life. It is biased in favor of a view that the studies insights of an engaged researcher have value. It is biased against the notion that humans can ultimately achieve objectivity. (29)

I do not fall prey to the notion that I can sit in the background, observe, and be able to objectively write about a cultural phenomenon. As a human being and researcher, my presence influences the individuals I study. In turn, they influence the ways that I think about and write about my research. Autoethnography is as engaged with the recursive process as it is with research (Poulos; Bochner and Ellis). In fact, the writing of autoethnography is the physical embodiment of the self-reflexivity performed throughout research. Throughout my writing and editing of this dissertation, I became more attuned

with how I was presenting my information as well as how my research influenced the ideologies I posited throughout this work. Indeed, this is a “biased” project because I have been aware of my position as a person, researcher, and family member throughout this entire process. It is biased because my love and respect for my cousins pushes me to think about other people’s cousins, siblings, and family members and how they would like to be presented throughout this research. I can never be objective in this work because the community I care about will always tug at my heartstrings and move me. This is not a biased approach. It is simply one that does not believe that I could ever be a fly-on-the-wall, objective on-looker, free from emotional responsibility.

I believe that the strength of this project lies in the tight-knit relationships I have with my participants. They are my cousins. Because of how close we are, they granted me insider access to their lived experiences. My cousins shared their innermost thoughts throughout this research because of my position as a cherished family member, not because I was a researcher who thought she had a right to their stories. My participants spoke their truths, and in their words, I saw where we could stake a claim against the monolithic stereotype that stands against Long Island Latinos. Their stories affirmed the questions and thoughts I had as child and teenager and forged a new definition of Latinidad that is smelted together by many stories; ours being of Ecuadorian ancestry but varied from person to person. Utilizing the closeness of our relationships helped me bring together the plurality of Latinidad based on intersectional identities. This was an opportunity to come center stage and speak our Ecuadorianness loud and proud in the face of

the United State's bio-power that tries to taxonomize us as a unified Hispanic. And we took it.

This project consists of a series of four interviews with my cousins--all of whom had spent significant time here on Long Island growing up-- as well as my own self-inquiry. Bryan, male, age 27; Jari, female, age 24; Nikki, female, age 30, and Valerie, female, age 29 are all cousins who I know and love dearly. All of us grew up in a 10 mile radius from one another. Since many of our parents were immigrants to the country and/or emigrated to Long Island from Queens in their early adulthood, we all formed our own little community.

Myself, My Self-Awareness

My name is Tabitha Benitez and I struggle with my Latinidad.

There, I said it.

Saying this on paper feels like spitting out my own teeth. This is a bloody truth, one that I was sucker-punched in the jaw with years ago and one that I've been trying to wiggle back into place in an attempt to ignore the irreplaceable nature of my teeth's roots. I'd hate to let people know of my toothless grin, a seeping mess, red and wet. For this I'd need surgery, medical intervention, not a restless tongue swallowing blood. And yet, here I am, dripping from the mouth to finally announce that I, Tabitha Benitez, struggle with belonging to my own culture.

Growing up in a mostly white neighborhood, I had a limited view on what it meant to be Latina but I always had my family. Back then, I just called it Spanish because

I didn't know any better and used the words of the (white) people around me (who also didn't/still don't know any better). Often, I felt uncomfortable within my brown skin because of my limited Spanish language ability and was in awe of family members who were able to command Spanish as easily as English. I was jealous. But more importantly, I was ashamed. I did not feel like I was Spanish enough so I trusted my Anzaldúan facultad and leaned heavily onto whiteness to combat the feeling of being an outsider. I tried to assimilate myself as much as possible to suburban living in hopes of being accepted as one of the white folks, but never was. But this was my strategy for survival as a child and young adult and what it cost me was years of insecurity in my skin, my language and my culture. I know now that race—my racialized body—can never be ignored and must be addressed in order to overcome the queasy feeling of not belonging. I trusted my deeply ingrained and guttural sixth sense of survival, my facultad, to help me get through my younger years and now I turn to survivance to reclaim all that which I lost. While stating that survivance is a capricious term that cannot be tied down to a single definition, Gerald Vizenor describes survivance as "an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction" (1). Listening to the stories of my people is not a reaction to survival or loss, but an acknowledgement that we have been here all along. It is of the utmost importance to understand that I am not the only person who has changed or sacrificed in order to survive. Furthermore, it is ultimately important to me, and hopefully to my audience, to dislodge these idyllic 12-year old notions of Ecuadorian-American hybrid perfection to lay out, bare and true, the

ways that even my Spanish role models have negotiated body, mind and culture. These stories have become a part of our survivance narrative, too.

As a kid, I was told that we speak Spanish. *Our family* speaks Spanish. But all this caused me pain as I tried to recollect the words that once flowed so easily. I could understand well, I could even read and write a little bit of Spanish, but spoken Spanish reopened the wound of my broken mouth. So, I stopped trying. This gash was so deep that I turned my back to my Ecuadorian roots. I spit them out in a feigned disgust. I figured that if I could not speak Spanish the ways my family members could, then I could not possibly be fully part of the family. I was not Ecuadorian like everyone else, but I was Ecuadorian-*American* (emphasis on the *American* part). And such my struggle began.

I tried to whiten myself. I immersed myself in Long Island culture, the white one. I listened to emo rock, pop punk, screamo music, and hardcore metal. I wore my hair long and pin straight, half covering my face like my white friends did. (Now, don't judge. It was 2007 and this was *cool*). I wore vans and converse shoes and enjoyed dark, brooding literature. In retrospect, I acknowledge the arbitrary nature of fashion, trends, and middle school/high school cliques, but I chose this particular style to immerse myself into *precisely because* it was what my family thought of as white. In my teenage brain, the logic was this: if I cannot be "Spanish" enough for my family, then I will be the whitest "Spanish" girl they know. I stopped trying. I learned a completely new foreign language--French--in order to further distance myself from my Latinidad. I condemned the browner side of me because I never felt like I could be worthy enough to belong.

Here's the kicker. I couldn't belong in the white community either. I was too *brown*. I mean this in a deeply colorist way. I had friends who were of Argentinian and Puerto Rican descent, but they were light skinned. They passed as white. Julissa Arce quips, "I am not sure what it means to pass as white. Doesn't that just mean someone *is* white" (142)? Indeed, in this case, these white-skinned Latinos did not face the same kind of backlash as I did, even with last names like Gonzalez. No one ever gave them a hard time for eating traditionally Latino dishes. No one questioned their parents' accents. No one questioned *their* existence in the group. They *were* white. However, because of *my* complexion, *my* heritage, *my* Latinidad was vibrant and therefore my existence within social circles was questioned. I was on the receiving end of anti-Latino remarks. In my desperation to fit into the whitest group of people, I endured countless name calling, bullying, and straight up mean shit no one should ever say to you because I wanted to belong. This was not my community, but it was my attempt to find one.

My struggle with my identity is like pulling my own teeth from my mouth.

So from an early age, I associated Latinidad with skin pigment and language. It looked a certain way: dark-skinned and curly haired. It sounded a certain way: it spoke Spanish and more often than not, it had the residual sounds of Spanish in its voice when it spoke English. For so long I had been defining myself by other people's rules instead of taking my own unique intersection into consideration. I had been holding myself up to the same standard as my parents and elder family members who had moved to the United States from Ecuador in their late teens, or been children of immigrants who were raised in Jamaica, Queens. For so long, I had considered Latinidad to be immigrant, "old-school,"

hard, street smart, or urban. I could not consider the possibility of a suburban Latinidad; one that was bookish, sheltered, and one that faced its own unique set of experiences. There was no overlap amongst those two identities. Suburban life, I was told over and over again, was a white life.

In graduate school, I finally learned that Latinidad did not look or act a certain way. I met peers and professors who were assured in their own Latinidad or their engagement with Latino cultures that I was finally pushed to find my own way. Seeing and interacting with other Latinos who called themselves Latinos who did not define themselves according to the strict rulebook of my childhood was exactly what I needed to start healing my wounds. Reading about Gloria Anzaldúa's nueva mestiza solidified my burgeoning, Latina identity. For the mestiza, Anzaldúa says, "rigidity is death" so then she "copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity… She learns to juggle cultures" (79). To be chicana, and by extension, Latina, means to juggle all the multiple cultures that a person embodies. It cannot just be one definition because of our many histories--colonial, native, migrant, citizen, and so on. I finally learned that to be a Latina within the United States means to be all things at once.

Chapters and Organization

This project is a pathway, a plot, a practice. The chapters in this dissertation are meant to guide you to a place where I, too, have landed. In the first chapter: "Disrupting the Monolith of Latinidad by Examining Long Islandness" I explore the various meanings of Latinidad. I interrogate my past and present understandings of Latinidad and also

explore my cousins' definitions of Latinidad. Together, we loosen the rigid knot of what it means to be Latino as I had defined it as a child. Furthermore, I investigate how Long Island has permeated our Latinidades. In chapter two, "Language Isn't Everything: How Fluid Language Practices Fuel Latinidad" I interrogate raciolinguistics, and what it means to be an English and/or a Spanish speaker on Long Island. In chapter three, "Moving and Making Homes," I close in on the lived experiences where my cousins and I have forged homes on Long Island, in the United States, and disrupted the idea of what it means to be an *American*. This chapter opens for the floor for healing for anyone who is struggling to live in-between.

Why This Matters

Even more than me and my family members, this project is for mi gente. Toda mi gente—Latinas, Latinos, Latinxs, children, adults—who are trying to figure out how to fit in between two worlds. This project is an affirmation honoring the generational differences between migrants and their children and all the levels of struggle and sacrifice that each Latino encounters within the United States. This project is a celebration of Latino strength and continuity in the face of the white, middle-class idyllic. It is the woeful eulogy of all that we have lost along the way. It is the hope that someday things will get better even if that means everything has to change. This project sits in the transitive space of being told who we are while screaming to define our existence as we see fit.

Conclusion

In the spirit of plurality and empowerment, I embark on this project. No longer shall I recede into whiteness as a coping mechanism. No longer will I feel ashamed of my languages. No longer will I sit in the sidelines while others live authentically. No. By embracing the mestiza, the intersectional, the splintering, I embrace life as a Latina on Long Island. An *American* who does not look like the majority but enjoys many of the privileges. I am Latina. I am American. Yes, this project is about me, but it's also about who this story can reach out to. The pain I experienced as a young woman and teenager need never be felt again. We can define ourselves by our own definitions and pathways and live in between all the cultures we are a part of.

CHAPTER 2: DISRUPTING THE MONOLITH OF LATINIDAD BY EXAMINING LONG ISLANDNESS

"To say that ethnicity is subjective is not to say that it is unaffected by what others say or do. Indeed, outsiders' conception of us may be a major influence leading to our own self- consciousness as an ethnic population. Others may assign to us an ethnic identity, but what they establish by doing so is an ethnic category. It is our own claim to that identity that makes us an ethnic group."

Cornell and Hartmann as quoted by Marta Caminero-Santangelo

"I feel like Latina is like sazón and whiteness is like salt and pepper."

Nikki

"I think whiteness is the bread and Latinidad is like the meat inside the sandwich."

Valerie

How Ambiguity Influences Latinidad

Before I even start this chapter, I feel it is necessary to state the obvious. We are not all the same. Any umbrella title that tries to homogenize us is an attempt to remove our individuality and our cultural differences. However, seeing that this project is being written from the United States and addresses the United States perspective, I must contend with the white gaze that attempts to turn us into a monolith. Latinos are not all the same, but in a country that has a compulsion to taxonomize (or, hates us), we look for unity. The purpose of this chapter is not to find a uniform Latinidad that can be copied and pasted onto every individual who identifies as Latino. Instead, in this chapter, I investigate how a small group of people embody their Latinidad on Long Island. Through their stories and my own, I aim to show the many iterations of Latindades.

When my mother says to people, “Tabitha didn’t know she wasn’t white until she was in high school,” I chuckle. Of course, I knew I wasn’t white. Unlike my peers, my hair did not lighten in the sun, instead, my skin got darker, and more cinnamon colored. I never brought food from home into school because my food was “weird” and “smelled funny.”[3] I was able to communicate with my family in two languages while my peers struggled through introductory level Spanish classes. No, I knew I could never be white. Underlying that chuckle, though, is a deep-rooted shame that I have only begun to grapple with. I wasn’t exactly ashamed of being Ecuadorian, but I was ashamed of not sharing similar experiences to my white peers; not understanding their food, music, or vast knowledge of American pop culture. I knew I was not white, but I wanted to fit in with my white Long Island peers, so I did everything I could to *act* white. Today, I am ashamed that I ever felt this way and let my insecurities get in the way of embracing my Latinidad to the fullest. Throughout my childhood and teenage years, the various identities I hold felt mutually exclusive. How could I, a gringuita, also be Latina? How could I embrace my Ecuadorian heritage and still fit in with my mostly white peers? It took me a really long time to understand what my Latinidad meant to me and how that fits into the Long Island suburban culture. So, I always knew I wasn’t white, but what took me a very long time to figure out is how to balance the many layers of my identity. The answer to a lifetime of identity struggle is, as Gloria Anzaldúa states, “a tolerance for ambiguity” (101).

[3] Also, there was no microwave in school cafeterias and everyone knows that cold rice is not as good as hot rice.

I think of ambiguity as the act of push and pull. Like the waters that surround Long Island, identity is fluid. Much of my past identity strife was based on others' definitions of Latinidad and whiteness. According to those Latinidad narratives, Latinos spoke Spanish fluently, *and* were dark skinned, *and* listened to Spanish language music, *and* danced salsa, *and* ate rice and beans… *and*… *and*… The list was exhaustive, but mostly, it was not realistic. Perhaps for some, the parameters of Latindad function as a list of additives, but ambiguity allows for ifs and buts. Latinidad is not a monolith, therefore, there is no one way to be a Latino (Arce 143). Ambiguity believes that "Latinos are made in the United States" and all Latino experiences are worthy of being a part of Latinidad regardless of generation, location, proximity to home culture, etc. (Caminera-Santangelo 20).

Latinidad is multidimensional. It functions like Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality that emphasizes examining the crossroads of the many aspects of a person's life instead of part and parceling their identities. If I were to work from within the "single-axis framework" that Crenshaw opposes, Latinidad could only exist as a single ethnicity that "imports a descriptive and normative view of society that reinforces a status quo" (139, 167). But by instead insisting on the multidimensionality of Latinidad I would be, "placing those who currently are marginalized in the center is the most effective way to resist efforts to compartmentalize experiences and undermine potential collective action" (Crenshaw 167). Intersections, then, can be used as a launching pad to examine the many iterations of Latindad, therefore debunking Latinidad as a monolithic identity.

Latino ambiguity allows for multiplicity in identities. We do not have to be a single thing because we change throughout our lives. In her memoir, *Lost in Translation*, Eva Hoffman describes herself as "splintering" as she becomes more and more assimilated into her new Canadian culture after having fled Poland because of religious persecution (197). We, Latinos, also splinter from our home cultures as we settle into our lives within the United States. We are constantly in the state of becoming and conserving. Gloria Anzaldúa in her essay, "*La Conciencia de la Mestiza*/Towards a New Consciousness" advocates for a tolerance for ambiguity. In her argument for a new feminized Latinidad, she says,

> The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode--nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad, and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else. (101).

Anzaldúa argues against rigidity of identity and supports the pluralistic nature of what it means to be Chicana. While Anzaldúa's perspective focuses on Mexican-American experiences, particularly within the U.S. Southwest, I believe that her argument overlaps with my experiences as an Ecuadorian-American from the point of being able to "juggle cultures" (Anzaldúa 101). Anzaldúa's intersections and mine do not align exactly, however this reinforces the multidimensionality of Latino experiences. By extension, Latinidad is also plural. Because of the largesse of its origins, we cannot think that Latinidad is just

one thing, or that it operates in a single way. Instead, Latinidad is more of a methodology than anything. It is a system of practices and traditions that a person embraces and continues. It cannot be confined to a strict set of checkboxes down a list. In my personal experience, Latinidad is also a feeling. It feels like pride, community, mom's cooking, the smell of campfires, cariño, y chisme. I don't think I could ever properly describe it, but I can feel it in my core. Latinidad is our origins and our lived experiences all at once.

The importance of ambiguity in this project is twofold. I aim to disrupt the monolithic perception of Latinidad within the United States, but I also want to disrupt the stereotype that Long Island is a white place. Yes, since the colonial era, there has been mostly white people who have lived on this 100 mile stretch of land; and yes, there is a controversial and racist history of keeping out people of color, but to continue calling Long Island white invalidates any non-white person's experience living here (Hartigan, Joerges, "Black History on Long Island," "Historical Population of Long Island Communities from 1790 to 1980," "Long Island's Transformation, 1970-2010"). I refuse to be reduced to whiteness because of the place where I have always lived. It is not a perfect place, but my experience living here my whole life proves that Long Island is not only for white people. I am here, my family is here, therefore Long Island is for Latinos, too. Moreover, just because we live here does not automatically make us white either. Living in the suburbs does not automatically strip us of our Latinidad by virtue of being suburban. Examining Long Island through the lens of ambiguity also allows for all of us to identify as Long Islanders.

Invoking an autoethnographic method for this project allows for a deep investigation into Latinidad. In this project, I interviewed four of my cousins with whom I share my Ecuadorian ancestry to locate how they, and we as a family, define our Latindad and how it functions for us living on Long Island. Autoethnography is necessary for this project because it "requires conscious attention to and focus on the researcher's experiences, memories, emotions, insights, epiphanies, and life practices as a way to gain a fuller understanding of the interaction between one's inner world(s) and the outer world(s) encountered in human social life" (Poulos 16). Utilizing a plethora of personal stories and experiences reinforces the ambiguity and multidimensionality of Latinidad. Each of our stories highlights how our own "inner world(s)" collide and inform our interactions with the "outer world(s)" (Poulos 16). The fluid and ambiguous identities cannot be captured by a single definition. Even the Wikipedia definition of Latinidad, "Latinidad is a Spanish-language term that refers to the various attributes shared by Latin American people and their descendants without reducing those similarities to any single essential trait" cannot pin down exactly what it is that we share as a people ("Latinidad"). Therefore, individuals ought to decide for themselves. By exploring our experiences with Latinidad and Long Island life, I seek to break down the homogenized monolith of "Latino" both on the Island and nationwide. The qualitative research done here will form a conglomerate identity of Latinidad that is based on experiences and not on rules or stereotypes.

The first issue I must address is the issue of naming. What do we even call ourselves? Julissa Arce in *You Sound Like a White Girl* bravely states, "I am not sure what

we collectively should be called, nor is it up to me, but I do know we are not the monolith America paints us as" (143). Indeed, the title we should be called is not up to me because I advocate strongly for individualized terms, but I know we are not what Long Islanders refer to us as; "Spanish." As I have stated in the previous chapters, this is the common vernacular that is used on Long Island to categorize, or taxonomize, people of Latin American descent. But in reference to myself, and to my cousins who are also of Ecuadorian descent, this title is inherently wrong. I recognize the distant Spanish ancestry that flows through my blood as a consequence of colonization, but I do not align myself with Spain's culture or history. I love paella, and I know that Real Madrid is a great soccer team, but this is, essentially, the extent to which I understand Spanish culture. Therefore, this is not a good overarching term to conjoin us.

Other terms I have heard are: Hispanic, Latino, Latina, Latine, Latinx, or a hyphenation (such as Ecuadorian-American). But what I have heard most loudly throughout all of these different titles is debate. The term Hispanic has been criticized as an anglicization of our identity and is said to reflect our colonial ties to Spain too strongly (Arce). Latino and Latina have been critiqued as too gender binary. Latinx and Latine have been called out as too academic and as what "white people call us" as one friend asserted in the drive through of a Taco Bell.[4] And through this debate, what comes to light is that our

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[4] Oliver Cardenas, in conversation, 7/9/2021. This was a very interesting, unprompted conversation with a friend who also happens to be Ecuadorian-American. He and I were discussing this chapter that you are currently reading and he was recounting his hatred for the term, "Latinx." He said that it sounded elitist, and sat outside of the language that many of us call home; Spanish. He said this was not a real word in Spanish, and therefore was a made up construct to help push current *American* debate surrounding gender into places that it had no business. (Felt like linguistic imperialism at the time, and still kind of does.) I did not then discuss with him the international nature of gender struggles or the ever-changing nature of language as I had just begun to engorge myself with a crunchwrap supreme, but this kind of sentiment is not the first I've heard against the term, Latinx. And I'm sure it will not be the last.

identity cannot be simply summed up through a single term. Our experiences are so diverse, as are our cultures, customs, traditions, physical attributes, language, and so on, that giving us all an overarching title feels, well, *wrong*. At the same time, however, I cannot deny the camaraderie that I feel when I am among other Latinos. Even if I know very little about their country of origin, the warmth and familiarity of Latinidad is palpable. For example, in my household and family, we do not traditionally eat arepas,[5] but I would be lying if I said that seeing Mirabel's mother in Disney's *Encanto* curing people with arepas did not fill my heart with joy. Arepas were shown in this movie to be a literally magical part of Colombian food culture capable of curing even the most dire ailments. The movie's emphasis on the intersection between magic and food did not go unnoticed. It was a metaphorically magical moment for me to see Colombian food being represented by a previously very white-washed film studio.

Our community may not all be the same, but in many ways we share experiences. Sadly, some of these experiences, such as the *Encanto* arepa example, are shared through a narrative of silence or absence. The reason this scene sticks out to me is not because of my deep love for arepas, but because I had very rarely seen such an accurate representation of food from our culture(s) being demonstrated in a Disney movie. Like Kimberlé Crenshaw who highlights Black women's intersection of race and sex as a point of theoretical erasure from legal proceedings, Disney theoretically erased Latinos through its overwhelming lack of Latindad on screen (139). The previous silencing/absence of our

[5] Even though we may not traditionally make and eat arepas, I have a deep love for them. I was introduced to arepas in my late teens by my uncle in Queens, New York. He brought me to a Colombian deli once and I've been hooked ever since.

cultures from mass U.S. media is what makes this representation exciting, but it also reinforces Caminero-Santangelo's statement that Latinos are made in the U.S. In this case, erasure, silence, and oppression of our culture is where many of our intersections collide.

The mutual acknowledgement of the shared tastes in food, music, dance, style, and even further, ancestral lineages, history, and language amongst Latino cultures brings us closer while within U.S. borders. In other words, when trying to categorize two continents worth of people it might be more important to acknowledge the similarities in Latino cultures more than it is to know the intricacies of their differences. The same intersection that mass media has silenced is where we have been organizing our unity. Disney might have been late to the game, but Latinos in the United States have been finding community in their love for each other's food, Selena Quintanilla, *Telemundo* as our go-to Spanish-language television channel, the weekly Walter Mercado, inside bodegas, and anywhere we could relish in company as if we were amongst our own families. In the words of fictional character, Dave Skylark, "same, same, but different. But still same" (*The Interview).*

So, here I return to my initial question of this chapter, "what do we call ourselves?" Well, I call myself Latina. I am a woman and I believe that this term reflects me as an individual. In the past I have called myself Hispanic[6], but in order to become closer to my Latinidad, I decided to move away from the anglicized word to an accented, Spanish language one. While I do not personally believe that speaking Spanish is necessary in order to identify as Latino, *my* personal identity *is* influenced by Spanish. It is the

[6] My confidence in speaking Spanish has had everything to do with calling myself, Hispanic, for a long time. This will be discussed more in chapter 3.

language of my father, my mother, my abuelas, my abuelos, my aunts, and my uncles. It is familial and I hear it frequently. To me, being Latina means to feel at home in my own family. For this, Spanish is *desired*, not *necessary*. Moving towards the title of Latina is my attempt to reclaim and maintain that linguistic-familial link. This is my personal reasoning and it does not influence the way that I see others interact with their Latinidad. Therefore, throughout the rest of this research, I will be referring to my people as Latinos, in tradition with the language that sometimes, but not always, binds us. At the same time, I will also be honoring the ways that the individuals interviewed for this research identify themselves. Amidst the hotly debated topic of naming, I choose multiplicity; as has been the best option for my whole life up until this point.

Diverse Perspectives on Latinidad

My favorite way to start thinking about Latinidad and Latino identity is alongside Walter Mignolo's *The Idea of Latin America*. In almost perfect correspondence to the confusion surrounding the title of Latinos within the United States, Mignolo proposes that "the emergence of 'Latinidad' and of 'Latin' America is to be understood in relation to a European history of growing imperialism grounded in a capitalist economy and the desire to determine the shape of 'emancipation' in the non-European world" (Mignolo 57). Latin America, as we understand it from a North American perspective, was created during and in the wake of European colonization and, as a consequence, the ethno-racial marker, Latino, was also invented.

From the beginning, Latinidad was a homogenizing project. Throughout his work, Mignolo posits that Latinidad was used to cement former Spanish and Portuguese colonies on the new colonial global order. When conquistadors became colonial subjects and were no longer masters of conquest and destruction, the new colonial population needed to continue asserting their supposed superiority, despite any racial and ethnic miscegenation that may have occurred throughout the years. What once was a conquest in the name of civility and religion had become a desperate attempt to maintain power in a land that Europeans had invaded. Out of this, we have words that are still in use today like mestizo, criollo, indio, and so on that are all used to describe the proximity to European ancestry. It was the criollos, those nearest to European ancestry, but who were also a little removed from it, that leveraged the idea of Latinidad to approximate themselves to Europe. Latinidad, then, is a project by the Creole-Mestizo elites that both created the Americas and erased African-descended and indigenous folks from the picture. That is, all races were supposed to have been homogenized so that only Latinos are left.

The term, Latino, stems from the colonial tradition of approximating whiteness. Whiteness, as we understand it today, had not yet been made concrete, however, that is not to say that there wasn't power associated with being of European descent. Standing in a binary wherein one was either civilized or uncivilized, Europeans and European descendants used a self-serving vision of civility in order to reinforce their supposed superiority over the indigenous of the Americas. Colonizing Europeans wrote off the indigenous of the Americas as barbaric and seemingly without a civilization of their own. But this is a very eurocentric vision of American indigenous culture because, as Mignolo ex-

plains, "civilization is nothing more than a European self-description of its role in history" (Mignolo xvii). This dangerous self-serving definition allowed racialized people of European descent in the Americas to lean into their heritage as a method to continue to subjugate those they deemed were below them on the social ladder.

After ruling European countries pulled out of the colonies, Spanish and Portuguese descended elites in Latin America focused on emulating whiteness instead of reflecting on their own subjugation through European colonialism. This failure to decolonize from the inception is what allowed "Latin" America to remain unchallenged for nearly 150 years.

> Therein lies the underlying cause of one of the most radical mistakes made by post-colonial scholars and intellectuals – the attention given to the "thinking" rather than the "doing" and consequently to the local historical connection between doing and thinking… Latin Creoles set themselves in dependent relations (political, economic, and intellectual) with France, England, and Germany. (Mignolo 68)

Latin American elite aligned themselves with the colonizers instead of finding a way to be without them. They had bought into the Latin ideology and thought that they were the legacy of Rome. Being *Latin* became a racial status marked by marginality, geography and language in relation to Southern Europe.

The etymology of the terms Latin American and Latino highlight the very crux of these terms in today's usages. They had, at once, been a title that we had claimed for ourselves, and had also been thrust upon us. As European descendants with traditional Span-

ish last names like Garcia or Benitez, part of our ancestral history belongs to the self-naming and self-aligning with European culture. The other part of ancestry is the hidden indigenous and African cultures that were embedded into mestizaje. "La mestiza is a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another" (Anzaldúa 78). As such, we are many variations of Latinidad. This begins to connect some dots as to why there are so many varying titles for those of us hailing from Latin America. It is because we have a complex history that often ignores parts of our bloodlines. Our many racial, cultural, linguistic, and national differences can all be found under the umbrella term of Latino because of our colonial and (post)colonial history of blending and "kneading" (Anzaldúa 81).

In a contemporary interpretation of the terms Hispanic, Latino, Latinx, etc. author of *You Sound Like a White Girl: A Case for Rejecting Assimilation*, Julissa Arce, iterates opinions from her own experience as a previously undocumented Mexican as she struggled to find her place within United States society. She, like myself, refers to herself as Latina because she understands the term Hispanic to "[elevate] the whiteness within our communities and negates my [and our] indigenous roots" (Arce 140). For Arce, the term "Hispanic" does not and cannot apply to everyone within our community because of the ways that it silences and ignores our indigenous roots. She chooses to work against Mignolo's theory of Latindad that originally sought to suppress our indigeneity. She also explains that the term "Hispanic" has a connection to the Spanish language, which is not a lived experience for so many of us Latinos. Many of us have lost the Spanish language through assimilation, myself included. An even grittier (or triumphant) truth is that the

Spanish conquest of Latin America did not infiltrate fully into every community. There are "hundreds of indigenous languages that are still spoken in Latin America and in the United States" (Arce 141). Arce chooses a broader idea of Latinidad where "Latino is defined as a person whose origins are in Latin America, or who have ancestors from Latin America" (143). In this way, she is calling upon *all* of our ancestry. Not just the ancestry that gave us the Spanish language.

Julissa Arce also critiques the usage of the term, Latinx. She states, "Latinx has recently come into popularity as the most inclusive term because of its gender neutrality--though it attracts criticism for being elitist and accessible to people with college degrees. Others view it further as forcing Spanish to be like English" (143). I agree with Arce that Latinx comes across as elitist and accessible only to people with college degrees. I have never heard the term in conversation amongst fellow Latinos in English or in Spanish, but I have seen the term written plenty in academic journals, books, academic Twitter and academic Instagram. Any time Latino friends and/or family and I have discussed the term, there is either heated opposition to Latinx or a happy acceptance of it. There has been no in-between. Some people have said that it is too anglicized and it does not follow existing Spanish language grammar rules. Other people have said that "it is what white people call us" or mock the way it sounds in a sentence, i.e. "Look at those Latinxs walking across the street." Yet, others find that it is wonderfully inclusive and acknowledges the patriarchal roots in the Spanish Latino. They argue that masculine suffix, -o, need not be the norm to address a mixed group of people. To me, the controversy proves that Latinx feels more successful in theory than in practice. However, in this moment I must lay

down my arms and admit that these personal conversations I have been involved in did not include non-binary folks. My personal experience limits my understanding of the usefulness and justice that the non-binary term, Latinx, offers people.

Interestingly, there is another theory that posits that “Latinos are made in the USA” (Caminero-Santangelo 20). In her book, *On Latinidad: U.S. Latino Literature and the Construction of Ethnicity*, Marta Caminera-Santangelo argues that Latinos and Latinidad is something that is constructed within the United States' borders rather than an essential fact. She suggests, “one problem with the notion of a panethnic identity, from a Latin American perspective, is that national identity has always trumped continental identity in the home countries” (20). Undeniably, this is true. My cousins who have lived in Ecuador their whole lives do not identify themselves as Latino in the same way they identify as Ecuadorians. Further, despite having lived in the United States for three years, my friend still identifies as Mexican more than Latina. She gravitates towards Latinidad here in the United States, but her identity is not as panethnic as mine. There is something about the United States that makes us look for unity. Caminera-Santangelo, Arce, and Anzaldúa alike agree that there are enough similarities in the inequity that we face that this could be our potential unifying point.

This feels wrong to me. It is not just the inequity or mistreatment that conjoins us. There *is* something more that binds us. I see it every day. I see the nod of approval from other Latinos when I play Bad Bunny or JBalvin on the beach. I see the look of recognition when I nail those more difficult salsa moves on a dance floor. I hear the translanguaging from English to Spanish or vice versa when something just does not translate. I

see it when I bring coquito to a Christmas party and other Latinos are ecstatic to open the bottle. I see it at baptisms, weddings, and social events. We recognize each other and are happy to be around other people like us. I even see it in online communities. For example, this post from the Latina-empowering Instagram, @fiercebymitu.

Figure 1 *Instagram* Post from @fiercebymitu depicting Jennifer Lopez being photographed by paparazzi, with a *Twitter* comment overlaid on photo

The post depicts Jennifer Lopez, one of my first Latina icons, in a well-tailored white and floral dress with a bright red purse on the ground (see fig. 1). The in-meme Tweet says, “did her purse on the ground trigger any other Latinas?!” Without even having to look at the comments, or dig deeper into what this Tweet means, I knew exactly what was intended. As a young girl, I was always told by female elders to *never* put your purse on the

floor or else your money will fly away, or so the superstition goes. It is a superstition that probably has roots in etiquette, hygiene, and property, but still it is a superstition that is held throughout the diaspora. The comments below the post are as hysterical as they are indicative of a unified Latinidad.

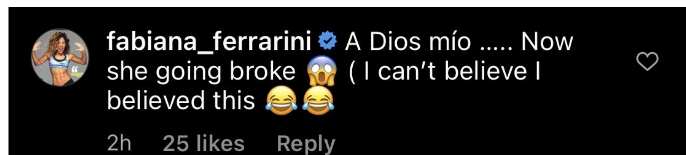

Figure 2 *Instagram* comment posted by @fabiana_ferrarini in response to the above @fiercebymitu meme

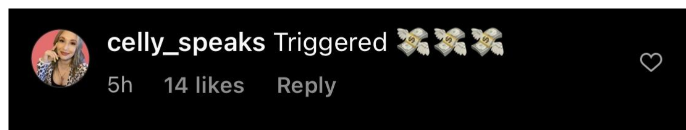

Figure 3 *Instagram* comment posted by @celly_speaks in response to the above @fierce-bymitu meme

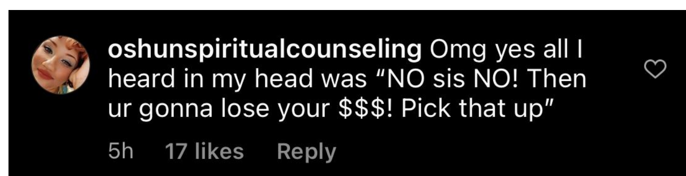

Figure 4 *Instagram* comment posted by @oshunspirtualcounseling in response to the above @fiercebymitu meme

Something as innocuous as a superstition permeates Latinidad. These individual commenters most likely do not know each other, as goes the internet, but they all had similar reactions of shock and reiterate the superstition (see fig. 2, 3, 4). Maybe, just maybe, "ethnic self consciousness, the *invocation* of a common history (real or imagined) is more important than the factual existence of shared historical circumstance. *Ethnicity, like nation, is narration*" (Caminera-Santangelo 21). If ethnicity is a narrative, and we can invoke a real or imagined history, then we have the power to define Latinidad according to

our own rules and experiences while sharing space within the United States. Latinidad is not a monolithic idea. It cannot be, as Caminera-Santangelo rightly points out. We are too diverse in culture, country of origin, skin color, language, traditions and so on. However, the United States's narrative of the Latin American diaspora *has* indeed created a unification of Latinidad. It is tenuous, transformative, imagined, but still exists. It sits at this cosmic reunion point where it is everything at once, and then nothing at all.

"Where are you from? No, where are you *really* from?"

I have recently made a turn from referring to myself as Hispanic to Latina. I still use the term Hispanic sometimes, but I am making a stronger effort to use the accented Latina. In this way, I am recapturing my own Latinidad which, for me, is inextricably tied to the Spanish language. This is my own method of identity making. My cousin Jari also feels comfortable with the panethnic term and "would say Latina or I would say I'm Hispanic." Caminera-Santangelo says that this identity marker is much more common amongst second and third generation Latinos--which both Jari and I are (20).

Unless I am pressed for a specific answer or I'm in a situation that requires specificity, I do not often think of myself as Ecuadorian. This is because my experience is undeniably Ecuadorian. It is the only other culture I am a part of besides the American culture. It's in my food, hair, face, accent, and traditions. I am Ecuadorian every day, so I do not need to think about it. I hold my culture as near to my heart as possible and because I am okay with ambiguity, Latina feels perfectly fine to me in everyday conversation.

Much of the topic of self-identification depends on who is asking. Throughout my life, I have been asked the dreaded question, "where are you from?" But what I refer to myself as out loud depends entirely on who is asking me the question. If I am speaking with other Latinos, I will automatically say I am of Ecuadorian descent. With non-Latinos, I'll just say Latina, or Hispanic. I have grown to hate the question, "where are you from," because, in my experience, it does not often refer to what town on Long Island I live in. It is a racially-loaded question that intends to interrogate my skin color. I have tried to ignore this intention, but I no longer can. I hate this question… when asked by white people. When a Latino asks me where I am from, I gladly fulfill their request for information. Indeed, I, too, am searching for other paisanos to connect with. If the inquiring mind is from a place other than Ecuador, it is interesting information to learn. This resistance to the person asking the question is entirely racially motivated and often serves as self-defense. My experience growing up Latina on Long Island was troublesome and brought me much anguish as a person sitting between two cultures. I have never felt enough as a Latina or enough as a Long Islander. The trauma that this question instilled in me resulted in resistance for white askers, and gentleness for Latino askers. In a way, it is a method of survival. I am both asserting my Americana while allowing myself to be Ecuadorian.

Throughout my interviews with my cousins I asked them to identify themselves using their own terms. Their responses varied but were consistent upon the stipulation of who is asking the question. When asked to "name your Latinidad" Nikki responded with,

> So I would say, let's say, I'm here, right in the United States. And they asked me that, I'll say Ecuadorian, because I feel like they are asking me for a reason. Like, they see that maybe I have certain features. And you know, that I resemsble a Latina. So that's why they would ask me that, I don't think… I don't think they would ask me if I look like a white person. You know, but if I'm in Ecuador, they are probably asking me that because of, like, the accent that I have is not the same as them, so, they're probably figuring that I'm not from here. So in that case, I'll say I'm from the United States.

Nikki's answer was larger than the Long Island perspective that I offer. Nikki thinks in global terms. Her self-identity is not just confined to my racialized, and admittedly salty, perspective of being asked the question, "where are you from." For Nikki, her response crosses borders. Within the United States, her identity aligns with her ancestral heritage from Ecuador. Whereas within Ecuador, her identity aligns with the United States, the country she lives in permanently. Interestingly, Nikki also does not self-identify with either the diasporic terms Latina or Hispanic. She chooses specificity instead choosing to call herself Ecuadorian, or say she is from the United States.

Much of Nikki's global vision of self-identification can be attributed to her upbringing. Nikki's parents are Ecuadorian immigrants who arrived to the United States in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Nikki remembers her parents' migratory story as, "I feel like my parents, I might be wrong, but I think they were here for maybe like, two years. And they had me a year or something." Because of their recent arrival to the United States when Nikki, "was born, my parents had been pretty, you know, new to the United

States. So, like, I grew up with Ecuadorian traditions, customs, the language, because they didn't know the customs and traditions of the United States." As is common for many children of immigrants, Nikki had grown up primarily with the customs of her parent's homeland. They had imparted onto Nikki their Ecuadorian traditions, language, and customs initially because, logistically speaking, she and her parents were all new to the United States. Nikki went on to also say that she and her parents "were learning together." In recalling her mother's learning of English, Nikki recounted that her mother was, "going to, I don't know if it was a community college, or like, I don't know, some kind of like, center, you know, learning center, but she was trying to learn English. And I was in school learning English. And you know, like, it's very crazy to think about. That we were learning the new customs." This specifically Ecuadorian upbringing, coupled with the family's mutual learning of Americana, led Nikki to feel a "50/50" split between cultures, as she called it. She and her parents are proud of their heritage, but Nikki also acknowledged her Americanization and how that plays into her dual identity.

There is another duality that lives within Nikki's answer. She identified with a foreign title in her two hypothetical situations. This is evidenced by her oppositional use of the word, "they." When discussing how a Long Island audience influences the way she self-identifies, Nikki said, "because I feel like *they* are asking me for a reason." Within Ecuador, Nikki stated, "*they* are probably asking me that because of, like, the accent that I have is not the same as them, so, they're probably figuring that I'm not from here." In both cases, the "they" she uses highlights the influence of others upon how she names herself. "They" puts Nikki in opposition to the public milieu where she is always an out-

sider. If she was asked this question within the United States, she would identify as Ecuadorian, but if she were in Ecuador she would identify as American. This duality of identity is interesting because she has proclaimed herself as a foreigner within each of the countries she hypothetically identifies with. Her initial vocabulary dictates a mismatched sense of belonging, of always being the Other in whatever country she is in. Invoking ambiguity here is valuable because it allows Nikki to be Ecuadorian, American, or neither. She does not need to identify with one country or another because she is all of it. Her identity is fluid and as she traverses borders, her identity also changes. Salman Rusdhie, in his essay, "Imaginary Homelands" says that migration identities are "plural and partial… that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools" (16). In her persistent Otherness, Nikki embodies Rushdie's partial and plural identity. She both is and isn't American, just as she both is and isn't Ecuadorian.

Since identity is intersectional and informed by aspects such as ethnicity, race, and culture, it is important to keep in mind the possible intentions behind being asked to self-identify. W.E.B. Du Bois, in his essay, "Strivings of the Negro People" describes as African Americans as having a "double consciousness" that is, "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois). It functions as a methodology within which, Du Bois argues, African Americans are always already thinking about themselves from outside their own bodies and from within their own bodies. It is a perspective that functions automatically and simultaneously wherein you are both an autonomous subject, and an observable object. I believe that Latinos living within the Unit-

ed States are also “gifted with second-sight” (Du Bois). We must, in an instant, be able to gauge what other people are *really* asking of us when they ask us to self-identify and why.

Latinos having a double consciousness akin to Du Bois’s description of the African American experience is most evident in Valerie’s response. She is keenly aware of the role that race plays in why someone may be asking her the question, “where are you from.” Valerie said,

> I am Ecuadorian. I am from Long Island, New York. This is so funny because [name redacted] and I have spoken about this. I always introduce myself like that. I'm always like, ‘but I'm from from Ecuador.’ And [they’re] always like, ‘where you from from?’ And I'm like, ‘I'm from from Ecuador. I was born there.’ And that's it. I mean, I definitely identify with people like ‘where are you from?’ I'm like, ‘I'm from Ecuador.’ I guess it depends on how people ask me. I mean, I identify as Ecuadorian. And if people are like, ‘what are you? Where are you from?’ I'm Ecuadorian. If I'm here in Rhode Island, now that I'm out of New York, and I've been in New York for most of my life, if someone is, like, speaking to me, and they're like, ‘where are you from?’ They're definitely talking about how I'm speaking, so then I'm like, ‘Oh, I'm from New York’ But if I'm, like, speaking to a Latino, and they're like, oh, ‘de donde tu eres?’ I'm like, ‘yo soy de Ecuador.’ So if a brown person is asking me, I am sub-categorizing myself within the brown category. If a white person is asking me, I am either categorizing myself as like a brown person and where I lived.

Valerie demonstrated her double consciousness by being aware of the racialized intentions of being asked, "where are you from." Without even consciously thinking, she gauges that brown people are seeking one kind of answer, and white people are seeking another kind of answer. If a person is "brown" and Spanish speaking, then Valerie will answer that she is Ecuadorian, and she will respond in Spanish if the question is asked in Spanish, as well. She "sub-categorizes [herself] within the brown category." Valerie knows that there are many ways to be Latino, or "brown," as she calls it, and can identify when others are inquiring about her heritage. The question, 'de donde tu eres' is not the same as "where are you from" despite literally translating into each other. The Spanish version of the same question is an inquiry into what *kind* of Latino Valerie could be. It could be a community building moment where the response could be that Valerie and the asker could both be Ecuadorian, or could serve as a general inquiry as to where she is from in the diaspora. In contrast, the English version seems to ask *if* Valerie is Latina. This version is also often more geographical than it is cultural, though Valerie was also quick to say that non-Latino askers are also usually trying to inquire about ethnic origins.

Within this response, Valerie also brings up a very interesting question of belonging. "Where you from from" she asked. The repetition of "from" within this question emphasizes the deeper cultural belonging that the question aims to interrogate. Initially, Valerie begins her response with, "I *am* Ecuadorian. I am *from* Long Island, New York" (my emphasis). Valerie is not *from* Ecuador, when initially asked the question, she *is* Ecuadorian. Ecuadorianness takes up her whole being. It is more than a place where she is from, it is a place that she belongs to. Ecuador fills her identity such that she *is* that place. In

contrast, she is "*from* Long Island." Long Island is a part of her identity but is not the whole thing. Valerie has lived much of her life on Long Island, but she was born in Ecuador. Her emotional and cultural ties are not primarily to the place where she grew up, but to the place she was born. She is from Long Island, but she is proudly from from Ecuador. Valerie highlights that there is a significant difference in belonging to a place--from from--and being from another.

Contrary to my pet-peeve of the questions, "what are you" and/or "where are you from," I love the question, "where you from from." The question is asked in vernacular. It is familiar and kind. Most importantly, as seen with Valerie's answer, being from from a place is entirely dependent on how the respondent *feels*. It is an ambiguous question that can be answered according to the person's own sense of identity. Valerie is clearly emotionally involved with her Ecuadorian identity, so, for her, she is from from that place. If I were asked the same question, I would answer similarly. Ecuador holds a special place in my heart, too, even if I was not born there. I have asked my own students this question as an ice-breaker during the beginning weeks of the semester, and the answers I've received are pure and delightful. Some students follow in my and Valerie's mindset and feel as if they are from from the country of their heritage. Others feel as if they are from from the place they were raised, like Queens, Long Island, or another state. The question, "where you from from" offers a much needed reprieve[7] from the often interrogatory "where are you from" because it allows a person to decide for themselves where they feel like they

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[7] To be entirely frank, I think this question is *very* personal and will not fit in all situations. But in casual, comfortable situations, I think this question can work.

most deeply belong. It does not necessitate a racialized, geographical, or heritage-based response. It is entirely personal and ambiguous.

Self-identification, while variable depending upon who is asking, can also be a means to address and interrupt stereotyping. When asked to name his Latinidad, Bryan responded,

> Hispanic, mostly? Yea, I don't know why. I just one day decided that I was gonna stop referring to myself as Spanish. That was a while ago. Because Spanish… I hated… Sometimes… I would always say 'Spanish but not European Spanish' and people would be like 'yeah, obviously not.' And I'm like, 'it's not obvious that I don't mean European Spanish.' So that I just, like, made a mental note to stop saying that and to say strictly Hispanic. I never really felt much of an identity with Latino, the word Latino. I don't know why… Because in English, it's Latin. And I think that's why I don't use it because in English it's Latin and I don't feel Latin. Like, I don't know, it's weird. I have a lot more of a connection with the word Hispanic.

Within Bryan's experience, he had found that askers of the question, "what are you" were assuming his identity as non-European. He was bothered by the perpetuation of the Latino stereotype that ought to include him as a non-white person, ergo not European. For Bryan, it was not "obvious" that he "[didn't] mean European Spanish." But the assumption that automatically placed him as being from Latin America, without him specifically mentioning his ancestral origins was enough to change his vocabulary from Spanish to Hispanic. Unlike the criollos of Latin American history, Bryan does not find it necessary,

or appropriate, to tie his identity to Europe because he "[doesn't] feel Latin." He did not go so far as to call himself specifically Ecuadorian, but he did call upon the anglicized panethnic term, "Hispanic." He is not Spanish, even if our history is tied with Spain. He did not want to continue colluding the two distinctive identities. I believe that this language choice demonstrates his double consciousness because he chooses the English language iteration of Latinidad which fits in nicely into the typically English-speaking monolingual Long Island public. At the same time, Bryan chooses a term that acknowledges the Spanish history on our ancestral lands, but does not align with it entirely. He is identifying with the living (post)colonial legacy and not with the colonizer. Bryan embodies the homogenized cultural identity of Latinidad while also splintering into his English speaking, Long Island identity.

Non-Latino Long Islanders have a tendency to call us all Spanish at first glance. It is the term used for our ethno-race. Many of us are guilty of using this overarching term to identify ourselves. Bryan and myself are counted among this population. However, Bryan's move from Spanish to Hispanic is a powerful disruption to the incorrect moniker. This act of resistance against the Long Island public highlights Bryan's agency in the face of whiteness. He did not buckle under the linguistic peer pressure to refer to himself with a word he does not feel that appropriately represents who he is. He found power in referring to himself as Hispanic, as he saw fit.

It is experiences like these that strengthen my theory that the questions, "where are you from" or "what are you" are racially motivated and unnecessarily interrogatory when asked by white people. In his book *Looking Like a Language, Sounding Like a*

Race, Jonathan Rosa argues that the modern gaze always already looks at Latinos through a lens that ties race and language together:

> The co-naturalization of language and race is a key feature of modern governance, such that languages are perceived as racially embodied and race is perceived as linguistically intelligible, which results in the overdetermination of racial embodiment and communicative practice—hence the notion of looking like a language and sounding like a race. (2)

This overdetermination is a key factor in why white, or non-Latino, Long Islanders usually call us Spanish. It is the language they think we ought to speak. It makes no difference to them whether we do or not. My childhood experiences as an English-dominant Latina did not change the way white Long Islanders looked at me. My lack of skill in the Spanish language did not change the public perspective because, in their eyes, I was already a Spanish speaker, and therefore Spanish. It is for this reason that I find it offensive/annoying when white people ask me to self-identify. I am aware of the theory of raciolinguistics and how it functions for people who look like me, therefore when I am asked "where are you from" or "what are you" I cannot help but be annoyed. The person asking probably already has an idea that I am Latina. They are just looking for my confirmation.

Being asked to self-identify furthers my argument that Latinidad *is* a lived experience for people within the United States. We are constantly falling within Kimberlé Crenshaw's definition of intersectionality that focuses on marginalization as a crossroads because by being asked to self-identify highlights our Otherness. We exist in opposition to normative whiteness, but through the opposition we can find a community. Such as the

imagined, online community that critiques Jennifer Lopez's purse on the ground, the things that separate us Latinos from white *Americans* becomes the glue that can put us together. Latinidad is intersectional, a set of processes, but it is also a choice. We have to choose to engage in Latinidad at some level. It will look and function differently for everyone. If the white gaze can presuppose us as already *not* being European Spanish, but Latino of *some kind*, how can I continue to deny the reality that we do and must contend with a certain categorization? I don't mean to say that this is a resignation to define ourselves from within the white gaze. I am saying that this title exists and we are a part of it. (Plus, whites don't call us Latinos. They have other wrong nomenclature to describe us by). If Latinidad was not a lived reality, then why would the question, "what are you" exist? If Latinidad was not such a fluctuating identity, then why would anyone ever bother to ask us these questions? It is entirely because we are so varied and different from one another, that curiosity is sparked and people feel like they must know. However, Latinidad is not constructed exclusively out of the white gaze. The lived experiences of Latinos in the United States prove that there is much more that holds us together.

Latino Pride[8]

When I began my interviews with my cousins about how they define Latinidad, I admit that I had anticipated some of the stereotypes that I had named at the beginning of this chapter, particularly that Latinidad was defined by language skill and physical appearance, but I was pleasantly surprised by their answers. No one said that appearance

[8] I recommend listening to the song "La Gozadera" by Gente de Zona before or while reading this section.

was an important factor in being Latino, nor was speaking Spanish. Only Jari defined Latindad as, "a Hispanic person is someone who is raised in a tight knit family like I was, eats similar foods as I do. I feel like if we share similar experiences in our upbringing and our homelife I would consider them Hispanic." Instead, the ultimate unifying factor for Latinidad was, "just, like, being proud of who you are" (Jari).

For my cousins, pride is one of the biggest determining factors of being Latino. Nikki says, "Pride is a huge thing… Yeah, you have to represent it in a way you don't have to be, like, full through and through. You have to have a certain, like, pride, and I guess you, like, accept that you are." Along the same lines, Bryan states, "Pride comes to… that's what comes to mind. Like that's like the first word that comes to mind when I think of Latinidad… I think people are very prideful of being Latin." If nothing else, to be a Latino means to be proud of your roots. As demonstrated in "La Gozadera" music video, or in the radio classic, "Que Bonita Bandera" by Plena Libre, a main point of Latinidad is being proud of your Latino heritage. I know many Latinos who were born in the United States, who are not so in tune with their ancestral culture, but still wear their countries proudly on their hearts. Indeed, in certain neighborhoods on Long Island, you will see Latin American flags hanging from the rearview mirror of cars. The pride we feel is palpable and visible.

An interesting trend in recent United States pop culture is the infiltration of Latino culture and traditions. Bad Bunny and Karol G both released albums within 12 months' time. Bad Bunny released his album *Un Verano Sin Ti* in May of 2022. Karol G released her album *Mañana Sera Bonito* in April of 2023. Both albums are taking the American

music scene by storm. Regardless of language or culture, both Spanish-speaking, Latin American music artists are being embraced by the American public in ways that I have not seen before in my lifetime. For Valerie, this is a tremendous source of pride, "I mean, like you've seen Bad Bunny. He's tearing it up! Becky G is like out on the scene now… Like I always get so hyped!" The Latino pride is not limited to the pride we feel of our own roots, it is the pride we feel when we see others like us succeed. For certain, hearing Bad Bunny play in a white townie bar is one of my biggest moments of pride. It says, "we made it." It also says, "we don't have to blend into your culture anymore to be embraced."

At the beginning of this section, I recommended the reader listen to "La Gozadera" by Gente de Zona and Marc Anthony. Popular culture, particularly music, is a joining point for many Latinos. This song is an excellent example of Latino pride. The title, "La Gozadera," roughly translates to "good time" or "party" while the lyrics describe a hypothetical gathering of Latinos from different countries to have fun. The music is upbeat and happy and in the music video everyone is representing their country's flag and smiling. Gente de Zona and Marc Anthony create an anthem that celebrates all the differences of Latino nations and honors the customs that they have offered to others,

> Y el arroz con habichuela, Puerto Rico me lo regaló
>
> Y la tambora merenguera, Dominicana ya repicó
>
> Con México, Colombia y Venezuela
>
> …
>
> Panamá trae la zandunga, Ecuador bilirrubina

Y Uruguay con Paraguay, hermano con Costa Rica

Bolivia viene llegando, Brasil ya está en camino

El mundo se está sumando, a la fiesta de los latinos (Gente de Zona)

We are united by beats and rhythm despite being from countries away from one another. In this particular example, one of the main points of conjunction is the Spanish language. (And, somewhat jokingly, I would also say Marc Anthony. I mean, who doesn't love Marc Anthony?) However, is language necessary to a Latino identity? Is it not more important to identify with the lyrics of this song than to understand, word for word, what this song is saying? Latinidad is not tied to a language. Rosa argues that the link between race and language "must be analyzed collectively" (2). In chapter 3, I address the function of the Spanish language within Latinidad at great length, but for brevity here, I will claim quickly and curtly, that it is not necessary that one speaks Spanish in order to consider themselves Latino. The key point of "La Gozadera" is to acknowledge that there is a shared history amongst our many countries and to take pride in our heritage.

Latinidad on Long Island

Oh my God. Everything I am today is Long Island. New York represent! Well, it is in the way I drive, and the way I speak, and the music I listen to, and the snobby faces I make if, like, there's potholes. It's all I know. It's my home. I am, like, Long Island.

Valerie

Growing up Latina on Long Island during the 1990s and 2000s is certainly very different from what life is like today as a Latina Long Islander. As a child and teenager, I did not particularly like being Latina. It made me feel like I was an outsider for being different. During the 2000s and 2010s when I was in K-12 public school, the demographics of my town were predominantly white. The Town of Brookhaven, which encompasses my city, Centereach, as well as 26 others, was 88.4% white in the year 2000 (*Profiles of General Demographic Characteristics* 837). In that same year, the population was 8% Hispanic or Latino for all 27 towns (*Profiles of General Demographic Characteristics* 837). This census does not break down into specific towns smaller than municipalities, so I cannot confirm or deny my mother's claim of Centereach being less than 2% non-white when she and my father chose it to be our hometown. However, I can recall the overwhelming whiteness of my school age experience. I grew up in a white neighborhood in which I vibrantly stood out as the Other. I worked very hard to assimilate, but never truly felt at home in the skins I was in.

Extremely fortunately, I do not recall any instances of overt discrimination or racism at my ethnic difference. There was certainly some bullying in high school, but that could be chalked up to just some of the high school experience. What I can recall from my youth is feeling confused. I was confused about my identity and my heritage. I could not figure out how to join a social group. Latinidad felt like an at-home thing, and my whiteness felt like an in-public thing. While some scholars support that kind of cultural separation--namely Stanley Fish as described by Vershawn Ashanti Young in, "Should Writers Use They Own English"--for me, it was an emotional roller coaster. I could not

belong with my emo rock loving, Myspace surfing, black eyeliner wearing group of friends and also listen to salsa music, read Paulo Coehlo's magical realism novels, and eat plátanos con mantequilla. Those things, for so long, were mutually exclusive. At the same time, I did not want whiteness to integrate into my Latinidad. I wanted to keep them as separate as possible. I pushed back on whiteness as much as whiteness pushed back on to me. I remember while I was in middle school asking my mother, "what do white people eat" with true and innocent curiosity. Whiteness and white people were also a mystery to me. These, however, were my childhood and teen years.

Adulthood has been much more kind to me as a Latina on Long Island. There is more ethnic and racial diversity in my town. Today, the Town of Brookhaven has a population that is 83% white and 15.6% Hispanic or Latino ("QuickFacts Centereach CDP, New York; Brookhaven town, Suffolk County, New York; Suffolk County, New York"). Centereach follows very closely behind with a population that is 80.7% white and 14.6% Hispanic or Latino ("QuickFacts Centereach CDP, New York; Brookhaven town, Suffolk County, New York; Suffolk County, New York"). It is no racial utopia, for sure, but it is nice to drive down the main street in town and see a plethora of different cuisines and signage in different languages. Acceptance of diversity is also visible in more subtle ways as well. Local stores (commercial and small business) have begun to play Spanish language music as well as rap and hip hop on their loudspeakers. Backyard get-togethers cater from all different cultural backgrounds. I have personally seen a huge rise in interracial couples in my neighborhood. I only have two sets of friends who are not in an interracial relationship. These examples are not perfection but they are, indeed, progress.

I cannot objectively say if Long Island has become more kind to diversity, or if I have just become more cognizant of it. Today, as an adult, I see the change in demographics. My perspective now makes me feel less of an oddity. More importantly, as an adult, I stand against the naysayers, the bigots, and all those who say we do not belong. Long Island is my home and I will defend it as such. For me, being a Latina on Long Island is the trajectory of feeling outcasted to settling into the idea of Long Island as my home. Long Island is in my accent[9], my mannerisms, my knowledge of the beaches and bars, *and* it is my heritage. Without taking an intersectional approach to my Latina/Long Island identity, I cannot acknowledge that "the failure to embrace the complexities of compoundedness is not simply a matter of political will, but is also due to the influence of a way of thinking about discrimination which structures politics so that struggles are categorized as singular issues" (Crenshaw 167). Long Island Latinidad must be intersectional in order to break through the monolithic perception of Latinos here. But at the same time, intersectionality helps me cement what it means for *me* to be who I am where I live. I will no longer consider my many facets as mutually exclusive because my life, my experiences, always function at the intersection of being all the things that I am. They are, like Kimberlé Crenshaw dictates, multidimensional and no one aspect of identity ought to overpower or overrepresent the others. "By so doing, we may develop language which is critical of the dominant view and which provides some basis for unifying activity. The goal of this activity should be to facilitate the inclusion of marginalized groups for whom it can be said: 'When they enter, we all enter'" (Crenshaw 167).

[9] Yes, I pronounce it as "worter."

Of course, movement and personal growth do not occur without struggle. In my darkest years of assimilation, I tried to ignore my Latinidad in favor of fitting in. For me, this meant no longer speaking Spanish and being embarrassed to try learning it again. It also meant that I distanced myself from my relationships with my family members--the two things that make up Latinidad for me. Nikki, on the other hand, had a much easier time navigating the path of a hybrid identity,

> I've always liked to be Latina on Long Island. I never really had a bad experience of being that. I always felt that, in my personal experience, being Latino was more of like, like a flex. like I was super proud to say I was lucky. And I never was, like, kind of scared or like, like trying to hide it. It was always something I really carried.

Unlike myself, who as a youngster wanted to blend in, Nikki was always okay with standing out. She did not find any of the discomfort that I had in my youth accepting her Latinidad. Indeed, she calls it a "flex." Coinciding with pride for home country, Nikki also felt pride here on Long Island. For her, being Latina was cool and different and offered her many experiences that her classmates did not have access to. Nikki "carried" her Latinidad, suggesting she could take or leave this aspect of who she was. She chose to take it, enforcing the agency in her identity formation. Her self-assuredness in her Latinidad was a choice that she willingly made. The difference between Nikki's experience as being a Latina on Long Island growing up versus my experience further disrupts the misconception of a single narrative of the Latino experience. She and I are only months apart in age and grew up in neighboring towns but had vastly different perspectives re-

garding our identities. Admittedly, she "grew up in Sachem [school district]. It's kind of hard to not be surrounded by that, you know, but I had my circle of friends who were Latinos… But then I also had my white friends." Her K-12 experience was marked by more ethnic and racial diversity so her perception of self could have certainly been influenced. However, even this example demonstrates the plethora of experience that is born out of being a Latina on Long Island.

To further diversify the narrative of Long Island Latinidades, Bryan brings attention to his vastly different experience growing up as a Hispanic on Long Island. Bryan attended the same school district as Nikki, except a few years behind. For Bryan, being Hispanic on Long Island means defying stereotypes,

> It means I have to constantly battle stereotypes. I think so. I think that's for that's like, my truth is I feel like since I was a kid, trying to feel like I'm not a stereotypical Hispanic person, and that has led to a lot of, like, resentment over the fact that I'm Hispanic at times during my young adulthood. Like, when I was a teenager and wanted to be more white passing. Cuz I don't know, I guess, like… You know what. Back to that question, about how in high school there was a lot of stereotyping. That part sucked.

When asked to expand upon the stereotyping he experienced in high school, Bryan responded,

> Because I grew up in a predominantly white area, and then the people that were, like, Hispanic, were Central American. Like the majority of them around me were Central American. And so oftentimes, because I spoke Spanish growing up here,

> people automatically assume I'm Mexican, for example. And that really, like, that would really upset me because I'm like, 'No, I'm Ecuadorian'. Like, just because I speak Spanish doesn't automatically mean I'm Mexican. So where I grew up had a lot to do with that. Like, almost wanting to try to be more Ecuadorian to, like, stand out, I guess… But it almost made me, like, resentful, because I was, like, mislabeled or whatever.

Bryan does not like to be mislabeled. He was frustrated at attempts to oversimplify his identity as one term or another. He made moves of his own to stop calling himself Spanish, and here he was also resistant towards being mislabeled as the wrong country of origin. In this example, Bryan took issue with being stereotyped and mislabeled as Mexican. There is a nationwide stigma of being Mexican that shows its ugly face time and time again through public media. Donald Trump's presidential campaign of 2016 found its foothold in the "border wall" along Mexico's northern border suggesting its construction would stop the "crime and rapists" from getting into the United States ("Road to the White House 2016 Donald Trump Presidential Campaign Announcement."). Satire television show, *South Park*, also depicts Mexicans as lazy and sleepy janitorial workers ("The Death Camp of Tolerance"). These examples are just the tip of the iceberg of the prejudice against people of Mexican descent. The lived reality for Bryan, however, was to overcome these stereotypes and not be classified as *any* of the negative connotations for being Hispanic. On Long Island, "Mexican" has become synonymous with a racial slur for Latinos. When said with poison on the tongue, it might as well be a racial slur. Not only does this do a massive disservice to Mexicans and Mexican Americans living here

on Long Island, but it also perpetuates the overly homogenized view of Latinos. We are not all Mexicans and Mexican is not a slur.

To be Latino on Long Island comes with its own set of experiences, as Bryan points out, however, being specifically Ecuadorian on Long Island offers a different perspective. Since Spanish is used as an over-homogenized term, and Mexican is used as an insult, being Ecuadorian brings us some anonymity and slight advantages. Nikki describes the specific experience of being of Ecuadorian descent living on Long Island,

> I'm gonna go back to, like, my students. I think they have this stigma of being from, like, Central America; related to, like, the whole gang life and poverty and all that. Not saying that we don't have that, but, like, their experience differs from ours; for sure different than mine. And just being from that country, you know, it makes their life harder. And even with, like, [name redacted] it's interesting because, like he and his family's Panamanian and, like, every time he gets reactions from people that he's Panamanian. It's like, 'oh, cool. Like, you're from Panama.' Someone from, like, Guatemala isn't gonna get that reaction. And, like, Ecuador. Sometimes I get that. Like, it's not as common. It's more of a surprise than if you say Salvadorian or Guatemalan. So, for sure, those experiences are really, really different. Depending on your heritage, yeah… Cuz, like, there is, you know, even though like I say, like, there's like this over-homogenization of the idea of like, just being Spanish on Long Island. Like, there is also the association, like, negative associations of being from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras.

Nikki specified the distinction between herself as an Ecuadorian-American and her students who commonly come from Central America. She explains that her students' experiences on Long Island differ greatly from her own because of the negative connotations of being from specific countries like Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, or Mexico. In no small part has this been influenced by former President Trump's vicious rhetoric against people from these nations in the past five years, as well as the continuation of mass media portraying Central Americans in this negative light. In conjunction with years of anti-immigration rhetoric and the skewed perspective of Central American gangs, such as MS-13, people from Central American countries face a wave of prejudice that we, as Ecuadorians, simply do not face. It is not because Ecuador does not have its own problems. Instead, Ecuador profits from relative anonymity. When I say I am Ecuadorian I am met with a seemingly polite curiosity. I would go so far as to say that Ecuadorians, or Panamanians, as Nikki describes, are exotified in a positive light. There is very little media that presents us as harm-doing people overtaking the United States, and if there has been, I certainly have not seen it with my own eyes.

It is from within the space of exotification that we can find relative safety. It is an uncomfortable place to be in because it demonstrates the true ignorance of the Long Island public regarding the diversity of Latinidad. This is the fickle nature of Latinidad on Long Island. At first glance, we are very often over-homogenized as Spanish, or Mexican, usually out of ignorance. Then once specified, we can still be subjected to more bias and prejudice because of already existing stereotypes. It is because of this that we cannot and do not have a unified idea of Latinidad on Long Island.

Ambiguity and intersectionality are key. Our experiences vary too greatly to encapsulate ourselves into a single lived experience. We must become comfortable with the ambiguous, blurry lines of self-identification because Latindad is a practice. We can all exercise our Latinidad in so many different ways. Likewise, Latinos have intersectional, multidimensional identities but we can all still choose to be Latinos by exercising Latinidad practices. This is the “unifying activity” of intersectionality that finds unity while standing in opposition to the norm and critiquing oppressive normative structures (Crenshaw 167). There is no need to try to define us as a single term, like Latino, Latinx, Hispanic, or the like because we all come to our own conclusions of what we prefer to be called. The long history of Latindad as explained by Mignolo demonstrates that this confusion is as old as the conquest of our ancestral lands. There will never be a single answer because there is no such thing as a single experience.

In the midst of all this ambiguity, growing up as Latinos on Long Island has pushed us to look at our intersectional identities and move towards acceptance. Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality describes the experience of identity as a multifaceted one; one that exists in layers and cannot be simplified into just race, or just sex, or just class. Crenshaw draws an analogy using a four way intersection, “Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them” (149). Likewise, our identities are a consequence of the many characteristics that make us who we are. Sometimes,

we may feel like one characteristic is more highlighted than others, but we will always be at the center of the traffic intersection. For some of us, the past of growing up in mostly white neighborhoods came with their own trials and tribulations. We internalized anxiety, harbored feelings of being unable to fit in, felt displacement in home and/or homeland, but the end result is understanding that Latinidad is a multifaceted experience. Nikki said her experience is “the best of both worlds,”

> I feel like my personal experience growing up on Long Island and going to school on Long Island was kind of like the best of both worlds for me. But I think that's just, like, how lucky I was that I had so much Latino at home, and then I would go to school and I would have the American there. So, I would have the best of both worlds. Like, I would come home to, like, merengue playing in the background, but then I would go to school and have my white friends.

Nikki acknowledged the different spaces where different parts of her identity come to the forefront, but she did not set them against one another in contest. She saw the split of her cultures, the spaces where they are dominant, and considers herself, “lucky.” Indeed, we are lucky. Our family has done a great job ensuring that our culture was not overtaken by suburban Long Island life. Nikki did not need to choose between cultures. She found a way to be a Latina on Long Island and a Long Islander in her Latino household. Her 50/50 split between feeling American and Latina demonstrates the layered nature of our identities. We don’t need to identify exclusively one way or another because we are hybrid individuals. We embody the space between two cultures and have learned to balance them. It has been only through growing up and living our lives on Long Island (and with-

in the United States) that hybridity and ambiguity has become our solution. We are so proud to be Latinos, but we are also happy to be Americans. Like Valerie said, "I love this culture. Like, this is me. My family chose this culture and gave it to me, and I made it home."

Conclusion

Tabitha: *How do you contend with being everything all at once, then nothing all at once?*

Nikki: *I always agree with them. I never fight it. Yeah, I'm always, like, if my [students] are like, 'you're Ecuadorian,' like, yeah, 'You're right.' In Ecuador, when they were… they considered me to be American. I'm like, 'You're right. I am.' And then with my white friends, they were telling me 'Hispanic', I'm like, 'Yeah, you're right, man.' I would never fight that. It's all correct.*

Tabitha: *So would you say that you feel, like, at peace with it?*

Nikki*: Yeah, I would say so.*

Throughout this chapter, it may appear that I contradict myself while describing the difficult experiences that my cousins and I had on Long Island and concluding that we have grown to love and accept our hybrid identities. I don't mean to contradict myself because it is not a contradiction. We are not victims of Stockholm Syndrome who have come to fall in love with their captors. Using an autoethnographic approach for this research highlights the complexity of identity formation for Latinos within the United States; particularly in white spaces. My cousins and I, despite research and hours of conversation, were unable to pin down a single definition for Latinidad or how to embody being a Latino. We couldn't even settle on a single term to refer to ourselves. The most unanimous answer for describing Latinidad was pride for who you are. That pride stands

as a countermeasure for oppression, discrimination, and marginalization that we have faced throughout our lives here on Long Island because we were often considered the Other. In opposition, we found a community. It does not matter if we have a unified word to describe our identities because identity is a practice. Identity is ambiguous and intersectional, but most importantly we all have our own agency to self-identify as we see fit. It has not been an easy experience growing up Latino on Long Island, but is one that my cousins and I have come to accept, and eventually, love.

This research adds another piece to the proverbial puzzle of Latino identity within the United States. My approach in addressing Ecuadorian(-American) Latindad on Long Island provides a look into a white-washed suburb that exists right outside of one of the most diverse places in the world, New York City. My work highlights how whiteness interferes with our identity formation, but also how my cousins and I actively worked against whiteness and found pride and comfort in our Latinidades. Others before me have already made cases for nuanced identity that empower us despite living within the white gaze. This is a line of questioning we must continue inquiring about. My stories recounted here are a fragment of Latinidad on Long Island and if we are truly to break through stereotyping, marginalization, and the Latino monolith, more autoethnographic research must still be done. All of our stories must be heard.

At the beginning of this chapter, I stated that I have chosen to become comfortable with ambiguity. The more I have learned about the personal grievances of identifying terms of Latinidad, the more I accept the differences in rhetoric used. Latinx, for example, could be an anglicization or an elitist term, but who am I to deny someone who

truly believes that this term identifies them? If a person does not speak Spanish, but still identifies with Latinidad, who am I to deny them the title of Hispanic (which is arguably an easier word to say with an American accent than the accented Latino/a/e/x)? If Latinidad cannot be tied down to culture, physical description, or language, then I choose to allow people to identify themselves. Personally, I feel loss on behalf of other Latinos who do not speak Spanish or who have never visited their homelands, or who have lost the culture through assimilation. But I also recognize that these are sentiments about *my own* Latinidad. These feelings are in no way objective. Nor do I dare to use my own emotions to define others' Latinidad. Ambiguity is the solution to understanding Latinidad within the United States because it allows everyone the space to self-identify as they deem correct.

Latinos are not a monolith. We are connected together through *some* idea of unity, but it is nothing concrete, or tangible. There is no unified ethno-race, language, or location of origin. Indeed, even the idea of Latin America is defined through the European lens. So, if Latinos are made in America, we cannot be monolithic, the same way that whiteness within the United States is not monolithic.

In the next chapter, I will dive into the link between the Spanish language and Latinidad. The interviews with my cousins will provide insight as to what extent Spanish influences their Latino identities, particularly as we live in mainly monolingual, English speaking Long Island. I will explore both language loss and language recovery as assimilatory and survival practices while also providing a third option: translanguaging, as an alternative to strict definitions of bilingualism that seek to undermine our connections to

our language. Furthermore, I will investigate the link between Spanish and Latindad using Jonathan Rosa's raciolingsuitics to rupture the stereotypes that Latinos *must* speak Spanish. The next chapter will work to further prove the case for ambiguity as the solution for understanding Latinidad within the United States and Long Island.

CHAPTER 3: LANGUAGE ISN'T EVERYTHING: HOW FLUID LANGUAGE PRACTICES FUEL LATINIDAD

"No sabes!
No sabes!
Tienes que aprender.
Orejas de burro,
Le vamos a poner"

- A schoolyard taunt

My entire life, as far as I can remember, I have been told, "tienes que aprender," I need to learn. Specifically, I was told that I need to learn Spanish. I also remember my parents being scolded, "tienes que hablarles en español," by members of my family. These words, said in the language I was told I ought to know, I understood in their entirety and they haunt me to this day.

Let me be perfectly clear. I know Spanish. I've always known Spanish. Spanish was my very first language, my mother tongue. I just fell out of practice with it for many, many years of my life. But I never forgot it. I could always understand what the Spanish speakers around me were saying. But it was never enough to simply understand. For me to be reaching my full potential as the United States born daughter in an Ecuadorian family, I needed to be a balanced bilingual. I needed to speak Spanish; and fluently. My so-called *broken,*[10] sporadic answers were insufficient and, in turn, caused me much embarrassment and shame throughout my life. Without the language, I could never feel like I was enough. Despite my clear Ecuadorian ancestry, and my daily practicing of Ecuadorian culture and traditions, without Spanish, I was too *American*.

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[10] Yes, this is a sarcastic, facetious comment.

Language has been the main point of contention for my identity formation. Spanish was the thing separating me from my family, sometimes, literally so. My memory is full of bilingual family parties, holidays, and sleepovers at relatives' houses where my cousins and I would be spoken to predominantly in Spanish. I navigated these moments by listening in Spanish and responding in English. Today, informed by scholars such as Jonathan Rosa, Min-Zhan Lu, Bruce Horner, and Laura Gonzales, I understand this interpretive act as translingualism, but in my young brain, the connection was clear. The elders who immigrated from Ecuador or relatives who were born to Ecuadorian immigrants were the *real* Latinos because they could speak the language with ease. Even American born cousins and relatives with strong Spanish language skills were closer to my ideal Latinidad. Those of us who could understand Spanish but opted to respond in English were the Americans. We were ones who were born in the United States, whose primary language was English. We were one step removed from our ancestry.

For some of my family members, and for other Latinos I have met, being able to speak Spanish is essential to the identity. I once had a Mexican friend tell me I was "not a *real* Latina" because I was not born and raised in Ecuador, and I do not speak Spanish fluently. For individuals such as these, moving away from Spanish is a movement away from Latinidad and towards assimilation of white-washed, monolingual *American* culture. I find this definition of Latinidad much too rigid. No matter how well I, or any Latino, speaks Spanish we can still claim our identities. Language is only one facet of the Latino identity and it is a fluid and individual practice. Insisting on the connection be-

tween Latinidad and the Spanish language robs those who have lost the language of their right to call themselves Latinos.

Plain and simple: being able to read, write, or speak the Spanish language is not necessary for a Latino identity.

As a Long Islander, I am constantly surrounded by water. I have seen the push and pull of tides over a day at the beach, or over weeks passing by the same marsh. I think of language in the same way as tidal marshes. Language is fluid, it ebbs and flows. Sometimes, the marsh is full of water, and other times, you can see the crab holes in the sand, but with time and patience, the marsh will change. When a language is used more frequently, the "marsh" is full. When a language is not used as frequently, the tide is out. The possibility to refill with water is always there, though. Language is the same; it rises and falls with practice. This is why a language can be lost. Losing something assumes the eventuality that that lost item/skill can be found again, just as the marsh will eventually refill at high tide. A person's Latinidad should not be lost to the tides because of a language that has not been passed on or learned, *yet.* It is never too late to learn. To insist upon this connection conflates language as an essential part of our identities, when it is really only a skill that can be commonly practiced or under-practiced.

I have heard many reasons from fellow Latinos why their families or parents did not impart upon them the Spanish language. Sometimes, it is a choice. Other times, it is a necessary survival strategy that falls under the illusion of choice. Nilsa J. Thorsos, in their article "Language Loss: Implications for Latinx Identity," describes the numerous and dynamic reasons why language loss occurs amongst Latinos in the United States.

Among the reasons given are: acculturation, educational progress and success, power dynamics associated with speaking English, and economic and social mobility (Thorsos 422). A common narrative I've heard from American-born Latinos is that their parents did not pass along the language because they did not feel confident enough in the Spanish language to teach others. Other times, I have heard that Spanish and Spanish accents made the family stand out when they wanted to blend in. And once, I was told a story where one parent was a Spanish speaker, and the other was not. The Spanish speaking parent was asked by the non-Spanish speaking parent not to pass along the language to the children for fear that the Spanish speakers would "talk shit" about the other in a different language. This reason breaks my heart most of all because it demonstrates the distrustfulness surrounding bilingual and multilingual people. However, what stands out in these situations is that there has been a personally, politically, and socially informed decision making process that results in a justification for passing along the language or not.

When I inquired about my own language journey, I was told that the *decision* not to speak Spanish at home was because of the neighborhood we lived in. When I started grade school, my parents moved from speaking only Spanish in the household to English because English was the dominant language in our Long Island neighborhood. This *decision* was less so a true choice and more of a survival strategy. My parents, once having moved to Centereach, Long Island, knew that fluency in English was more important for fitting in with my new peers and assimilating than knowing our mother tongue. It simply made more sense to speak predominantly English in our predominantly monolingual neighborhood and schools. The raciolinguistics of my physical appearance, my last name,

and the social presumptions of how someone like me ought to speak, were already stacked up against me. My parents wanted to give me and my siblings the best opportunities possible to fit in and thrive in a neighborhood where we were already so ethnically different. During one conversation with my mother, she stated, “what has knowing Spanish brought me? It got me started in my career, but English brought me to where I am today.” English was, and continues to be, the clear path to assimilation, and therefore, success.

I must acknowledge here that my parents never shamed me for not speaking Spanish. They never made me feel embarrassed and were always proud and willing to translate for me and my siblings when necessary. I felt safe in my home to use the language that came most naturally to me, English. As an adult, I force myself to break into Spanglish with my parents. Oftentimes, the reaction I get from them is of surprise and of a gentle push. They never force me to speak in Spanish back to them. They will teach me new words, here and there, or speak a phrase or two to me in Spanish. I have not asked them, but I think they understand that, for the first time, I am trying to break out of this linguistic shell. This small step forward is the kind of healing I have needed for a long time.

Today, my family assures me that I have never been an outsider when I couldn’t speak in Spanish with relatives. But my own emotional separation was there. Comments such as “tienes que aprender” haunted my interactions with family members and other Latinos. Their long-lasting effects still remain. Despite knowing the language, it wasn’t until my mid 20s when I began to feel confident enough to start using my Spanish lan-

guage voice in public. Previously, the shame and embarrassment of being unable to manage the language in the same ways my relatives prevented me from speaking aloud. It was a silence that lasted upwards of 15 years. Even today I struggle to speak in Spanish with family members even if I can hold hours long conversations in Spanish with friends.

Many of my feelings of insecurity were, are, entirely self-imposed and driven by fear of not living up to what I *ought* to be. I had fantasized a version of what kind of Latina I should be, instead settling into my actual, hybrid identity. And, even though many of my anxieties were imagined, this *was* my lived experience. The feelings, the insecurity, *were* real. They still are. Even if no one has told me "tienes que aprender" in years, the emotional scars of that phrasing have left a deep rift between my identity and allowing myself to feel completely aligned within it. Understanding translingualism and linguistic fluidity have been the most cathartic part of undoing this trauma.

As an adult who is actively trying to regain her Spanish language skills, I have these feelings of insecurity with a lot less frequency. I understand that my previous apprehension was very closely linked to an emotional disconnect from my own identity. In other words, I was insecure about my language skills, therefore I was insecure about my Latinidad. But no longer. Realizing that the ties between Latinidad and the Spanish language are not essential and/or necessary has given me the freedom to see for myself that an Latino identity within the United States does not necessitate language. I do not have to speak Spanish in order to be, or feel, Latina. No one does. This revelation has set me free after so many years of anguish.

Putting Balanced Bilingualism in La Basura

There is a social expectation that Latinos are supposed to know Spanish. Moreover, within the United States, there is an expectation that we all ought to know English, as well. In other words, we are expected to have *balanced bilingualism*. The 1973 definition of balanced bilinguals, as per Haugen, is "an individual who has native-like competence in both languages" (Liddicoat 8). This definition is quite strict and demands a high level of skill in two languages in order to be considered a balanced bilingual. It also submits to a monolingual frame of reference that looks at each language as separate from one another, as if being bilingual was the same as being monolingual twice. A more contemporary definition restructures the definition as a "balanced use and balanced level of proficiency in two languages" (Yow and Li 3). This definition is more fluid and acknowledges that language moves across itself. Being bilingual may not be "native-like" in both languages--if I dare to use the Haugen frame of reference--and the languages can weave in and out of themselves. Yet, I find these definitions limiting; as is the expectation to be a balanced bilingual Latino. The social expectation to have equal competence in two distinct languages always puts one in front of the other, like judging first place, then second, and so on. Thinking about bilingualism according to these definitions undermines the validity of other kinds of, less *balanced* bilingualism. By hierarchizing fluency, we are already setting ourselves to be dominant in one language over the other, as if that is a bad thing.

I want to address this for what it is, a myth. I call it the *myth of bilingualism*. The myth of bilingualism is the assumption that we Latinos, particularly those of us who are

born in the United States, are supposed to be 100% fluent in English and 100% fluent in Spanish. The myth dictates that we ought to be a perfect 50/50 split of culture and language. Sometimes, the expectation comes from within our own families and we are expected to speak Spanish fluently like our ancestors while engaging with strangers in English. Other times, white society expects us to be able to translate Bad Bunny's new album for them, when really, we know as many words as English-speaking monolinguals do. As an employee, I have been asked, unprovoked, to translate insurance documents, advertisements, memos from teachers to parents, and so on from English into Spanish from white, monolingual higher ups who viewed me as a balanced bilingual. Many of these higher ups were shocked when I told them I couldn't translate complicated legal or pedagogical jargon into Spanish. I was often met with the phrase, "Oh, I thought you spoke Spanish" with a tinge of disappointment and annoyance in their voices[11]. In short, the expectation varies according to the audience. Moments such as these belittle my bilingualism, as if being unable to speak certain kinds of Spanish undermines all the Spanish I *do* speak. The myth of bilingualism only sets out to hurt people who speak more than one language by constantly measuring languages against "native-like" standards.

To continue breaking the myth of balanced bilingualism, I must address the myth of monolingualism, too. Within the United States, we can easily fall into the expectation that everyone around us already speaks English. It's not a fair expectation out of a country that *supposedly* prides itself on being a nation of immigrants, but it is an expectation no less. English is the norm, the language most commonly used with strangers. Other

[11] In my mind, I remember them rolling their eyes and crossing their arms, but this is probably just my memory playing tricks on me and over-dramatizing the situation. But I really can't be sure.

languages are the outliers. Thinking about language in these always already monolingual terms limits our understanding about the lived dexterity of language in multilingual people. One such space that is guilty of always assuming fluency and/or "native-like" English language skills is the university. In his article "Myth of Linguistic Homogeneity in US College Classrooms," Paul Kei Matsuda challenges the "dominant discourse of U.S. college composition [that] has not only accepted English Only as an ideal but it already assumes the state of English Only, in which students are native English speakers by default" (637). Matsuda acknowledges the ever increasing population of multilingual students who are entering a composition classroom with English *not* as their first language already sets composition instructors of those classroom spaces at a massive disadvantage when interacting and teaching these students. This is because the ideological audience of many, certainly not all, composition instructors is one that is already English speaking, and already privy to the "privileged variety of English" (Matsuda 638). Monolingualism cannot exist if there is always variety and difference within the student body's language skills. Such an expectation of students demonstrates the ways that we anticipate language usage from one another. Moreover, the myth of linguistic homogeneity does nothing to break the idea of balanced bilingualism because it is locked deeply into the monolinguistic mindset. The way Matsuda explains that English-Only is expected out of college students, balanced bilingualism is expected out of Latinos. Approaching language through a monolinguistic mindset is an inappropriate method of grappling with the lived experiences of Latinos within the United States. Our language usage is not monolingualism twice. It is a lot more fluid than that.

By addressing linguistic diversity within this imagined classroom, Matsuda exposes the myth of monolingualism in a classroom space. He emphasizes the diverse linguistic repertoires that students use and urges that all the students in one classroom do not, and therefore should not be expected to, use the same kind of English regularly. He makes the argument that movement away from monolingualism, including languages other than English, code-switching, and code-meshing are all valuable methods of communicating ideas and should not be discouraged within school settings. Matsuda works to deconstruct ideologies of appropriate in-school language usage for academic writing. Drawing from Matsuda's myth of monolingualism in classrooms, I extend the theory to address Latinos' already expected bilingualism. The expectation that Matsuda argues against, of a single, dominant English, is the very same I argue against in Spanish. There is no one right way to speak Spanish[12], therefore, a call for plurality is necessary. A translingual approach is key to understanding U.S. Latinos and our English-Spanish language usages.

Speaking two languages does not need to be balanced in order for it to be effective. When I was in middle school, at the height of my linguistic anxiety, my uncle told me I "should at least speak Spanglish." He gave me an example demonstrating that I should be able to move between English and Spanish in order to say something along the lines of "mami, can you pass me la olla?."At that moment, I felt like he was making fun of my inability to speak Spanish fluently, but in retrospect, I recognize that he was giving

[12] I acknowledge the various dialects, slangs, vocabulary choices in Spanishes coming from different countries throughout Latin America and the world. To say one Spanish is the dominant language is to establish a hierarchy of language and culture that immediately sets one country's linguistics above another. I will not do that. I will not hierarchize our Spanishes against one another.

me an alternative. He was demonstrating that translingualism, moving between languages, did not have to be grammatically correct in one language or the other. I did not have to be perfectly fluent in Spanish because Spanglish was a perfectly fine method of embodying Latinidad within the United States. My uncle's linguistic fluidity puts the balanced bilingualism myth in the basura by breaking expectations of monolingualism. His two languages collide in sentences as his two cultures collide in life. Translingualism is the alternative to balanced bilingualism because it sits between the grammar rules of both languages and takes into consideration primarily the audience. Spanglish, or translingualism in general, is not an even split. Depending on who we are speaking to, we can opt to speak more Spanish heavy Spanglish or more English heavy Spanglish. Spanglish is able to do this because translingualism does not function like two monolingual brains inside one skull. It is fluid and flows according to the speaking situation and the needs of that situation.

In my uncle's Spanglish, the fluid motion between Spanish and English is a determining factor of his translingualism. In the example, and in his every day speech, he does not stop and consider what language to speak and when. He just does it. This is how many Latinos translanguage. The ability to easily move between languages is one key component of translingualism. Like my uncle, Min-Zhan Lu and Bruce Horner argue that translingualism can be found in our everyday language usage and depends largely on audience. In their article "Translingual Literacy, Language Difference, and Matters of Agency." Lu and Horner state that translingualism is "*the norm*, to be found not only in utterances that dominant ideology has marked as different but also in utterances that dom-

inant definitions of language, language relations, and language users would identify as 'standard.'" (Lu and Horner 585, my emphasis). Lu and Horner explain that translingualism occurs in situations with unequal power structures. They describe instances where writers construct and reconstruct their writing in order to meet the standards/requirements of the institution they are writing for/within. For Lu and Horner, the movement from thinking in a colloquial spoken language filled with slang to writing in a Standardized Written English for a school essay or a business letter is a translingual writing event. The key is the movement from one method of thinking/speaking/writing to another. For example, speaking slang-heavy, informal English with friends has a different set of rules than speaking in formal, academic English with a college professor. It doesn't matter if the language is always in English, individuals translanguage across speaking situations. Likewise, Laura Gonzales thinks about translingualism "as a framework to analyze the fluidity and negotiation of language in various modes. Translingualism, as I will be using the term, does not define or represent students' linguistic backgrounds. Rather, translingualism gives us a framework for understanding the *fluidity* of modalities and languages" (2, my emphasis). Her approach to translingualism focuses on the give and take and in the recursive practices of language. Like Lu and Horner, she does not necessarily focus on the movement between one specific language to another, like Spanish to English or vice versa, but the practices that allow a person to move from one idea to another. Translingualism, then, particularly as it applies to U.S. Latinos, ought to focus most on the movement between languages and the cultural knowledge of how to speak to whom and when, more so than the skill level in one language or another. Like my uncle did for

me, translingualism gives us the opportunity to find our Latindad within the vast spectrum of language skill. We do not have to fit into a bilingual ideology that demands so much of us and considers so little of our lived experiences within the United States.

However, the above is still an idealized version of translingualism, looking at bilingualism as splitting into two languages and does not capture the variety in multilingual experiences. Indeed, my uncle does speak both English and Spanish very well, so he is able to move with relative ease between the two. I, on the other hand, experience translingualism much differently. I am English dominant and am relearning Spanish, so oftentimes, my translingualism comes to a crash. Sometimes, I can't think of a word in Spanish, or an English idiom gets translated directly into Spanish and doesn't make sense anymore. Like poet Jamilla Lyscott says, "sometimes I fight back two tongues, while I use the other in the classroom, and when I mistakenly mix them up, I feel crazy… like I'm cooking in the bathroom" (Lyscott). My personal translingualism is much more in line with Rebecca Lorimier Leonard's "messy literacy" (33). In her book, *Writing on the Move*, Lorimer Leonard describes her participants' "'mess' of multilingual experience" (34). She writes,

> One dimension of literate fluidity expressed by almost every participant in this study was the "mess" of multilingual experience. Participants describe the movement among their language varieties as anything but tidy. For many, this meant mixed or meshed language use beyond their control, while for others this meant the productive chaos of multilingualism. The broad sampling of participant narratives here shows the frequency of invocations of literate mess as well as the range

> of its characterizations, as political choice, easier (than monolingual communication), uncontrolled and automatic, or controlled and intentional. Although the multilingual writing of migrants is often treated as error-ridden, unformed, or lazy —too messy to merit response—these writers treat mess as the natural state of language, a set of sometimes chaotic practices that reflect how they believe literacy is experienced in most of the world. (34)

In contrast to the myth of balanced bilingualism--which feels more theoretical than practical--Lorimer Leonard's participants provide real world examples about how language plays in their heads. They do not describe a native-like control of two or more languages. Instead, she reports that they often find themselves in a chaotic mindset when trying to clear out one language in order to privilege another. If there were a truly balanced method of speaking more than one language, Lorimer Leonard's participants would not feel like their "mixed or mesh language" was "beyond their control." Messy, chaotic literacy is a more apt approach to understanding translingualism.

Regardless if the movement is across one language or many, the recursive process of languaging forces us all to stop, think, consider, and reconsider our words. Language is not balanced. It is messy. For example, a job interview would require a person to speak politely, charmingly, and in a manner befitting the position that person has applied for. And yet, that same person may go home and speak in a stern manner when their toddler is trying to climb onto the counters again. That one person has to navigate between the situations at hand, and the process may be messy. How quickly must the person choose not to hurl curse words at the toddler, but accidentally does? How formal must they choose to

be at that job interview, but lets slip a “y’all” or a “yo?” This is a messy process and it is this exact messy literacy that Lorimer Leonoard addresses. For many people, myself in-cluded, this is how translingualism works.

Being able to speak more than one language is not a tidy experience. It includes moments of pause, reflection, searching, stumbling, stuttering, being unable to find a translation, finding a translation after some time, shame, excitement, nervousness, pride, and so much more. Lorimer Leonard defines these movements across language as either fluidity, fixity, or frictive. Fluidity refers to the messiness of language movement where languages and literacies collide in order to meet whatever demands must be met (Lorimer Leonard 67). Fixity refers to moments of getting stuck, which function as a part of fluid language movement, and also suggests that language movement can well be restarted (Lorimer Leonard 67). Frictive, on the other hand, describes the phenomenon where, “writerly and institutional values that both do and don’t match” (Lorimer Leonard 93). Lorimer Leonard focuses on the specific movements between and across languages, and how each of those movements are interpreted by a larger public. She calls it the “literacy game” where her participants are able to use their language skills to their best benefit (16). The valuation system that either does or does not value a certain literacy skill is what drives her participants to have moments of messy fluidity, getting stuck, and mis-aligning literacy skills. Lorimer Leonard’s method of viewing literacy, and therefore lan-guage, as a system of movements and not as a two-way street, allows for multilingual mobility.

At this moment, I must pause and admit that I have been leading this conversation towards a very specific pitfall. I've been reiterating the stereotype that Latinos speak both English and Spanish. Unintentionally, I've been reinforcing that in order to be Latino, a person must be able to speak some level of both languages. I started this chapter by saying that speaking Spanish was one of the biggest hindrances to feeling like I could claim my Latinidad, and here I am reinforcing that same expectation. So, I say this very clearly. *The ability to speak two languages, Spanish and English, has no bearance on identifying as Latino. Latinidad and language are not tied together.* Being translingual is a reality for some Latinos, for sure, but in order to be Latino, a person does not need to be translingual. The nefarious side of this conversation is contending with the theory of raciolinguistics. Raciolinguistics is,

> The co-naturalization of language and race is a key feature of modern governance, such that languages are perceived as racially embodied and race is perceived as linguistically intelligible, which results in the overdetermination of racial embodiment and communicative practice—hence the notion of looking like a language and sounding like a race. (Rosa 2)

Admittedly, it is very difficult for me to dislodge my own Latinidad from Spanish because I *do* look like the stereotypical person who *would* speak Spanish. My racial and ethnic features line up with the languages I speak. I find myself surprised when I see light skinned or white Latinos speaking Spanish on my Instagram feed. Even though I know that Latinidad is not determined by skin color, I cannot help but feel a small bit of shock and remind myself, "Yes, Tabitha, there are white Latinos." The inverse is also true. Lati-

no-looking people who do not speak Spanish are also still Latino. The two are not connected. But the theory of raciolinguistics dictates that the link between the two have been "co-naturalized." This is the nefarious part of Latinidad and language. Without interrogating this link, we risk perpetuating this stereotype and pushing non-Spanish speaking Latinos to the periphery of Latinidad. Which I do not want to do.

Jonathan Rosa defines the connection between physical appearance and expectation to speak a certain language as raciolinguistics. In his book, *Looking Like a Language, Sounding Like a Race*, he breaks down this theory into five major components:

> (1) it racializes language and Latinxs by referring to people of "Spanish- speaking descent" and implying that language is biologically inherited; (2) it completely obfuscates rapid Spanish language loss among US Latinxs by suggesting that it is normative for US Latinxs to be monolingual Spanish speakers; (3) it suggests that Latinxs strategically create a "bubble" around themselves, which frames segregation and marginalization as the products of individual choices rather than structural phenomena; (4) it naturalizes English monolingualism and hegemony; and (5) it chronotropically positions the Spanish language/ Spanish speakers as parts of Chicago's past that should be respected, compared with the English language/ English speakers who compose the city's present and future. (Rosa 137-138)

The theory of raciolinguistics interrogates the seemingly natural connection between Latinidad and the Spanish language, linking together identity and language in a way that necessitates the two to be conjoined. The connection between physical appearance and language spoken erases many of the lived realities of U.S. Latinos by reinforcing the

stereotypes that we ought to look a certain way, and we ought to speak a certain way. In other words, Latinos must be brown of skin, black of hair, speak Spanish and accented English. People who do not speak English with a Spanish accent are part of the "future" as Rosa puts it (*Looking Like a Language, Sounding Like a Race* 15). They are more assimilated and therefore further from the Latino identity. Fighting against the stereotypes of race and language, Rosa argues against the myth of a naturalized union between language and appearance and works to disjoin the two. His research in Chicago public schools with Mexican descended and Puerto Rican descended high schoolers proves that although connected to identity in some ways, Spanish language fluency is not a necessary part of being of Latino descent.

Rosa, instead, argues that maneuverability within different syntaxes of Spanish language, instead, is more important. He highlights the varying usages of Inverted Spanglish in identity affirming languages that 1) plays into expectations of Spanish-speaking-looking people to speak a form of Spanish, 2) work around ranging Spanish language proficiencies, and 3) reinforces "intimate familiarity" with both Spanish and English (Rosa "From Mock Spanish to Inverted Spanglish" 74). Inverted Spanglish mimics the sounds of Spanish through an English monolingual ears'. For example, Inverted Spanglish would pronounce it "grassy ass" as opposed to "gracias." This mockery grants access to non-Spanish speaking Latinos into the world of Latinidad because of the way that it makes fun of outsiders by making fun of itself. It is a meta-analytical act that reciprocates the white washing of Spanish but does not bring attention to the speaker's actual language level. Indeed, their language skill is not important because being on the inside of

this joke is the most important part. These stylized counter-usages of Spanglish work to undo the internalized sentiment that even the most skilled bilingual person is not fluent enough in either Spanish *or* in English. Rosa describes an event where. Dr. Baez, the principal of New Northwest High School, the school which Rosa researches, apologizes, in Spanish, to an audience of parents for having a Spanish-language translator (Rosa *Looking Like a Language, Sounding Like a Race* 125). Rosa also points out that at NNHS, multilingual students are not classified as bilingual on their school papers, even if they speak multiple languages regularly, unless they are in ELL classes (*Looking Like a Language, Sounding Like a Race* 129). Additionally, students and teachers are mocked and critiqued for not speaking Spanish well enough (Rosa *Looking Like a Language, Sounding Like a Race* 125). For Rosa, what is dangerous about raciolinguistics is how, "the racialization of language can push minoritized populations to the lowest and most peripheral points" (Rosa *Looking Like a Language, Sounding Like a Race* 126). Language usage for us Latinos is an act that can never be enough. What changes, however, is who is the one that deems the language sufficient or insufficient. Sometimes, we are our own worst critics.

What I think the bottom line of Rosa's raciolinguistic theory is that there will always be perceptions of what Latinos should and should not be like. It is a view of us from the outside that forces us to think about the ways that we react back to the public. I situate this alongside W.E.B. DuBois's theory of double-consciousness, except on a linguistic scale instead of a racialized one, though the argument can be made that it is both. Gloria Anzaldúa calls this "facultad." Facultad "is the capacity to see in surface phenomena the

meaning of deeper realities… it is an instant 'sensing,' a quick perception arrived without conscious reasoning" (60). We Latinos are always thinking about how others view our Spanish usage and are considering others' perspectives of us before embarking on a linguistic exchange. My lifelong experience with holding in my Spanish tongue is a prime example.

By combining Lu and Horner's and Gonzales's definitions of translingualism, Lorimer Leonard's frictive/fluid/fixed theory, and Rosa's theory of raciolinguistics, I propose that it is precisely the fluidity of language--between English, Spanish, or otherwise--that best exemplifies the connection between language and Latinidad. Being fully fluent in Spanish and English as if within a binary, does not and cannot capture the variety of Latinidades within the United States. We also must be aware of the linguistic social demands that are asked of us before uttering any phrases. We must consider with whom we are speaking, when, and why. Even if a person feels as if they still have lots to learn, their familiarity with language is what shapes their Latinidad within the context of the United States.

Therefore, it is exactly the messiness of language ability that informs Latinidad as opposed to balanced English-Spanish bilingualism. Bilingualism is a lived reality for many Latinos, but it is not the only lived reality. Raciolinguistics and fluid literacies inform a much more nuanced and linguistically complex Latinidad that more closely resembles real life experience. As I have stated above, I have always spoken Spanish, despite only becoming more practiced in the language in recent years. Defining my identity according to the rigid definition of balanced bilingualism hindered my ability to view

myself as a *real* Latina. I may have looked the part, stereotypically of course, through my brown skin and black hair, and my white peers may have readily accepted me as a Latina, but the idea of balanced bilingualism kept me from accepting myself as such. Without the ability to speak Spanish as well as I spoke English, I felt like I could never be fully Latina. In my own eyes, I was ethnically Latina, but I was a gringa.[13] This connection is harmful to those of us who do not speak Spanish but still adhere to our Latino identities. Fluency in Spanish and English does not and cannot influence Latinidad. Therefore, I advocate for the messy nature of translingualism as an alternative for our Latinidades.

By investigating my personal experiences, and the experiences of my cousins, this project steps into the daily lives of Latinos to examine their language usage and its various functions. Long Island, a predominantly white location, has made its many linguistic demands of my family and me. Its mainstream culture has asked us to assimilate and lose part of our language, but in turn, it has allowed us to become Long Islanders and feel at home on this 100-mile-long plot of land. Through our language usages, we have lost, gained and survived. There is no one story of a Long Island Latinidad, and not all of the stories that arise are happy ones. We are still very much the ethnic, and racial, and cultural Other here. But through all of the choices that have been made, we have carved ourselves out an existence.

[13] In a heart wrenching moment of self-doubt, I named myself "G.R.I.N.G.A" on my Myspace while in middle school. It got a lot of laughs from family, and was a fun play on my understanding of the Spanish language and the slightly derogatory term to which I referred myself. But it was a confusing moment of being both inside and outside of the culture that I belonged to, but did not feel like I belonged to.

Learning English

I do not believe that speaking Spanish makes one Latino. Latinidad is much more of a cultural process than it is a skill set, a phenotype, or ancestral heritage. Although I enjoy speaking Spanish and communicating with others who have a similar background as me, I recognize the language is not a unifying factor in our identity. That being said, the Spanish language and Latinidad do still have a relationship to one another. Because of raciolinguistics, our Latino identities are often tied to the Spanish language. Even if all that remains is calling it a plátano instead of a green plantain. It can be the emotion felt hearing grandma's favorite cumbias, or the pride of seeing Bad Bunny win a Grammy with his Spanish-only album, *Un Verano Sin Ti*. We are linked to our Spanish language roots in one way or another. The fluidity of our identities, and therefore the fluidity of our proximity to Spanish, ebb and flow through us like water; even if only the tip of the wave touches our toes and we are never engulfed into the undercurrent. I am fully aware of how societal expectations for Latinos to speak Spanish influences the connection between Latinidad and Spanish. My personal experience with it is a painfully clear example.

I needed English to fit in. We all do. That is, of course, if we are looking to fit into the mainstream United States society. Here, English, for the most part, is the dominant language of many workplaces, paperwork, public education, literature, media, popular culture, and so on. English is the language that surrounds us on our day to day within this country. Immigrants and children of immigrants alike are pushed towards the English language like lumber on a splitter, told over and over that English is the path to success. In many ways, I agree. I speak English like a Long Islander. I have my oh's and aw's and

pronounce water as “warter.” Because I still live here, I sound like one of the crowd. I also write like someone who has spent a tremendous amount of time writing in Standardized English, because I have. I can put on the guise of a monolingual American, without anyone finding out I speak other languages unless I tell them. Because I live within the United States, this mastery of the English language has awarded me many of the privileges I have today that range from my personal relationships, to my work, to my education, and even writing this project. I am grateful for my English. It is the language I think in. It is the language I love in. What I am not grateful for is the incessant push towards monolingualism as a means to success. Language loss is an inevitable fact for many immigrants and children of immigrants, but monolingualism does not need to be our doom (destiny?).

The goal for many of us is to assimilate to the United States’s culture to the degree we see fit. The English language is certainly a facet of this. Our success is bound to our mastery of English such that when children are placed into English language acquisition classes in public school, no one bats an eye. As Matsuda points out, the U.S. college composition classroom, and by extension any U.S. classroom where writing and reading are done in English, is where we are taught a single kind of English, Standardized Written English. The push to learn a specific kind of English language is always already there. Subconsciously, this perpetuates the idea that learning English is a necessary step in becoming American. I was never placed into an English as a Second Language classroom, as it was called in the 90s when I attended grade school, so I cannot personally attest the value of such a classroom. However, I do remember moments being lost in translation.

During kindergarten, I recall trying to tell my teacher about why I was absent the previous days. I was sick, and could not translate what I was experiencing into English. One parent had just dropped me off at my Catholic school, leaving me to explain myself. In my blue and white plaid uniform, I confessed to the teacher that I had been absent because "I had *diarrea*." Embarrassed enough to admit my malady, the teacher asked me to repeat myself, not understanding what *diarrea* meant, I suppose. And I did.

I have always lived my life between two languages. I feel at home in Spanglish. However, it was moments like this that pushed me to believe that the appropriate language for public use was English. It was what my teachers and friends understood, so it became imperative that I could also speak fluently in English so that such embarrassment did not have to be repeated. Eventually, English became my dominant language.

I was privileged enough to speak English from a young age, so that I did not have to be placed into an English as a New Language class. I have *Barney & Friends* to thank for a lot of that, my mother tells me. My school day memories are filled mostly with sitting alongside peers, never having to be pulled out for English lessons on the side. My language usage never hindered my school day experience. This is a level of privilege that I will never understate. However, this was not the experience of all my cousins. I have seen first-hand how raciolinguistic stereotypes can affect a child's education.

As per my mother and aunt, the story goes like this: when my cousins were children, they were automatically put into English as a New Language classes. Their parents were livid because the children were never taught Spanish. English was their home language; and only language at the time. The connection between their brown skin, their

Hispanic sounding last names allotted them a place, wrongly, in ENL classes. After some argument, the children were correctly placed into a general education class, as they should have been placed in the first place.

My cousins, Nikki and Bryan, recalled their ENL days very differently from this experience and from one another. Nikki and Bryan are only a few years apart in age and attended the same elementary school. They likely had the same ENL teacher during their elementary school days, but since Bryan was unable to recall the teacher's name, we cannot be entirely sure. This is of particular note because may remove teaching style out of the equation, leaving only Bryan and Nikki's recollections of their time in ENL and highlighting the differences in their experiences. According to Bryan,

> Yeah, I took ESL for two years. And I tested out. It was a fun experience. Like, I remember it being the fun part of the day. Oh, I didn't learn…. She didn't teach… like, she didn't know Spanish herself. So it was… I wish I could have had more of a better memory of the experience, because I would like to know how I even learned English. Because, like… I don't remember. I don't remember what the classroom setting was like at all. Like… I remember playing a lot of games. And because I was young, I was, like, in second grade. So I was there from second grade, third grade, and then by fourth grade I was out. But yeah, it was cool. Oh, I think most of my English learning happened at home with my siblings, because I had older siblings.

Bryan remembered his elementary school days with fondness. His days of learning English within a school setting were filled with play and "fun." He did not remember his

teacher very well, save her English monolingualism. He experiences the friction that Lorimer Leonard describes in her theory of fluidity and messy literacy. The pause between “oh, I didn’t learn” and “she didn’t teach” demonstrates Bryan’s difficulty remembering how, and if, his ESL teacher had anything to do with his English language acquisition. He paused to scan his brain for memories of this teacher instructing him English, was unable to find one, and opted to return to a memory he did have in order to complete his answer. He didn’t remember learning, only fun. However, his overall positive answer demonstrates that the teacher’s playful nature was the most important detail of his interactions with her. Her (likely) monolingualism bore no importance upon Bryan’s remembrance of his ENL classes. “It was cool,” as he says. Bryan did, however, regret not having a fuller memory of his education. He would have liked to be more fully aware of how he did acquire English and who were his biggest influences. Though, later he assumed that much of his English language learning came from home from his older siblings. I am thrilled Bryan was able to have such a great experience and have such fond memories from his English language learning days.

In a perfect world, this is the experience we would want for our young people to have when in an educational institution learning a new language. Bryan’s past generates positivity and hopefulness that every child will be so lucky to simply absorb a new language with no ill-effects, like a sponge. However, that is not always the case. Nikki, in contrast to Bryan, did not remember her days in ESL as warmly:

> So, I was in first and second grade ESL. I also actually went to Reading and I don't know, I feel like I didn't… I didn't… even as, like, a kid I felt like, ‘why am

> I in Reading?' Like, I don't know. I felt like Reading was, like, for lack of better words for, like, special-ed kids. Like, you know, like that. That was my perception of it when I was little and I'm like, 'why am I in Reading? I can read.'

Unlike Bryan's experience, Nikki's recollection of her ESL days brought up feelings of resentment and confusion. She recalled her childhood self being made to feel intellectually inferior to her peers because the special attention she was receiving was, then, usually reserved for children with special needs. She asserted, "I can read." She could read at that time. Nikki was an intelligent and capable child, but her language skills at the time demanded that she be pulled out from class and given support where she did not feel like she needed support.

> When we were younger, there only existed the pull out [method]. You know? You would be pulled out of class. And I don't remember it being like, like, I don't remember it feeling like I was different. Like, I was being pulled out. You know, like, I remember being excited, because it was a good experience.

Nikki stressed that her experiences were generally good, and she wasn't made to feel different, but the tumultuous nature of her responses demonstrate that she did, at that time, have mixed emotions about her education. She was and wasn't different. She did and did not need extra attention. She sat at the intersection of fitting in and just being different enough. At her young age as a first and second grader, Nikki had begun her assimilatory journey that would earn her the "50/50" identity that she claims today as a Latina and a Long Islander.

The paths of life are such that Nikki has since taken on the role of ENL teacher on Long Island in her own career. Her perspective is particularly valuable because it provides both a retrospective vision of her language acquisition journey and a much more nuanced perspective of how her own students perceive their language skills. While discussing her own language acquisition journey, Nikki discussed her students. She described them as self-critical, and they continued to down-play their own English language skills. In an exasperated, passionate breath, Nikki said:

> So my students, in their perspective of being bilingual, and like, knowing English, is that they can just have a full conversation in English. That's their perspective. I'm like, 'No, you speak English. I don't care if it's, like, you use this word in English or Spanish, you speak English, you understand?' You know? So, for me, like being able to move between languages, you're, like, you're bilingual. You know both languages. Like, just because you're not fluent in one, you don't know the language, you know? And I like, it's such a struggle with my kids trying to, like, make them understand that and try to be, you know, proud of what they know already. All the time. They're like, 'we don't know English, we don't know English.' And I'm like, so how did I have a whole conversation with you, me speaking in English, and you're answering me? They'll laugh. I'm like, so like, 'you know English,' you know? And they will use, like, words here and there. I'm, like, 'You're, you're speaking English right now.'

Nikki's compassion is inspiring. She urged her own students to recognize their English language skills, especially when they were feeling most down about their abilities. Her

questions, “you understand” and “you know” were rhetorical and instead acted as affirmations. She urged her students to think about their English language abilities as evergrowing, while embodying the ideas of fluidity that Lorimer Leonard posits in her writing. “Being able to move between languages, you’re, like, bilingual,” Nikki asserted. Even if there are moments of friction, as Lorimer Leonard theorizes, where students stumble or cannot find the appropriate word to express their thoughts, translingual communication is happening. Nikki emphasized that her students are indeed bilingual because she, the teacher, was able to speak to them in English, and they responded to her appropriately. The language with which they respond is not identified, but Nikki’s point was that the language with which the students respond does not matter. What matters most is that they can and do respond to her. Engaging across languages is evidence and exercise of translingualism. Like Lorimer Leonard’s theory of fluidity, her students maneuver between Spanish and English. Nikki’s words of affirmation spoke not only to her students, but to language learners at large that bilingualism is fluid like waterways and should not be so strictly defined. Thinking in strict, binary terms is dangerous and reinforces the myth of bilingualism.

Within the same breath, Nikki recognized in her students the limiting nature of her students’ definition of bilingualism. Her students’ definition of bilingualism falls in line with Haugen’s definition of two “native-like competence[s]” (Liddicoat 8). They had yet to recognize their fluid translingual abilities even while Nikki worked hard to break that mindset. The effects of this strict definition is emphasized especially through standardized testing. Later in the interview, Nikki mentioned how the New York State Re-

gents exams further reinforced the idea of balanced bilingualism and how it stifled her students' self-confidence:

> But I have a feeling that this test [the NYS English Regents Exam] is going to do more bad than good. Like they're going to feel like, 'I don't know English, like this test just proved to me that I don't know English.' And it's so frustrating to me because I… especially with these two [students], like they're so, like… they're so bright. And this kid got here… not last December, but the December before... And he knows so much English already. He learned so quick. And he's one of the kids that say, 'I don't know English' and I'm like, 'but you do.' So that… I hate these tests. They do more bad than good. They really bring their self-esteem down, and they get so discouraged. They make themselves feel that they're like, not smart enough, or like they don't know something.

The unfortunate alternative to Nikki's compassionate pedagogy is the institutional reality of the school system. Tomás Mario Kalmar in his book, *Illegal Alphabets and Adult Biliteracy*, interrogates the value placed onto "legitimate" institutionalized spaces/places for language acquisition versus "illegal" methods of language acquisition (12). Throughout his work, Kalmar insists that learning a language--in this case, English--outside of a legitimate institution, such as a classroom with an instructor, is a perfectly viable method of learning English, even if it is non-traditional and if the methods used are constantly in flux. However, Kalmar still contends with the reality that classroom spaces, the educational institution, the teacher-student relationship remains overvalued as a legitimate space of learning because of its replicability and means for measuring success (77-81).

For Nikki's students alike, their own valuation of their English language abilities was based upon institutional measurements of success--AKA, their grades on the NYS English Regents Exam. The overvaluation of the institution as a legitimate method of measuring fluency erodes the ways that Nikki's students valued their language skills.

In a separate conversation, Bryan mentioned that on a scale of 0-100% fluent, he finds himself at "70%." This percentage he called his fluency was not derived from an internal self-evaluation, but instead from a standardized test he took during his undergraduate education. Bryan recalled his college years when,

> Going to Stony Brook [University], I had to take a fluency test just to, like, see if I should take a language course or if I can be exempt. And their testing system determined that I was a generational speaker, which meant that I could speak the language, but I couldn't read or write it. And that's exactly how I would define my fluency.

Bryan's undergraduate college, Stony Brook University, had given him a 70% fluency on their language exam. It graded him on spoken, as well as written language, and determined that he was a "generational speaker"--a person who speaks Spanish at home, but who has never learned to read or write the language formally. I've seen Bryan write in Spanish. I've seen him read in Spanish. He is able to do both, he was just not able to do it well enough on this exam to warrant a fuller percentage of fluency. If you had asked him before attending Stony Brook University, he, "would have probably told you a higher number, like closer to 90, or like 95, even like I would have, I would have thought of myself as, like, just a little bit less than fluent." Even though Bryan holds no qualms about

his 70% fluency, this example vividly highlights the power that institutions, and standardized testing alike, has over an individual's concept of self, particularly in terms of language ability. In other words, institutionalized grading systems undo the efforts of people like Nikki and Tomás Kalmar.

Nikki clearly has pride for the student she describes who has recently arrived in the United States and the amount of English they have learned in such a short time. And yet, she was aware that the NYS Regents will serve to only undermine the amount that they have learned. Like Ms. Rain, who calls protagonist Precious's TABE (literacy score) that jumps from 2.8 to 7.8 a "quantum leap" in Sapphire's *PUSH*, Nikki pushes her students to acknowledge their growth as more important than a score (139). Ms. Rain emphasizes that even if Precious's score is still below the score necessary to qualify for a GED-preparedness class, the amount that previously illiterate Precious's has learned is leagues more important. A number cannot account for a person's full intelligence. Unlike in Nikki's above example, Precious recognizes her own growth and is empowered by it. But this is a work of fiction, and Nikki's students deal with their reality much differently.

The infuriating contrast to Nikki's students' experiences, and my cousin's own experience, with English language acquisition classroom stands the Language Other Than English (LOTE) classroom. It would be impossible for me to say that I have not noticed the unequal balance of language acquisition based on who is learning what language. More specifically, there is a massive hypocrisy of how white children are treated when learning Spanish compared to how when Latinx children are treated when learning English.

In my K-12 school district, Middle Country Central School District, or MCCSD, students are asked to pick a language other than English to begin learning in the seventh grade; around age 12. Within the halls of my memory, there is much pride when people select the languages of their heritage and begin to unlock the languages that have been silenced to them. There is a palpable energy in these classrooms when children realize they can finally speak a sentence to their grandparents in their ancestral tongues. This excitement stands in stark contrast to the ways that English as a New Language (then English as a Second Language) students are treated when learning English. The ability to learn another language when a person is already in a position of power is a privilege and a luxury. But when a person who does not speak the dominant language learns the dominant language, in this case English, they are chastised for their accents, grammar, slow pace of conversation, and so on. Nikki, who teaches ENL in a public high school on Long Island, tells me that with the usage of co-teaching strategies in public schools that this gap is closing. But she also tells me that there is still a lot of language based segregation and bias in other facets of high school life. There is lots of stereotyping regarding parent involvement and student achievement that falls along language lines. The irony is that learning a new language is fun and interesting to those with privilege, but an obligation to those who do not have the dominant language skills.

In the example above, English speakers are the holders of Pierre Bourdieu's symbolic power (164). "Symbolic power is that invisible power which can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that they themselves exercise it" (Bourdieu 164). The symbolic power of speaking Eng-

lish on Long Island, and the United States at large, is that it allows us to join the "consensus" of who is in power (Bourdieu 166). In other words, speaking English on Long Island allows us to enter through the proverbial gate to a shared Long Island identity. This becomes the "dominant culture… which legitimates distinctions by forcing all other cultures (designated as subcultures) to define themselves by their distance from the dominant culture" (Bourdieu 167). Bourdieu's symbolic power was loudly at work in my public middle school when the English speaking, predominantly white students were able to happily embark on a language acquisition journey as a kind of suburban rite of passage, whereas the students in ENL classrooms were literally sequestered away into different classrooms away from the general public. Even though all seventh graders were doing the same thing, the symbolic power of students within the consensus was such that it continued to alienate young English language learners because they were learning the wrong language at the wrong time.

The Language Other than English classroom is an excellent space to focus in on the ways that society reinforces linguistic power dynamics. In her book, *You Sound Like a White Girl*, Julissa Arce addresses the racially-biased language acquisition gap.

> While Latinos walk around with a scarlet letter for speaking Spanish, white people are embraced as cultured for when they learn our language. Bilingual programs are trending with affluent families. Many schools in America now teach English as a Second Language and well-off parents pay tens of thousands of dollars for dual-language immersion programs, but speaking Spanish while Brown still isn't safe in many parts of America. (67)

White folks find that learning a new language as a marketable skill to be profited off of. This is how learning another language in my middle school experience was portrayed. I recall being called into the auditorium with the entire sixth grade class to sit down and view slide shows for the different languages offered at my middle school. In retrospect, they were advertisements. Students walked out of the auditorium excited about the language they were going to select for the upcoming school year. Some students were planning on choosing Italian because of their family ancestry, some chose French on a promise to visit Paris in high school, and many… many… chose Spanish because it would be "a good thing to know for jobs." Many friends at the time reiterated to me what their parents had said to them about Spanish as a desirable job skill. My language, my culture, was turned into a commodity. In the fall, students walked into a Spanish language classroom--the only space in the entire curriculum where my culture and ancestry would be featured--dragging their feet because their parents told them to. Arce mentions that "well-off parents parents pay tens of thousands of dollars for dual-language programs" demonstrating the lengths to which rich, white folks will go to advance their childrens' lots in life (67). These same folks are perceived as "cultured" when learning a new language, meanwhile Latinos and other immigrants are shunned, and scorned for not speaking English (well enough[14]). Arce argues that no matter what, we will never speak English well

[14] "Well enough" is important to note within the context of language, power, and social hierarchies because to the Long Island public, there is a massive distinction between speaking English fluently with a non-english accent and speaking English fluently without a non-english accent. Long Islanders love British, Australian, Irish, Scottish, Welsh, and South African accents, but scoff when someone speaks with an Indian accent, or a Spanish accent, etc. when speaking English. The issue of accent is deeply embedded in racism and xenophobia masked with the phrase, "I just can't understand what they're saying." It is not an issue of speaking English at all, it is an issue of speaking English well enough according to the arbitrary measure of Long Island social norms.

enough. Even so, for Latinos, learning English is necessary. We cannot afford to be monolingual within the United States if we want to be successful.

After outlining the harsh reality for many brown-skinned Spanish speaking folks, Arce describes an incident where a mother and daughter were harassed due to their "private moment" in a Walmart where the daughter said, "Mira, mami" (68). The mother was scolded and told, "you need to teach this kid to speak English, because this is America and kids need to learn English" (68). This kind of patriotic, monolingual ideology harms our sense of security, identity, and reinforces that our language is never acceptable, even when between family members. So then, when Arce adds, "only when *we* have the audacity to use our mother tongue do racists worry about the future of the country, but for others it's an added skill to speak Spanish" she is pinpointing the irony of this situation where when white folks are learning Spanish, it is acceptable, but when an ancestral user of Spanish speaks it, or teaches it to their children, it is no longer appropriate (68). It then becomes a skill that needs to be taken away.

No matter how I try to think about this, I cannot reconcile this gap. I understand that many Latinos have their own personal reasons for not passing along Spanish to their children, and I respect them all. But I cannot understand why our language is promised as a shoe-in for a job, but then we cannot speak that language in public without ridicule. This is racism. Plain and simple. But the fetishization of our language still leaves me baffled, *especially* when ENL students, and English language learners are so often accosted for speaking.

Losing Spanish

It is no secret at this point in this chapter that my Spanish language skills have haunted me throughout my youth and young adult life. I was often told that I was "too white" because of it. I felt shame because I was embarrassed to practice Spanish with family members and practicing with friends was an even more inconceivable idea. However, the alternative reality to this so-called, whiteness (which I will contest later in this section when discussing "Acting White,") was that I was able to assimilate fairly well into my Long Island suburb.

Part of my mother's quip that, "Tabitha didn't know she wasn't white until she was in high school" is the fact that I blended in at school fairly well. Of course, I stood out because I was one of the few brown-skinned people in my grade at the time, but culturally, I was well adjusted. I knew the most popular music artists, I followed clothing and television trends, I formed opinions that sat alongside (or in contrast) to my peers depending on how rebellious I felt at the time. My assimilation awarded me a place at the proverbial table within my childhood experiences. I experienced growing pains, as any pre-teen and teenager might, but none of them were racial, ethnic, or linguistic. I simply didn't see myself as distinct from my suburban community. I was a part of everyone else.

In contrast, this level of assimilation with peers earned me discomfort around other Latinos, including my family. I was accused of acting "too white" and recall feeling out of place around my family while wearing my Fall Out Boy band t-shirts and emo-punk music blasting in my hot pink, Skullcandy headphones. It was something that other Latinos didn't do--which, in retrospect, is total nonsense. My cousins' karaoke nights are

filled with pop punk throwbacks from the mid-2000s. However, the mentality of a rigid Latinidad weighed heavily on me. At the time, the lines had been drawn in the sand that a person was *either* Latina *or* American. So, I threw myself into whiteness and white culture because I felt more at ease with it. The most telling sign of my assimilation was my Spanish language loss and my English language dominance.

Growing up, terms like "acting white" or "too white" were meant as digs against assimilation, not white people. Durkee et al. discuss at length the various "cultural invalidations" of "acting white" (452). Cultural invalidations are "insults and identity threats that strategically undermine the validity of a person's membership within one or more social identities;" namely, the insulting nature of being told that you are "acting white" as a person of color (451). These terms, "acting white", being "too white," are meant to critique the loss of ancestral culture over generations. This insult is harmful not because white culture is necessarily a bad thing, but rather because falling into white behavior as a person of color is viewed as a betrayal to that person's heritage or ethnic/racial identity. In my own experience, my Spanish language loss was painful not because of some essential/natural connection between my Ecuadorian ancestry and the language. It was painful because I felt like I had betrayed my culture. My assimilation to Americana and Long Island suburbia felt like a slap in the face of my ancestry. As Castillo et al. state, it is a "disagreement over heritage culture maintenance" (233). When aimed at individuals, words like "acting white," "too white," or in my experience, "gringa," become personal insults. When they were aimed at me, it felt like I needed to bury a part of my personality, my culture and interests, in order to live up to the expectations of my family members

and Latinos at large. In many ways, it still does feel this way. I often cannot help but call cherished music of my teenage years, “white people music.” However, today, I have come to the understanding that I *can* be both Latina and American. They are not separate identities, they are both, equally, parts of me. What is most noticeable about this mental growth is that it needed to happen at all. Negotiating the space between two cultures makes the previous cultural disconnect I felt that much more stark.

However, part of the journey of becoming my version of American is learning English. To be a Long Islander, I needed English and I still do. My cousin Nikki emphasized the need for English on Long Island, “Unfortunately, I think it's very important, and I think it's… I think the word necessary actually fits in there. Not only just to communicate your needs… But actually, mostly to communicate your needs. Like [in the] suburbs, you have to know some English to communicate needs.” Nikki lamented the necessity of English on Long Island, but in the same breath, acknowledged that this place is mostly monolingual English. The geography of where we live, especially the further out east we drive, becomes more sparsely populated compared to nearby New York City. It also becomes much less racially, ethnically, and linguistic diverse the further east we travel. To simply get by and get around, a person needs some level of English. It can be done, of course, to have limited English language ability, but it is just easier if you do speak English already. What has changed over the years, for me, is understanding that we do not need *only* English in order to fit in. Understanding biculturality, and being able to sit between both of my cultures, has been the way to survive here on the Island. In this way, assimilation is not only about loss, but it is also about survival.

My mother emphasizes that the choice to speak English at home was to help us fit into our neighborhood. We moved to Centereach, Long Island, when I was seven years old. I was in the second grade. We had moved from a very racially and linguistically diverse town called Central Islip to Centereach because my parents were specifically looking "white," "safe" towns. At the time, 2000, Centereach was 91% white, 2.4% Black or African American, 3.5% Asian, and 2% "some other race" ("Centereach, NY").[15] Our social survival was going to be heavily dependent on how we negotiated language within the town. My mom, being born in the United States and being raised through NYC public schools in Jamaica, Queens, speaks English fluently. She calls it her predominant language, then and now. My father, having been in the United States and working at a massive cosmetics company, speaks English fluently, too, but with a Spanish language accent. I was young and impressionable, and like all parents, mine wanted me to thrive. English was our way of being seen as neighbors and not outsiders.

Nearly thirty years later, my assimilation into white suburban culture has come with its ups and downs, but I would like to emphasize that assimilation and language loss *just is*. It is a fact that we, children of immigrants, face as we become American. It does not need to be lamented like a death because, as I mentioned above, losing a language means it can be found again. Additionally, language does not necessarily need to be tied to a ethnic or racial identity. However, I do not want to be cheesy and toxicly-positive and say that assimilation is a great thing! Pro-assimilationist Richard Rodriguez staunchly

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[15] It is important to note that at the time of the 2000 census, there was no designation for Latino/Latinx, or Hispanic of any sort, so it is very likely that any Latinos living in Centereach at the time may have selected another race to designate by. However, my lived experience and memory of entering public school in the fall of 2000 was overwhelmingly white.

argues that blending into the U.S. public is when a person can find their "full individuality" ("Excerpts from *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez"*). Not only does this over-glorification of assimilation essentially advocate for the separation of ancestral heritage and culture as a private matter, it also attempts to white-wash our ethnic, racial, and cultural differences that simply cannot be ignored. Any attempt to do so would be a pursuit of colorblind rhetoric that is just plain wrong. The color-blind ideology ignores our lived experiences and advocates that the white public is just fine with our being here. Julissa Arce says it best, "English, no matter how many of its words I mastered or how much of its magical power I harnessed, did not protect me from the powerful race dynamics that labeled me as foreign. A white voice did not make me American" (56). Raciolinguistics would be at work here. Even if we speak grammatically correct English, with the *right* accent, we would still look like we primarily speak Spanish. Jonathan Rosa and Julissa Arce agree that our physical features and ancestry will always outweigh our ability to speak English well. Arce, contrary to Rodriguez, argues against assimilation because she believes that no matter what we do, how we sound, what jobs we have, we will never be perceived as fully American. I do not want to advocate that assimilation is fabulous for all, nor do I want to carry the weight of discontent that Arce holds, but I do want to acknowledge that assimilation and language loss can just happen. While they are not the same thing, they often go hand in hand. My own experience is an example of that. As a subject of language loss, I cannot have such strong feelings about it because there were legitimate reasons that Spanish was not passed down to me. I can, and do, feel sad about it sometimes, but approaching language as a skill allows

me the hope that I can one day master it the way I have mastered English. Even if I don't, I am satisfied with the pursuit because I am, above all, a United States-born daughter of Ecuadorian ancestry.

The solution, therefore, is to use our biculturality to our advantage. Again, not in the cheesy, one-dimensional way that advertises Spanish as a commodity to be profited from within the job market, but a set of linguistics skills that we can pull from to navigate some of the many lived realities that come with living on this Island. We can translanguage and translate for others and be proud of these moments. Instead of feeling shame of our plural tongues, we can feel pride. My cousin Bryan said it best, "I think, for the most part, people are jealous."

While discussing his daily language usage on and around Long Island, Bryan emphasized the celos he sees other people having. He states, "The common way that people react to it is that they're like, 'I wish I could do that. I wish I could, like, know more than one language the way that you do' or whatever." While saying this, pride radiated from Bryan's smile. Despite the fact that Bryan said, "used to, when I was younger, be embarrassed to pick up the phone when my mom called me because I would have to talk in Spanish" he has grown into a comfortable ease in speaking Spanish publicly. The envy that Bryan described, in fact, helped push him to feel comfortable with this biculturalism and his ability to translanguage such that he no longer feels embarrassed to speak Spanish in public. Indeed, he and I have often switched languages while conversing in public--a huge moment of growth for both he and I in our public affirmation of our bicultural existence.

This is a stark distinction from the experiences that Nikki's students have had with their language acquisition journey. Bryan has had a positive experience being translingual in public, whereas Nikki's students refuse to acknowledge themselves as bilingual. This, most certainly, has to do with Bryan's ability to speak English without a Spanish accent. Even though he was born in Ecuador and speaks Spanish fluently, his many years on Long Island has allowed him to assimilate into the suburban culture and be accepted by his peers, and thus, be made the object of envy. Bryan is not viewed as the outsider who is just learning to speak English for the first time, he is the "cool" bilingual friend who has a mastery over both languages. Within the Long Island perspective, this is a massive difference.

Bryan noted that despite Long Island being a predominantly English speaking location, there are many Latino ethnic enclaves that are predominantly Spanish speaking. An ethnic enclave, according to Mario Alberto Viveros Espinoza-Kulick et al., is "made up of a high concentration of an ethnic group within a geographic space, including a large number of business owners from that community" ("Ethnic Enclaves"). Long Island has many Spanish speaking ethnic enclaves throughout its two counties. They are known to the surrounding white neighborhoods as dangerous, dirty, and/or trashy towns. Most notably, former president, Donald Trump, gave a speech about the MS-13 gang violence within one Long Island ethnic enclave, Brentwood, where he called gang members, "animals" ("Trump vows to dismantle, decimate MS-13 in LI speech"). While I do not expect the former president to understand the intricacies of Long Island perspectives surrounding Brentwood, his rhetoric of highlighting only the bad of Brentwood is dangerous

because it legitimizes and hyperfocuses the negative attention on Latino communities on Long Island. In other words, Trump validated white fear of Latino neighborhoods on Long Island. My cousin Bryan and many other Latinos on the Island know Brentwood to be misunderstood, and often catches the brunt of oversimplified racializations. However, it is a town that one can get away with speaking exclusively Spanish, as Nikki said. “If you're a Spanish speaker in Brentwood, you probably, even with public transportation, will get to your place because every… almost everyone speaks Spanish. There's a bodega on every corner” (Nikki). For translingual people, such as Bryan, myself, and other cousins, the advantage is that we are able to enter these ethnic enclaves without issue because we speak the language. We, even though we do not live in this particular town, are still able to access it through language. Bryan said,

> I'm able to go to, like, holes in the wall, like, Hispanic restaurants and order something with no problem. And then I'm also able to go to, like, Applebee's, and have a fluent conversation with my waiter. Yeah, I mean, like, so being able to do that, I think is just almost like living two worlds. Like being in the Latin American side of the Island and then, like, the English speaking; being able to do both of them with no problems. Because I know, like, I have friends who would hesitate to go to a place where they only speak Spanish, just because they don't know the language. It makes total sense. There's nothing wrong with that. But for me, I don't hesitate. Because, like, I know the language.

Bryan’s commentary on translingualism on Long Island highlights his bilingual experience. He felt like the world is unlocked to him because he is able to access multiple cul-

tures, and even neighborhoods, through language. Spanish and English are not the only languages on Long Island, but because of his assimilation to Long Island culture, he feels comfortable in the neighborhoods he travels to. He is not an outsider; the way others may feel. He is comfortable in both white and Latino spaces.

Returning to Julissa Arce and her position of never being able to be accepted as American, I finish her thought where she offers us her opinion on the matter of assimilation, “Assimilation is not a road to belonging, but rather the carrot America dangles in front of immigrants, Latinos, and other people of color, an unreachable goal to keep us fighting for the single piece at the podium rather than spending our energy creating spaces where we don’t have to compromise” (9). Arce argues against assimilation because it is an inaccessible thing for us to try to attain. We will never be able to fully integrate into white American society, because white America will always look at us as Others. Arce urges Latinos to hold onto our culture and create a space for ourselves. “They are not our saviors. We are,” Ace says (10). I agree with her, wholeheartedly. Full assimilation would look like Richard Rodriguez’s “full individuality” in public as opposed to a holding onto your culture in public. This feels like a rejection of our ancestry and of our migration stories to the United States. His is not the loss of language over generations, but the willful forgetting in order to join mainstream white culture, which Arce says we can never join. The translingual being will feel more at home in more spaces when able to communicate to different degrees in Spanish and English.

Translanguaging: Doing Both

Bryan's example highlights a very important reality for Latinos living on Long Island--the plurality of our existences. Not only are our identities plural and fluid concepts, but so is our language usage. After hearing Bryan's answer of identifying as 70% fluent in Spanish, I asked the rest of my cousins how fluent they felt within their Spanish language usage. Surprisingly, most of them said 70-80%. I was shocked by all of their answers because I had always considered my cousins as entirely, 100% fluent in Spanish. Meanwhile, I thought of myself as 70% fluent. I could follow along with 70% of the conversations around me, I could read even less and write even less than that, but I figured I would be generous with myself and say 70% fluency. To hear that the role models that I had all my life also felt like a C-average student was a shock to say the least. Out of these less-than-average, self-diagnosed percentages is born a fluency in the hybrid tongue of Spanglish. Spanglish is a translanguaging act that is prevalent amongst many Latinos where we speak both languages at the same time. In this light, our 70-80% fluency in Spanish allows us to embrace our english-dominant Long Island identities and feel 100% fluent in Spanglish.

In a giggly exchange with my cousin Jari, she boasted of her ability to translanguage between English and Spanish. Jari said, "I do that all the time! I speak Spanglish fluently! *laughter* I think it's kind of *giggle* I feel like it brings both of my… not, like, worlds… I mean, I guess worlds together. You know?" Jari expressed delight over her translingual skills. With a giggle, she called her language usage "Spanglish." Her face was joyous via our Zoom interview, she smirked and expressed that she has the most flu-

ency in the hybrid language, and that she felt like "I'm 80% fluent in Spanish." Unexpectedly, during our interview, Jari's mother walked into the frame and talked to both me and Jari about her older sister's upcoming wedding.

"Hola mija," she says to me, she always calls me "mija," "estás lista para la boda?" Unprompted, I responded back to her, "qué boda? Nikki's, mine, or Valerie's? We have so many coming up!"

"Yea, mami, they all have bodas coming up," Jari adds.

We laughed at the plentifulness of upcoming weddings in our family at the time, however, throughout this unexpected exchange, Jari and I both translanguaged on camera. My awkwardness is apparent through the quick transition back into my more comfortable English, but Jari choosing to reiterate her mother's word, "boda" instead of "wedding" demonstrates the fluidity of her translanguaging skills. On the spot, she made a quick, strategic decision to continue the laughs through playful language. During this section of the interview, Jari and I exchanged giggles, knowing looks of not having full fluency in Spanish, and a sense of camaraderie in our less than 100% fluency in Spanish. She also admitted, "I do get insecure with other people who speak Spanish, especially really well." The emotions of joy, mirth, and insecurity loomed around us during this portion of the interview. However, as American born people of Ecuadorian heritage, hybridity and plurality have become our norms. As Lu and Horner propose, translinguality is the norm for people within an inequitable power structure. And as Gonzales and Lorimer Leonard argue, translingualism is best regarded as a fluid motion between languages. Jari's excited remark, "I speak Spanglish fluently" perfectly embodies the lived experience of many

United States Latinos. Her hybrid language usage and skills are not to be argued as a counter language to be set against Standardized Written English, but rather, as Lu and Horner argue, it is a normal practice for her and for people like her. Spanglish is the norm.

What is most exciting about Spanglish is its lack of legitimacy. Unlike other vernaculars or dialects like African American Vernacular English or Haitian Kreyol, Spanglish has no set grammar rules. It is not a dialect by any definition, and in that sense, it sits as one of Tomás Mario Kalmar's "illegitimacy of hybrid alphabets" (95). Like in Kalmar's Cobden Glossaries, there is a power in the illegitimacy. Because there are no rules, language can be manipulated in ways that "legitimate" institutions would not allow. In Spanglish's case, the lack of grammar rules allow for freedom to move between and across language as a person sees fit, or to their ability level. Jari asserting that she speaks "Spanglish fluently" is partly a joke made to earn a chuckle, but it's also very indicative of the fact that no matter how well someone may speak Spanish or English, their Spanglish will always be fluent.

This kind of hybridity is empowering. For individuals like Jari, or myself, who feel less than 100% fluent in another language, the translingual, hybrid alternative provides a linguistic home for us to return to. The lack of structure houses our fluid movement between the words and grammars that we know. It is welcoming. The hybrid language is the combination of Jari's biculturality. "I feel like it brings both of my… not, like, worlds… I mean, I guess worlds together." Even if we do not feel entirely confident in exclusively Spanish language conversations, our identities as Ecuadorian-*Americans*

awards us hybridity. We are hybrid in culture, therefore we are hybrid in language. As there is no one way to be Latina, there is no one way to speak Spanglish.

Conclusion

Why don't you speak English? Why don't you speak Spanish? Being Latino in America means the answer to both of these questions holds us to an impossible standard to prove we're both sufficiently American and authentically Latino. I am tired of the interrogation, the unattainableness, the in-betweenness. I am enough to stand on both sides, fully and completely.

- Julissa Arce

Growing up on Long Island as a translingual person was a confusing experience. I often had to argue the various levels of my identity against one another in order to try to settle into one box or another. I never felt like I could be enough because the different facets of my identity were fighting one another. The legacies of battles scar to this day. I cannot help but look at certain cultural aspects as "white people shit" and I also cannot help but roll my eyes and giggle when I see "Latino shit." My translingual journey has swayed so much that I have moved from the strict definition of balanced bilingualism towards Lorimer Leonard's fluid interpretation of translingualism.

Today, I see that throughout my whole life I have been riding the linguistic wave of fluidity. I have spent all of my years translanguaging and meeting and exceeding the demands of society, school, work, family, and so on. I have moved, not always easily, between the different aspects of my identity to fit in where I needed to and when I needed

to. Sometimes, these moments have rubbed up against one another, and been frictive, where I had to decide against one culture or language against another. And for a long time, my linguistic ability had been fixed, frozen in skill, until I decided to open my mind and mouth again to the Spanish language.

In some ways, I still do agree that English is necessary to survive on Long Island. It has given us the opportunity to find jobs, make lasting relationships, and plant roots in neighborhoods where we feel comfortable. But I do not believe it is the only key we can have towards happiness and success. In a place where I do not know if I will ever be viewed fully as a neighbor, I am satisfied with my own comfort in my hometown. Que se jodan los otros. My grandparents did not leave their lives behind in Ecuador for me to still, 60 years later, feel uncomfortable in the place they chose to make their new homes.

My story of language loss, and gain, is the consequence of a long line of actions taken by my predecessors. Their journeys to the United States from Ecuador have allowed each and every one of us to engage in this process of becoming American. In my next chapter, I will be investigating the migratory histories of my family members in order to more fully understand how legacy plays a role in our everyday lives. I will be looking towards my familial pathways, as well as the paths of my many cousins, some of whom immigrated to the United States themselves. I will be theorizing home and homeland according to Salmon Rushdie's theory of homeland and applying it to our lived experiences on Long Island which may, or may not, feel like home.

CHAPTER 4: MOVING AND MAKING HOMES

As many American families do, my parents, aunts, and uncles forced my cousins and me to announce what it is we are thankful for on Thanksgiving and called it a "family tradition." Each year, my elders relished in the discomfort of their progeny struggling to come up with a single sentence that summed up what we were thankful for. Sometimes, we cracked jokes. Other times we cousins outmaneuvered our parents and got to skip over this cringiest of traditions. However, a few years ago one cousin had won the unspoken contest of being most profound in what we were thankful for.

This particular Thanksgiving, as we do every Thanksgiving, my family and I sat around my mom's seldom used dining room table. The oaken monstrosity was only used for special events because it was too big and too formal for daily usage. However, when my mom's side of the family got together, the dining room table suddenly seemed too small. Sitting shoulder to shoulder, 19 of us sat at a table meant to fit 12 with the parents on one end and the "children" at the other. My mom and her siblings had finally decided that the "children" were all too old to be sitting at their own "kid's table." Indeed, I was in my late 20s, and my youngest cousin was already 14. Cramped together, hungry, and irritable, my cousins and I quickly brushed off the family tradition when one cousin announced to the table, "I am thankful for my health, my girlfriend, and most of all, my parents who moved to this country when they were young and making this beautiful life for us. We would not be here without their sacrifice."

We were stumped. The heat in my face rose and everyone around me swallowed hard. We were all put into our place for our silly "what we are thankful for's" and were

forced to recall the journey our elders had made so that we could sit around a big table with elaborate food and feast in a suburban, Long Island house. I do not recall all of the details perfectly. There may have been a tear or two, maybe some hugs, but I vividly recall my heart swelling for a gratitude so deep for my grandparents, father, and all my family members to whom I had never acknowledged with words before.

I have never stopped thinking about this moment. The reason we are able to celebrate the holiday of Thanksgiving is all because of my family members' decisions to leave Ecuador for the United States. My mother was the first in her family to be born in the United States. My father immigrated to the U.S. when he was 17 years old. Their personal histories are ones of movement and growth. The movement from Ecuador to New York City, then to Long Island is a legacy of hard work, dedication, love, and luck. I, like my eloquent cousin, am forever thankful for my parents, and grandparents for making Long Island, New York my home.

While I consider Long Island to be my home, I understand that not everyone may feel so attached to this 100-mile stretch of land. The concept of home is individually defined and shifts constantly. Like Taiye Selasi, I find that an individualized approach to identifying home is a much more precise practice than working with generalities. So much of what we consider home is like smoke in the wind. It looks so tangible as it hangs in the air ahead of us, however it can never truly be grasped. Because of the ever-fluctuating definition of "home" it is of the utmost importance that I approach this topic auto-ethnographically. Certainly, I can (and do) research what home means to many different authors or scholars, but that would be their definition of home, not mine or my family's.

By approaching this topic auto-ethnographically, I explore how home functions within our family dynamic with the goal of providing insight as to how people negotiate homeland in search of a new home. Investigating my shared roots with my cousins, I also explore the importance of family social structures and how they inform identity and belonging. What I seek is how home plays a role in a tight-knit family group who share the same great-grandparents and have lived their lives on Long Island. The purpose of which is to see if shared blood connects our definitions of home at all, or if home is something entirely individual.

Salman Rusdhie proposes that people who migrate make up homes. This phenomenon is what Rushdie calls "imaginary homeland" (13). Imaginary homeland refers primarily to the long gone India of Rushdie's youth which has since changed with the passing of time. It is the mental photograph we maintain of a place where we no longer live that stays locked in time, distorted by nostalgia, longing, or general human forgetfulness. The imaginary homeland to which I refer is the intangible homeland of my ancestors, Ecuador. For myself, Ecuador is a mythical place where mango trees grow and my father is forever a mischievous youngster. It is the place where we, my cousins, aunts, uncles, siblings and I, originate from. It is a land filled with smells of sand, sweat, smoke from fires, and humidity. But mostly, it is a place that I am from, but where I have never lived.

For many Latinos, myself included, the notion of home pulls us into two separate directions--the past and the future. We honor our homelands through food, language, music, our dances, and our preservation of home culture. We cherish the countries where we

have originated from, while also making new homes in the United States. Like Eva Hoffman in her memoir, *Lost in Translation*, we are splintered and constantly splintering. We have homeland and then we have home. Our identities are so intertwined with the past that we cannot ignore our roots. This also very well could be the United States's general compulsion to categorize and examine everyone's roots. However, I would be lying if I said that there is something very ancestral and nostalgic about the ways that Latinos love and honor their origins. We are often reminded of the sacrifice that the people who became before us had to make to get us here. The act of immigration from our home countries to our new home of the United States is one that sits at the back of all of our histories.

Growing up on Long Island makes the idea of "Ecuador is home" a difficult one to contend with. Luckily, and almost miraculously, I was never one of those Latinos that was told to "go home to your own country." I am still unsure of why I never received this hateful rhetoric. It could have been because of my non-confrontational demeanor, my Long Island accent, my general assimilation to suburban culture, or any other myriad of reasons. However, that does not stop the fact that this is an insult commonly hurled at people like me. Therefore, I cannot help but contend with this migratory *return-to-home* insult as if I were the one on the receiving end of it. Because other Latinos are told to "go home," I know that I, too, have a "home" to "go back to" that is not my mailing address in my Long Island suburb.

One of the most radical things that Latinos can do is make a home in the United States and call ourselves American. In a country where we are the cultural Other, where

our raza is either villainized as rapists, cartel members, criminals, or fetishized as sex symbols, to stake our Hispanic names to American addresses challenges the very idea of Americana. In this chapter, I argue that home, for my family, has been a process of negotiating family ties and belonging. I find that often, we do feel like Long Island is our home, but we also maintain a deep respect for our homeland of Ecuador. This balancing act of honoring two different home cultures deepens the multidimensionality of our Latinidad by splitting our belonging across borders. Gloria Anzaldúa says that "borders are set up to define places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*" but when we are both *us* and *them* we can forge a new iteration of home; one that transcends borders (25). In this chapter, I argue for the agency of claiming home. When we become just another neighbor, or another face in the local grocery store, we disrupt the whitewashed image of the "average" American. When we make homes here, we show the public that we belong here. Most importantly, we prove to *ourselves* that this land, too, is our home. Sí, somos de allá, pero también somos de aquí. We don't belong just to one land, we are people of movement, and therefore, we will make home wherever we want to.

What is home?

During a car ride, Kristiana Kahakauwila's protagonists in her fictional short story "The Road to Hana" debate the meaning of "being" Hawaiian. Cameron, the Hawaiian born-and-raised haole[16] knows all of the ins and outs of living in Maui. He understands the unwritten rules of the road where drivers descending the mountain have right of way

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[16] Hawaiian for white person. But haole could also used to refer to anyone who isn't black and from the United State's mainland.

on tight roads (Kahakauwila 95). He knows that stray dogs are not pets and are perfectly fine being independent (Kahakauwila 103). He is able to tell locals apart from tourists by their choice of car (Kahakauwila 94). Cameron knows all of this because he is a local and has lived on the island his whole life. His girlfriend, Becky, on the other hand, is of Hawaiian descent but has lived her whole life off of the islands, in Las Vegas, until moving back to Maui as an adult. She does not have any of this local knowledge but has ancestral knowledge of Hawaiian legends, of which she (alarmingly) speaks about in the present tense (Kahakauwila 95). Both have a claim in calling Hawaii their home, but their logic is very different from one another. The story never resolves who is more Hawaiian, and instead poses the question, "But did that matter? Was local being from a place, or just being of it" (Kahakauwila 92)? "The Road to Hana" leaves this issue unresolved because both characters are correct. For both Becky and Cameron, Hawaii is home even though their reasonings differ.

As exemplified in "The Road to Hana," the idea of home can be split into two definitions; ancestral or local; homeland or home. There is a small distinction between the ideas of home and homeland, but emotionally, the difference is minimal. Both home and homeland are defined by love, family, and positive emotions. The key difference between the two is time. Becky believes that Hawaii is her home because of her ancestral and ethnic claim to Hawaii and its history. I refer to this kind of ancestral link as homeland. Cameron, on the other hand, knows no other home than Hawaii because it is the place where he has lived his whole life. This locality is what I refer to as home. In both cases the characters feel very strongly about their definitions of home. They are emotionally

invested in their idea of home but time is what distinguishes, for me, Becky's homeland from Cameron's home.

My personal definition of home is staunchly locked at the address of my child-hood where my mother and family still reside. The house on the hill with a beige vinyl and brick façade reminds me that inside the walls I will be greeted with the warmth that only one's own family can provide. Indeed, my home is a physical location, but if push came to shove, I'd say that my home is anywhere my mom and siblings are. And, since getting married, my newest home is alongside my husband. Every semester I ask my students to define home and overwhelmingly, I receive such a response. That home's physicality is superseded by emotional bonds to family and friends. To invoke the wisdom from another fictional character, Odin from *Thor: Ragnarok* in his dying breath says, "Asgard is not a place. Never was. This could be Asgard. Asgard is where our people stand" (*Thor: Ragnarok*). Indeed, home is not necessarily physical because, as is depicted in the remainder of the *Thor: Ragarnok* plot, if that place is destroyed, a home can still exist within relationships; from those relationships a new, physical home can be built. For many, home is people. It is an emotional attachment to people who make you feel safe, comfortable, and like you belong above all else. It is also something that we can turn to right now. Home is current.

Homeland, on the other hand, has a slightly different connotation. Salman Rushdie in his essay, "Imaginary Homelands" states, for him, "it's my present that is foreign, and that the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time" (13). While Rushdie feels the opposite of my sentiment that his present is unwel-

coming, he names the past as his emotional home. But this home is one that he can never return to, therefore it becomes his "imaginary homeland." Homeland is a place that is locked into the past. Because of our human inability to have perfect memory, Rushdie suggests that everyone then creates their own version of homeland. He writes,

> It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind. (13)

People like Rushdie, "exiles or emigrants or expatriates," who seek to "reclaim, to look back" at their homelands are at risk of being "mutilated into pillars of salt." By looking back, or returning, we have to face the fact that the past, that homeland, has moved on without us. It has changed since our departure, even though our memory has stayed static. By the limitations of the human mind, unless we are gifted with photographic memories, our memories of the past will always be foggy. *Did the back room window get blown in by that storm during a birthday party, or New Year's Eve? Did grandma's finca have mangos, papaya, or both?* Like trying to draw a bicycle from memory, we strain to remember *all* of the details. Moreover, because of the often nostalgic nature of memory, returning to homeland will cause the imaginary image to become false. It is the fictional--

"imaginary"-- home that memory twists into a two dimensional image leaving it to be a fraction of reality. A memory cannot be so full as real time. Indeed, like a fly trapped in amber, homeland is locked in the past, and to return to it is to change it.

Cultural theorist Stuart Hall, also acknowledges the impossibility of returning to homeland in his essay, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." While discussing the potential of a shared Caribbean identity, he states,

> The original 'Africa' is no longer there. It too has been transformed. History is, in that sense, irreversible. We must not collude with the West which, precisely, normalized and appropriate Africa by freezing it into some timeless zone of the primitive, unchanging past. Africa must at last be reckoned with by Caribbean people, but it cannot in any simple sense be merely recovered… We can't literally go home again. (Hall 303)

Hall discusses that the idea of Africa has been frozen into a primitive space by Western thought. This is objectively false as Africa, as all other places around the world, has evolved and changed with the times. However, the Africa from where Caribbean people descended no longer exists precisely because of the change in time. Caribbean people can never go "home" to Africa, because that ancestral Africa has fundamentally changed. Instead, Hall argues that the Caribbean must contend with Africa as a contemporary, not as an ancestral place because they both continue to exist. This is how homeland differs from home. It is the place where we came from, but it doesn't necessarily feel like home. Indeed, homeland is an idea that is emotionally charged. There can be nostalgia attached to it, as in Rushdie's explanation of homeland. Or there can be a reckoning with the past, as

Hall argues. However, undeniably, homeland is a place that we can never return to. Not really. Each time that we return we'll find it changed and that time has passed over and through it. Homeland has not been frozen, or made inert by ancient organic material. Life there has continued without our presence. Homeland, then, is defined by the past, memory, and nostalgia. This is especially true for immigrants, like Rushdie, or the children of immigrants, like myself.

The puzzle with migration, particularly as it pertains to Latinos in the United States, is not necessarily homeland. For many of us, homeland is something we hold onto very close to our hearts. Instead, the issue is making a new home in a new country. In "Imaginary Homelands," Rushdie describes migration identities as "plural and partial… that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools" (16). As subjects of migration, homeland and home are always at odds with one another. They push back against each other leading us to either have multiple identities, for example, I am Ecuadorian *and* American, or I am *too* Ecuadorian to be fully American or vice versa. On behalf of other Indians living in England Rushdie says "we are not willing to be excluded from any part of our heritage; which heritage includes both a Bradford-born Indian kid's right to be treated as a full member of British society, and also the right of any member of this post-diaspora community to draw on its roots for its art" (16). The tentative nature of this sentence insinuates that these are rights that Rusdhie is fighting for. They are not yet fully awarded to Indians and children of Indians living in England. Across the pond, we, Latinos, too struggle with fitting in fully within United States society. For reasons of difference--ethnic, racial, cultural, linguistic, gastronomic, etc.--we are

outsiders. If home means safety, love, family, and belonging, then this current phenomenon tells us that the United States will never be our home.

But I don't like that, nor do I believe it.

If home can be built with relationships of support, we can build a home anywhere. In her TED talk, "Don't Ask Me Where I'm From, Ask Me Where I'm a Local," Taiye Selasi offers an alternative to home and homeland; locality. She urges the audience to move away asking one another, "where are you from?" Her argument is that being "from" a place can mean so many things and often falls back onto ancestry that we may or may not feel connected to. Or, the place that one is "from" may no longer exist, as in the case of her father who was born in the British colony of Gold Coast that no longer exists under that name. Instead, Selasi argues that we should be asking one another, "where are you a local?" Locality, as opposed to being from a place, relies on rituals, relationships, and restrictions as defining factors (Selasi). These are things that we do in the current and are part of our everyday lived experiences. They can change throughout the course of someone's life, but they are not exclusionary of one another. For example, Selasi says,

> I have no relationship with the United States, all 50 of them not really. My relationship is with Brookline, the town where I grew up; with New York City, where I started work; with Lawrenceville, where I spend Thanksgiving. What makes America home for me is not my passport or accent, but these very particular experiences and the places they occur.

So, despite being of Ghanaian descent, Selasi doesn't find it appropriate to say she is from Ghana because she has "never had a relationship with the Republic of Ghana, writ large." Instead, her relationship "is with Accra, where [her] mother lives." Therefore, Selasi is local to Brookline, New York City, Lawrenceville, and Accra. These are the places where shopkeepers know her face, where her people live, where she is allowed to be. For her, home is plural and experiential. She does not find it necessary to have a homeland that is tied to her ancestry or a home that is in reference to a nation as a whole. Selasi prefers the specificity of being a local somewhere over calling a whole nation, or even a state, her home. In doing so, she theorizes a plurality that honors all aspects of the migratory experiences.

The plurality that Selasi proposes is akin to Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality. Crenshaw's intersectionality highlights the crossroads of being two things, Black and a woman, is the crux of Black women's marginalization. Selasi does not focus exclusively on marginalization in her definition of locality (though it is certainly an aspect of it), but Selasi's and Crenshaw's theories overlap wherein they both consider the intersection of being multiple things at once. Crenshaw also argues against "single-axis frameworks" that "focus on the most privileged group members [and] marginalizes those who are multiply burdened" (139-140). Similarly, Selasi argues against one-dimensional definitions of being "from" a place because the immigrant experience is often torn from homeland and home, as was in the case between Becky and Cameron. In other words, a single, one dimensional definition of home will limit, or erase entirely, the complexity of home and homeland for immigrants and their children.

This paradox of being of multiple identities, or “multidimensionality,” and not being enough to qualify as those same identities forces us to push past one-dimensional meanings of home and accept the split nature of home and homeland (Crenshaw 139). As migratory subjects, we will never be able to stop contending with the past. Particularly, as Latinos living on Long Island, we are constantly reminded that this land is not our homeland, but it can be our home. Like Cameron and Becky, we can feel like locals and still have an ancestral connection to our homeland, even if they function vastly differently from the identity making process of our loved ones. They are not mutually exclusive identities. They are additive. We can have many homes, like Taiye Selasi suggests, and they can all have equal values.

The solution to home, then, is to embrace multiplicity. We can and do have many homes. This can be looked at as a spectrum of feeling. On one end of the spectrum, is Eva Hoffman’s struggle with her “splintering” Polish and Canadian identity. Hoffman writes, “in a splintered society, what does one assimilate to? Perhaps the very act of splintering itself” (197). Throughout her memoir, Hoffman is worried about who she is becoming, who she could have become and who she wants to become. Unlike the author, I’ve always figured that life is happening to me and I’m more of a rider on a roller coaster, rather than an active person in my fate. I’ve just become who I’ve needed to become, it’s never been about doing. However, Hoffman worries about becoming American, or becoming a pianist or becoming something else entirely. Despite the discussions she has with Polish friends about Americans being concerned with their identities constantly, she is also worried about her own identity. She’s *become* American in this way, which is like-

ly why it concerns her. Her "splintered" identity makes her feel like assimilation has been happening to her, as opposed to being an active participant in it. She laments the splintering of her identities, and tries hard to resist assimilation. Addressing home through Hoffman's lens could lead us down this darker past of tęsknota, a Polish word "that adds to nostalgia the tonalities of sadness and longing" (4). The other end of the spectrum lies Tato Laviera's poem "AmeRícan" that celebrates the conjoining of Puerto Rican and mainland United States identities. In total opposition, Laviera's poem rings of hope, honor, ancestry, and has a generally positive outlook on assimilation. It is much less critical of becoming American than Hoffman's journey with assimilation, but also falls a little flat without the critique of assimilation also leading to cultural and ancestral loss.

Home is what we make of it. Sometimes, begrudgingly, we must make new homes, but it is within our own power to define what home means to us. That is an empowering thought. Particularly as it relates to Latinos living within the United States. Even if we are told to "go back home" or if we are recent immigrants, or the children of immigrants, our homes are where we make them. They are with our families, our rituals, our relationships, all dictated by the fact that we have built lives here. Yes, our homelands are often locked in the past, across national borders, and are filled with nostalgia and longing, but home is the present where we find comfort, joy, and safety with the people and rituals we hold dear. Home doesn't have to be just one thing. It can be many. And we can honor them equally.

Searching For Our Homes: Long Island

In accordance with Latin American literary fashion, I want to believe in the mystery and mysticism of life. Gabriel Garcia Marquez's and Isabella Allende's magical realism stories have embedded so deeply into my soul that I often don't seek the truth, but am satisfied with the feeling. It is for this reason that I do not know the *reason* that my grandparents migrated to the United States. I just know they did. The academic in me wants to push the envelope and ask the *reason* why my mother's and father's parents decided to move to the United States so that my information will be "factual" and "true." But the granddaughter in me knows not to ask questions that you are not ready to hear the answer to, nor questions that may upset the family. I certainly do not suspect that my family was escaping a tragedy so horrific that they refuse to talk about it. Nor do I think they were moving because of persecution, or crime, or terror. There is not that kind of hushed, secretive talk about Ecuador from my aunts and uncles. I am afraid to "know" for sure that the reason that my grandparents moved to the United States was for a boring reason; like, "better opportunities" or "more money." These are valid reasons to leave the impoverished country of Ecuador, but they are not the most exciting. They aren't adventurous or grand. They are pragmatic and look towards longevity and legacy. Indeed, they tear away my mystical view of my imaginary homeland of Ecuador and turn it into just another place of finite opportunity. This is my limitation. I will always look at Ecuador as a place of foreign beauty, a place where *my* foreignness within the United States finally belongs.

From what I am told, and from what I remember, my grandfather was the first to arrive in the United States on my mother's side. I have a small recollection of my mother telling me that her father was *sent* to New York City in the mid 1960s because he was getting involved in local gangs in Ecuador. There is something in this memory that makes me think that these gangs were on horses. My mind pulls up pastoral images of the American Wild West from old Hollywood Westerns except with palm trees and colonial Spanish architecture. But, this could just be part of my mystification of an Ecuador that I never knew. I do know that my maternal grandfather returned to Ecuador after having been in the United States for a while and met my grandmother. After which, the two married, moved to Queens, New York and had my mother.

I am even less clear on my paternal migration story from Ecuador than I am about my maternal. My father is a natural storyteller and has a penchant for exaggerating stories. I never know what is true and what is not when he is telling me about his past. I suppose this is where my acceptance of magical realism began. I am certain, however, that his parents arrived to the United States before he did and he was about 17 when he joined his family in Brooklyn, New York.

Coincidentally, my parents did not meet in New York City. They met in Ecuador; in their home province of Manabí. Once their romance had sparked, they continued dating in New York and married within a year's time. I was born a few years later, in 1993, at a Long Island hospital just outside of Queens. My parents made the move to Long Island after a failed attempt to raise me in Ecuador as an infant. This was a tumultuous time in my parents' relationship and my mom decided to return, alone, to New York with her

infant daughter. She moved in with her best friend in a Long Island suburb not far from where we live today until she and my father worked things out. This is how we ended up on Long Island. A romance, a failed attempt to "return home," and the kindness and generosity of a good friend. We have been here ever since.

In my early 20s I made my own attempt to leave home for a new life in another country, but I was pulled home; to Long Island. Today, I describe myself as a Long Island girl, through and through. I love the beaches, sun, and sand. I love the proximity to New York City and the residual NYC attitude that bleeds into suburban life. I love the accent and the stereotypes of Long Island women. I love our urban legends of Mary's Grave and the Long Island Serial Killer. Long Island is the only home I know.

For my cousins, Long Island both is and isn't their home. Nikki, Jari, and Bryan all agreed that the idea of home for them was mostly tied to their families. Jari insisted that "home is not a place." Bryan said that, "I can be visiting my sisters in North Carolina and still feel like I'm home because like I'm with my family. And same thing even in Crucita." Nikki agreed and said that even when away for long periods of time camping, or in Ecuador, or traveling, "I never really felt like I was away because I was with my family... So definitely family." Like my crowd-sourced student data, my cousins agreed that family is where home is and it does not need to be a place. Home is being around your family, even if you have to travel to go see them. These three cousins still live on Long Island currently. Valerie, on the other hand, has moved away to Rhode Island has a bit of a different definition of home:

> Long Island. It's so funny because I always thought… because home is my pack, like my home base. My family… most of my family is there. And when we were driving back, maybe the third time when we were driving back to Rhode Island, I was like, 'I can't wait to be back home' referring to here, like our apartment. Like I think that's the first time I referred to our place as home. Because before I was like 'oh, I can't wait to go back to our place.' But when I'm referring to my family I'm always like, 'oh, I can't wait to go home this weekend.' Mm hmm. Home is where the family is.

Valerie stumbled through her definition a bit. She referred to both her apartment in Rhode Island as home and being alongside her family on Long Island as home. But Taiye Selasi says that we can do both. Since her move to Rhode Island, Valerie has become a local there. However, she was a local to Long Island for most of her life. She has relationships and rituals that she honors in both places. Valerie stumbled after quickly claiming Long Island as her home. She reflected on a recent moment driving to Rhode Island and realized that she had called her apartment there as her new home. Immediately after her move, she did not call the apartment she shared with her husband as "home" because that word was reserved for being with her family. She initially called the apartment her "place." But after the third visit to Long Island and back, she called the apartment "home." This was a major switch for her, which caused her to stumble through the definition of home. Indeed, this endearing, awkward, and complex answer further proves that home can be many places and does not necessarily need to just be locked with her family. At the same time, her definition of home, much more akin to Rushdie's homeland, is

locked in her past where her family still lives. Home is Long Island because her family still lives here. This answer is so complex but it is such a perfect addition to complicate Jari's, Bryan's, and Nikki's answers. If home means family, and family lives on Long Island, does that also make Long Island home? The mathematical rules of logic would say they are all equivalent until, like Valerie, someone moves and we have to reevaluate the definition.

The pink elephant in the room, however, is the last of Selasi's R's: restrictions. She defines restriction as, "where are you able to live? What passport do you hold? Are you restricted by, say, racism, from feeling fully at home where you live? By civil war, dysfunctional governance, economic inflation, from living in the locality where you had your rituals as a child" (Selasi). While my cousins and I do not have legal or economic restrictions to living on Long Island, we do face some social restrictions. Selasi mentions "racism, from feeling fully at home where you live" as an important restriction for being a local. To varying degrees, and within vastly different situations, my cousins and I face these restrictions that influence the ways that we are able to call Long Island our home, through and through. I am in full agreement that, yes, we can make our own homes based on our rituals and relationships, that being accepted back by that same place we call home is another situation entirely. After nearly two decades of living in my town, Centereach, and being a frequent face in local delis, the nail salon, our local Target, and so on. My Long Island identity has intersected with all my other identities such that I am able to say whole heartedly that I feel no restrictions here. I am able to profit from my intersectionality because of my locality. However, I will admit that I feel a sense of discomfort when I

shop in unfamiliar stores in particularly affluent, particularly white neighborhoods. For some reason, pharmacies always put me on high alert.

On Long Island, pharmacies are a one stop shop. You can get over the counter medicine, prescription medication, vaccines, and flu shots. You can get make-up, beer, greeting cards, basic household essentials, laundry detergent, pet food, toiletries, non-perishable food items, costume jewelry, you can print photos, or have your passport photo taken, and so much more. All that is to say there are any number of reasons to stop at a pharmacy, and because they have long hours, you can stop in at any time of the day. There are two examples that remind me that the whole of Long Island isn't my home, because I am mainly a local of Centereach.

Once, I was running late to my good friends' wedding. It was poor planning on my part and I forgot the wedding card at my house. There was a CVS three blocks away from the wedding venue, so my husband and I chose to run in quickly, purchase a card, and try our very best to make it to the wedding on time. The wedding was a semi-formal, waterfront event so we were dressed to the occasion. The looks we got as we approached the cashier were uncomfortable, to say the least. The reason we were dressed the way we were was quite clear--I was in a brightly colored evening gown, and he was in a suit, and we were buying a wedding card. The cashier and other guests should have deduced that we were on our way to a wedding. However, the looks we received did not make me think that we were out of place for our wardrobe. It was something else; something that screamed to me, "you don't belong here." I brushed it off then because I was panicking

about missing the wedding ceremony, but I have not been able to shake that moment. We were in an affluent, mostly white neighborhood at that time.

There is a very popular beach on Long Island called Smith's Point Beach. It's a Fire Island beach so the shoreline is the Atlantic Ocean, as opposed to the relatively calm waters of the Great South Bay, or the Long Island Sound. It has great waves for body surfing, drive-on beach access, campgrounds, and it is generally *the* beach to go to if you live in the general vicinity. There is only one road to get to Smith's Point Beach and on this road, there is yet another CVS. In the Long Island pharmacy fashion, it has a little bit of everything. After one long, hot, particularly sunny beach day, my friends and I stopped in at this particular CVS. I cannot remember what it is that we needed to buy, but there was still the same feeling of eyes on us, telling us that we did not belong. The neighbor-hoods on the long road to Smith's Point are segregated by the extreme wealth of those who own waterfront property and those who live inland.

These moments of discomfort, of the hair raising on the nape of my neck, remind me that I still cannot fully blend in. Long Island is my home, but there are still times where I am an outsider. Perhaps, to use Selasi's terminology and lighten this feeling of disconnection, I am not a local to all of Long Island. But I do know the rules of Long Is-land. So by Kahauwila's character, Cameron's logic, then I am indeed a local. I may not look like the stereotypical white Long Island woman, but I know asking the cashier "how's it goin'" is a greeting and does not warrant an actual response or conversation. I am at once, inside and outside the Long Island culture, "straddling two cultures" (Rushdie 16).

While interviewing my cousins, I found that they, too, share my sentiment of wobbly acceptance by the Long Island public. The most salient point, however, relates directly to skin pigment and how much we do or do not pass for white. Jari, who defines herself as, "pretty fair skinned" was the first to notice the importance of her skin color and how Long Islanders treat her,

> A lot of people don't assume that I am foreign, Hispanic, ya know? And it does influence that interaction because… it also depends on the person I'm talking to. Um, because sometimes if people do know that I'm Hispanic. Like, I'm gonna say an example… The woman I work for. She's very white and very Republican and I feel like when… she… she has… I work in her home and she has house cleaners that are foreign and she talks to them and treats them differently than she treats me. And I see that…and it doesn't make me… I mean…

Jari's voice trailed off here. She was at a loss for words and was working hard to reckon with the way her boss treats her, a light skinned American Latina, versus the "foreign" workers. She did not describe the treatment her coworkers receive, but I can assume that her coworkers face a restriction that Jari did not face in making Long Island their home. Later, Jari stated that because of her skin color, "I am viewed as American, as just white." The link between Americanness, whiteness, and social acceptance Jari made here is stark. It is the thing we all think about but do not want to say out loud. Though Jari and I share many layers of our identities-- ancestry, family ties, social class, gender--we are read as different from one another because we do not intersect on the aspect of skin color. Our intersections are different. Jari's and these unnamed coworkers' intersections are differ-

ent. I could be projecting, but this line forces me to understand that white folks around me on Long Island have to learn to accept me as American, but they already accept Jari as American and it has everything to do with our skin.

In the same vein, but with a different outcome, Bryan also felt that his acceptance by the Long Island public depends on his physical appearance. As Bryan said about himself, "you can very much tell by my facial features that I'm not, like, 100% white or European, or European descent, like, definitely not." He self-defines as "definitely not" white looking and he believes that his non-whiteness is plain for others to see as well. When asked how he thinks that people of Long Island perceive him he responded,

> So, I think I'm perceived as a foreigner… Because it definitely affects, like, how I… my comfortability. Depending on, like, crowds and what kind of a crowd it is, like… for example, basically, every time that I go to a Cracker Barrel[17], I feel very out of line, like, 'I shouldn't be there right now.' But I still go every time because I love the food. But it feels like I'm the only minority in there. And it feels like, I mean, I'm sure nobody, like, it's very possible that this is also just like my personal anxiety over things. But like, to me, it feels like everybody knows that I am a foreigner. And it couldn't be the reality, like, nobody cares. But yeah, I definitely do feel anxious sometimes being aware of the fact that, I mean, I am an immigrant literally, I wasn't born here. So yeah, it causes, because I'm aware of it, it causes some anxiety, some social anxiety.

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[17] There are no Cracker Barrels on Long Island. I am unsure why this was his go-to example, but it is important to keep in mind that this franchise was the epitome of feeling out of place for him.

Bryan did not define himself as specifically Latino or Ecuadorian looking, but rather as a "foreigner," like Jari said of her coworkers. Bryan was indeed born abroad, in Ecuador, but someone's nation of birth is not a fact that we can know about someone by just looking at them. However, because Bryan is non-white, his non-European appearance causes him to be hyper-vigilant about who he is surrounded by. This causes him "social anxiety" because he does not fit the stereotype of white American. He is "personal[ly] anxious over things;" that thing being the guests at the Cracker Barrel knowing that he was born abroad. The nation of his birth causes him to fixate on others' opinions of foreigners, despite the fact that he knows that "nobody cares." He still cannot help but feel out of place in a restaurant like Cracker Barrel.

Nikki provided a lot of complexity to the possible restrictions of being a local by bringing in her work as a high school English as a New Language teacher. According to Nikki, "on the spectrum of skin color, I fall on the lighter side." She has told me that she has often been mistaken as Greek or Italian. She is not quite as fair skinned as Jari, who rarely gets placed for being Latina, but nor does she find herself so obviously non-white like Bryan does. For Nikki, she finds that how she is perceived by Long Islanders largely depends on audience:

> Yeah, I think it depends on the group of people I'm with. For example, my students, they consider me American. I think one of them calls me gringa. I'm like, 'Well, I guess you're not wrong. I'm like, I'm American.' But I'm also Ecuadorian. I'm with my students, they think I'm American. Um, when I was with my friends

> in high school, they thought, as me as foreign, I was the Hispanic girl. When I go to Ecuador, I'm considered American.
>
> So, and I think that fits nicely with me thinking I'm 50/50… Yeah, I don't know. My views have shifted from that. I might be 60/40. I don't know.

There was a reluctance in Nikki's voice here. It's not so much that she was pained to have been more American than she anticipated, but from what I see, informed by my own experiences, I see that she is struggling to accept her hybridity. So often, her Ecuadorianness was reinforced by her childhood friends, experiences being brought up by two Ecuadorian parents, that she had gotten used to being the cultural Other. However, as she settles more into her adulthood and into her career where she teaches other people who are, objectively, undeniably, foreign, she is faced with the profound reality of her assimilation. Like Eva Hoffman, she has splintered off from her Ecuadorian roots and become a variation of identities, all simultaneously. This assimilation was not through her own active participation, she just assimilated because she's lived here her whole life. The space where she can assert her Ecuadorianness is amongst white, non-Latinos, or other American-Ecuadorians. Returning home to Ecuador shifts her identity to American. Her Latin American-born students also assert that she is American. Her perception of self is unequivocally informed by the white, non-Latino, Long Island public where she is the Other. Amongst fellow Latinos, her identity changes because of *their* view of her. This, indeed, is a jarring and uncomfortable moment to contend with. Because, what it demonstrates is that our identity, the heritage that we cling to, is reinforced by our Otherness. Which, then, begs an even more uncomfortable question, "Can I ever belong anywhere?"

In Nikki's response where she hesitates to give a percentage to her identity, she is acting as both of Kristina Kahauwila's characters at once. She is both asserting that her heritage is what makes Ecuador her home and her an Ecuadorian. But when in Ecuador, speaking to the locals, they do not claim her as a local. Instead, they insist that she is an American just like when Cameron does not claim Becky as a Hawaiian local because she lived most of her life in Las Vegas. However, when surrounded by white Americans, Nikki is now "the Hispanic girl" despite having been a local her whole life. She is like Cameron who is ethnically different from native Hawaiians, and therefore does not call himself a Hawaiian.

This is why the act of claiming our own homes is so vastly important. As people whose intersections are constantly shifting, like Nikki who feels like she is American in Ecuador and Ecuadorian in the United States, we empower ourselves through the act of claiming our own home. We negotiate the various, overlapping parts of our identity and carve homes where *we* feel like we belong. Even if home changes based on one's current location, like Valerie who thinks about Long Island in the same manner that Rushdie thinks about India as his imaginary homeland, our homes undeniably inform our identities. They are an integral part of our intersectionalities. The different emphases that we place onto visions of home allow us to assert our own levels of belonging. Autoethnography is the best tool to uncover these personal iterations of home because the personalized approach to this methodology emphasizes the variations in home's definition. My cousins and I all grew up within 10 miles of one another, and yet we all think of home as something that is a little different from one another. This level of nuance risks being lost, un-

deremphasized, or misinterpreted in quantitative methods. If we were to allow others to define whether we are a local or not, if we belong to a specific identity group or not, we give others too much power over a personal matter. Home is personal. We should not let home be undermined by external factors. Like Eva Hoffman, despite fleeing Poland during the 1940s, she still considers Poland her home. Her many years in Canada and the United States do not undermine that she is staunchly Polish. She lets no amount of active or inactive assimilation take that homeland away from her. Living on Long Island should be enough to consider ourselves locals. We have our rituals and relationships here. Our family members chose this place to raise their children, and as such, we are entitled to call Long Island our home.

Searching For Our Homes: Ecuador

If my cousins' definitions of home are delineated by family connections, we must also contend with our ancestral connection to our homeland. Nikki, Jari, and I were all born in the United States, meanwhile Bryan and Valerie were born in Ecuador. This splits our identities into immigrants or children of immigrants. I, and my siblings, are the only ones who could be considered second or third generation Americans because our mother was born in the United States. Therefore, we all have a very different connection with our shared homeland due to the distance between our own lived experiences and the amount of time we have spent there.

One shared experience across our understanding of homeland is the feeling of nostalgia. The nostalgia that my cousins and I feel is not like Eva Hoffman's tęsknota;

which is nostalgia but deeper, sadder (4). I understand that this is a common sentiment, particularly amongst migrants that are forced to leave their home because of war, persecution, or other disastrous reasons and cannot envision a future where they can return to their homeland; such Hoffman's experience as a young Jewish girl fleeing 1940s Poland, or Thanhha Lai's young Vietnamese protagonist in *Inside Out & Back Again* whose family was fleeing the encroaching Vietnam War. Our ability to be able to return to our homeland, however, allows us the grace to feel happily nostalgic. Or as Nikki puts it, "it's the warm and fuzzy kind of nostalgia." We are lucky to be able to feel this kind of nostalgia as opposed to tęsknota. Our ability to return to our homeland directly affects the way we treasure our homeland. We long for it, but the way we long for any other old memory.

The overlap between my cousins' nostalgia and Hoffman's tęsknota is the ability to recall and reflect on one's own lived experiences. The accessibility and privilege we have as Americans granted us the legal freedoms to return to our homeland. The accessibility and privilege we have as middle-class suburbanites grants us the financial freedom to return, too. Many of my cousins were able to return to Ecuador frequently in their childhoods. Consequently, their nostalgia is often cheerful. Nikki recalled many wonderful childhood memories from her summers in Ecuador, "I have the memories of being with [redacted] in Ecuador when we were playing Barbies and like taking showers together because we're so young, but then I also have the memories of like, that's your boy. That's my boy. Yeah, we had boys. So we would, like, run off with." Nikki has a lifetime of memories from childhood into young adulthood. She remembers the innocent moments of bathing with another cousin, playing with dolls, but she also has more mature

memories of staking her claim to a specific boy that she liked. This list of coming-of-age memories is endearing, and as such, she expressed her happy nostalgia. Jari, too, recalled her youth in Ecuador "being on my great-grandma's farm and riding her donkeys and like seeing all the chickens." All remember their own lives and the events that took place in their pasts. My nostalgia, on the other hand, functions much differently.

For me, Ecuador is mythical and my nostalgia aches to know a place I have limited experience with. Unlike Jari and Nikki, I did not return to Ecuador often. I last visited Ecuador when I was 5 years old, then 25, and not since then. I am like Salman Rushie where I created an imaginary homeland in my mind. This imaginary homeland is based on everyone else's stories and my own three weeks' in the country. It is a place filled with pastoral images of urban farm life, where the cities are all made of concrete and cement, but somehow there are chickens roaming everywhere. My memory is hot and dusty, but I do not know any of the complexities of peoples' lives, of politics, of economics, or of social evolution. I cannot help but fantasize Ecuador because, even though I know it is a place that is literally real, I do not know it. It is the place where I come from, but it is not *my* place. At this point in my life, I "can't literally go home again" because the imaginary homeland I have created in my mind is not real (Hall 303). It is a combination of other peoples' stories and old photographs. I doubt the homeland in my mind ever was real. I can certainly vacation in Ecuador, or I can try to take a long hiatus and live in Ecuador for a while in order to try to get to know the true Ecuador, but I will giver be able to "go home again" because Ecuador is not my home. Long Island is. Ecuador is my homeland. It is ancestral, in the past, and for that reason I don't think it can ever be home.

The language surrounding traveling to Ecuador is interesting. Jari, for example, has “always enjoyed *going back* to ecuador.” Her sister, Valerie, too “love[s] *going back* to Ecuador.” Bryan invokes the same language of return when he describes that he “went back” to visit. When speaking about travel to Ecuador, at some point, almost everyone invokes the language of return. There is a nostalgia there, or an ancestral connection that when we book plane tickets to Guayaquil International Airport, we are returning to a place that we claim as our homes. However, the degrees to which the people there accept us as fellow Ecuadorians vary. In a most staggering example, Valerie, who was born in Ecuador and lived there for her young childhood, feels like she can claim Ecuador through and through. Her mother, on the other hand, does not. Valerie recounted a conversation between her and her mother about her solo trip to Ecuador,

> I just traveled there alone. And I was going away alone. And I was gonna, like, maneuver around. And I was, like, ‘whatever. Like, I'm fine.’ Like, I wasn't even nervous about it at all. And my mom was like, ‘oh my God, you're gonna go to Ecuador. She's alone.’ She was like, ‘aren't you nervous?’ She was like, ‘you need to be smart, blah, blah, blah.’ And I was like, ‘No, Ma… That's my home. Like, that's my motherland.’ And my mom was like, cuz she's always like checking me… Like she's like, ‘people can spot you out as a tourist in Ecuador the minute you land.’ Like she's always cutting on me. She's like, cuz, she's always like, ‘Who do you think you are? Like, you are from Long Island. Like, the minute you are in Ecuador people can tell you're not from Ecuador.’ Yeah, no, cuz… and it's

> true. People do… can tell that I'm like, American. So… but I don't get that feeling. So it's weird.

It is indeed weird. At once, both Valerie and her mother were simultaneously invoking two different pieces of wisdom from Salman Rushdie's "Imaginary Homelands." Valerie's insistence that Ecuador is her "motherland" and her "home," she was acknowledging that she "straddles two cultures" (Rushdie 16). But her mother, on the other hand, insisted on the imaginary homeland that Valerie had created in her head. Yes, Valerie did spend her childhood in Ecuador and has visited often, but her mother tried to "cut on [her]" and remind her that she is more American now than she was when she was a child. People will foremost look at her like a tourist before they look at her as one of their own. The Ecuador of her childhood is no longer there because Valerie changed too. In her own words, she affirmed what her mother told her and said that "it's true. People do… can tell that I'm like, American." Valerie indeed is also "fall[ing] between two stools" (Rushdie 16). The act of return to homeland for Valerie feels like a return to her motherland. Meanwhile, out of a mother's love and out of her Ecuadorian double conciousness, Valerie's mom, who indeed *did* spend much of her life in Ecuador, tried to gently warn her that Valerie will be viewed as a visitor, or a tourist to the Ecuadorian public. Her mother just wanted to make sure that Valerie would be safe traveling alone in Ecuador by gifting her the second-sight of viewing herself as local Ecuadorians would be looking at her--namely, a target or an outsider.

In my adult lifetime, I have returned[18] to Ecuador twice. I had returned a few times when I was a young child, but I have no memories from those trips. In 2018, my father's side of the family held a family reunion in our hometown of Crucita. Crucita is a seaside town, known internationally for its paragliding off of the town's Loma, but is otherwise a sleepy, rustic Ecuadorian town. The streets entering the town are paved, but once you get closer to the water, they become more and more covered with sand. The juxtaposition of wealth in this town is staggering. Some buildings are dilapidated or made from corrugated tin. Other properties, like my grandmother's and her sisters', are multi-building complexes complete with guard dogs and servants. They flaunt the wealth of having lived and worked in the United States for a lifetime and returned to enjoy their retirements in the lavish seaside constructions they spent decades building. In this dusty, sandy, humid town, over 80 family members from all over the world returned home to spend one afternoon together. We all wore white. Cousins and family from all over the United States arrived and stayed in our grandmothers' home. Tíos and tías I had never met, but had heard much about flew in from Australia, Switzerland, and Spain. I even got to meet my dad's fabled best friend, Mitchel[19], who is my sister's godfather. At the center of the reunion, was a pair of photographs of our late great-grandmother and great-grandfather who had set this gigantic family in motion generations ago.

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[18] I say returned because I am nostalgic for a past that is completely unknown to me.

[19] My father always spoke about the mischief he and Mitchel would get into as children and teenagers. Spending time with them in Ecuador during this vacation proved this to be true. They got into a ton of mischief and they dragged me into half of it. Truthfully, after seeing their interactions, I can't tell if my dad was ever over-exaggerating his tales. He might have actually been telling the truth. But not knowing is what makes it feel like magical realism. It could have been true, or it could have not been. Either way, it perpetuates the mysticism surrounding my ancestral homeland and my father's recounting of it.

The whole experience was so spectacular. About the reunion Jari said, “everyone was so happy and the air was different. It just brought everyone closer and it made me feel even more grateful. How many can say they’ve had this *huge* family reunion?” Seeing the sheer amount of family we had globally was astounding. I had always thought I had a big family here on Long Island, but the reunion was as if the diaspora returned home. It was like my father’s youth had come back and I was able to witness it without his storyteller’s hyperbole. This reunion was the grandest home I could ever imagine. My American cousins and I mostly stayed together while our parents reminisced over Pilseners and Johnny Walker Black. There, we called distant cousins primos and connected in ways that none of us would have considered doing in the United States. It was the grandeur of shared ancestry that brought us all together.

In retrospect, I do not believe that this reunion would have been so powerful had we had it in New York. There was magic associated with the land that we would not have been able to capture here. The grey hues of cement buildings, cement floors, cement road, coupled with the extreme humidity, moist sea air, and sun setting on the Pacific Ocean generated an ambiance of something purely *Ecuadorian*. Indeed, had the weather been overcast, humid, or moist on a Long Island beach town, we would have called it a crappy day. But being on the Ecuadorian seashore turned the grey day into a magical moment. The coastal hues of browns and tans felt so much more pastoral and ancient than the perfectly manicured yards of suburban Long Island. Bluntly, the dirt and bleakness of our beloved town made it real.

For me, the return to our homeland was formative and informational. As I have stated before, my father's retellings of his childhood in Ecuador are filled with boyish mischief. He never spoke about the extreme poverty. He never relayed that $200 American was the average monthly income for one family. He never said that children played in the streets barefoot, not because they wanted to, but because they did not have shoes. He did not mention the skinny street dogs, skinny chickens, and skinny beef cattle. He only mentioned that un ceviche de camarón would cost about $3 and that "everything is so cheap!" He never mentioned that we should carry around a change pouch instead of a wallet and a $100 bill is something most people hardly ever see. Yes, returning to Ecuador was beautiful because I was able to experience the magic of family and beach life. But, also, I was finally able to see why my family left and feel a deep gratitude for my grandparents and parents for taking us up north.

Gratitude is something that we all feel for the migration path northward--be it our ancestors' or our own. When I asked Bryan about his impression of returning to Ecuador, his chosen word was "impactful" because it was only upon his return to Ecuador during and after college that he was able to acknowledge how "lucky" he was. As a child, Bryan spent some years in Ecuador before moving to the United States to join his family. As a result, he has classmates from childhood against whose lives he was able to compare his own,

> I viewed how lucky I was to be able to leave that country because it's a very poor country. And that realization didn't come 'til, like, much later, like, when I was first going to college, that I went back and I looked at the kids that I had grown up

> with, they were, we were all the same age, and how different their lives were in Ecuador versus how different mine where my life was back here in the States. And all it took was like, luck, you know? Being born into the right family, to have that opportunity to, like, go elsewhere, and do something else with my life. Instead, my friends who didn't really do much with theirs, because they just, like, didn't. They weren't lucky, the way that I was lucky.

Indeed, luck has a lot to do with it. Despite the fact that some of us are immigrants, we were brought over to the United States by the hard work and resolve of our parents and grandparents. The decision to migrate from Ecuador to New York was not of our own volition. It was decided for us. In that way, we are lucky. We reap the rewards of our ancestors' tough decisions. While I write this line, I am sitting at my mother's desk in her suburban Long Island home, dog sitting for her while she is away on vacation. I am lucky to see the perfectly green, manicured front yard; complete with Japanese Cherry Blossom trees, budding hydrangeas, and lush hostas. We are a long way from the sandy roads of Crucita and the unforgiving, humid air of Ecuadorian mid-summer.

That gratitude extends past the immigration process itself. It also bleeds into the gratitude that we hold for our lives within the United States. Jari said that,

> Despite all the terrible things going on in America, I do feel grateful to be here. Especially in New York because… all around the world… it's crazy how many people strive to come here and try to make it here. Even besides that, people want to visit here so bad and some people can't. And I've read things that, like, its peo-

> ples' dreams to come to NYC and *here it is!* An hour and a half away so its like.. I feel lucky.

Bryan echoes Jari's sense of gratitude of living in the United States but takes a macro approach,

> I feel very lucky being an American. I have a very powerful passport, for example. Like, I'm very thankful that I can visit countries with no problem. When I was traveling in Thailand, I met this guy who was from Egypt and he was traveling illegally around different countries because his passport gets him absolutely nowhere. I never thought, like… when you want to go book a flight to, like, most destinations, we just booked that flight, no problem. For other people, it's like a headache of applying for a visa. I mean, I've applied for visas in Thailand and India. But because of where I'm at, I'm an American, it was just like, easy. Like, it's approved in an instant.

On a global scale, we are awarded travel privileges that other nationals are not so easily awarded. Furthermore, the location of New York is of special note because as Jari said, "it's people's dreams to come to NYC… an hour and a half away" from where we live on Long Island. We are living the fabled lives of wanderlusters worldwide. It is easy to take for granted, or fall smitten to the idea of Jay-Z's and Alicia Key's "Empire State of Mind" that glamorizes the struggle and success of being a New Yorker. We are absolutely grateful for the many privileges that having the American passport holds for us. We can easily travel to and from Ecuador, meanwhile Ecuadorian nationals must apply for a tourist visa to visit the United States ("Visa B1/B2 de Estados Unidos para ciudadanos de Ecuador").

We are only a generation or two from being not so "lucky" and having to endure the visa processes that our parents and grandparents had to go through to enjoy our lives the way we do. Our gratitude is born of the knowledge that our parents and grandparents sacrificed their homelands to have our lives here, in the United States, in New York, on Long Island.

I want to say that gratitude is simple. I want to say that gratitude is all that I feel; that I am truly honored to live in a place that awards me travel privileges and where I get to have clean water, reliable income, supermarkets with fresh fruit and vegetables all year round (even when they are not in season), where I have plenty of upward socio-economic mobility, where my safety is not threatened by war or famine. But contending with our family's migration to the United States, specifically to Long Island, is not an easy thing to do. We both do and do not belong. We both are and are not accepted. We are both lucky to be here, but must endure the public's eye of viewing us as outsiders. I recall a conversation with a friend who once, while speaking of Syrian refugees seeking asylum in New Jersey, said, "Well, they should be grateful anyway! They're not in a warzone anymore" despite their living conditions being notoriously atrocious at the refugee camp. I was angry then, and I am angry now; not just for the refugees, but for every immigrant who has chosen to leave their home in search of peace, opportunity, or growth. Yes, we are grateful to be out of those conditions--poverty, war, famine--but to enter into a country that will never see us as equals can we still feel 100% gratitude? We trade in one set of issues for another. Indeed, war, famine, and poverty are tragic and deadly, but do we not struggle in our own ways? Our ancestors left their homes, their languages, their family and

friends to make a better life in the United States. If after 50+ years of my family being in this country and our acceptance by the Long Island public is still questionable, do the grandchildren of immigrants not have a right to be angry? If we have lost our connection to our homelands that we are told to return to, do we not have a right to be angry? If we are still viewed as outsiders despite living at the same address for our entire lives, do we not have a right to be angry? When can we agree that gratitude is meant to pacify us and keep us from pushing the envelope further? Yes, I am grateful, *we* are *all* grateful to be living in the United States, on Long Island, but gratitude does not mean that we will be one of them, even if we feel like we are.

Indeed, in light of the anger that I often feel for being an American, I am still happy to be one. I am happy to be a Long Islander because it is my home. I did not take showers with my cousins in Ecuador, but I did take showers with my cousins on Long Island in our suburban bathrooms. I didn't share formative crushes on boys with my cousins in Crucita, but I did share secrets with my cousins behind trees or during long conversations on the telephone on Long Island. My memories are equivalent to Nikki's, but they are in a different place. Nikki's memory of summers in Ecuador helps her formulate a nostalgia for the country, but my own memory helps me be nostalgic for Long Island. Since homeland is defined by time and nostalgia, then I argue that Long Island is as much my homeland as Ecuador. It may not be a perfect place that is always accepting of me, my family, and who we are, but it is *my* place.

I am a local to many towns in Suffolk county and if I were to move away, there would be a good chance that Long Island would become the fabled homeland of my fu-

ture progeny. Like my father before me, I would exaggerate my life here. I would certainly hyperbolize my time spent on the beaches, attending concerts at Jones Beach theater, indulging in bagels and pizza, and from my stories I would certainly leave out the ever-increasing property taxes, the rush hour traffic and the social silo that is living on a literal island. Despite knowing the many complexities of living on Long Island, I can already envision my future self looking back on Long Island like a foreign land filled with delight. I would want to remember this place like a dream.

Conclusion

Finding a home is the ultimate goal of migrating from one place to another. As the birds do every winter, we travel when that old home no longer suits us. Or like the whales, we migrate vast distances to follow the schools of fish that are our proverbial opportunities because staying put means starvation. If we are so lucky, we can make a new home once we arrive at that faraway place.

Home is defined by constant relationships, love, feeling of safety, and comfort, not necessarily a physical location, or is it? In most responses, my cousins mentioned that they define home as being with their families. However, as is demonstrated in Valerie's response, Long Island is home because Long Island is where her family is. If her family were to move away to another state, would Long Island cease being home? I don't think so. I think that Long Island would be transformed from home into homeland; a place where the past resides to which we have many emotional ties that may or may not exist anymore. We can say that we used to be a local to Long Island, if we choose to move

away, but as Rushdie explains, time moves on and that place changes without you. We cannot help but keep it locked in our memory in a specific way, like a photograph, because we no longer know it as intimately as we once did. It becomes “imaginary” and as Hall says, we “can’t literally go home” (303).

Whether the home exists exactly as it does in our memory does not diminish the fact that my cousins and I have and do return to our shared homeland. Each return is a gift and helps remind us of our roots. Moreover, it grounds us to why our families left in the first place. We each feel gratitude for our families for having built a life we can enjoy in the United States. We are aware of the many privileges that were awarded here that we would not have been able to access if we were still in Ecuador. There is thankfulness there, even if we understand that the United States has not yet come around to accepting us fully. Like Ecuador, Long Island has provided our family a home for generations. Our lives are inextricable from Long Island, even if we move away or find ourselves disenchanted with it.

In a radical movement, we claim Long Island as our home.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION: HAVE WE BECOME AMERICAN?

Throughout this dissertation I have examined various levels of identity formation amongst four of my cousins and myself along three fronts: Latinidad, language, and the making and claiming of homes. The intention of approaching identity in this way was to investigate how influential U.S culture, particularly white Long Island culture, was and continues to be to our respective senses of self. Before even embarking on this journey, I knew the answer to the question, "have we become Americans" would be a complicated one, if there even was an answer. To be clear, I don't think there is an answer that can apply to my four cousins interviewed for this project and myself.

Identity is a complicated process. My cousins and I share so many different multidimensional aspects of our lives: we share great grandparents, we were raised within 10 miles of one another in white, suburban Long Island, we are all middle-class, we are close in age, we are friends and have been for years. But there are also so many other intersections that we do not share. Valerie and Bryan were born in Ecuador. Nikki, Jari, and I were born in the United States. I am the only of my cousins who has a parent who was born in the United States. Everyone else's parents were born in Ecuador. We have different levels of education, different skin complexions, different degrees of Spanish language proficiency, and so much more. While we share so much, our intersections and identities differ vastly, too. Despite our differences, we have all found comfort in our Latinidades. We may choose to define them in slightly different ways, but we honor our Latinidad all the same. Long Island has proved to be a difficult place to exhibit our Latinidad, but we

have succeeded in spite. Nikki, Bryan, Jari, Valerie, and I all identify as Latinos, even if there is strife that comes along with it.

Perception of oneself is as important to identity as acceptance by the public. My cousins and I are acutely aware of the positions that we are put in when we are out in the white Long Island public. We understand that our learning and daily usage of English is a necessary mode of assimilation and therefore survival on Long Island. My cousins and I have also decided that Spanish is important to Latinidad, but it is not essential. There is beauty, utility, and reasons for using both languages that our families or that we, ourselves, have negotiated with in order to fuel our translingualism. We work against Long Island's raciolinguistic expectation of speaking a certain way by speaking Spanglish, translanguaging, or other methods of using language to our advantage. Our Americanization is evident through the survival strategies we have utilized in order to make a home on Long Island.

We claim Long Island as our homes. My cousins and I have diverging perceptions of how to define home. But if home is family, and our families live on Long Island, then Long Island is also our home. At the same time, we honor and respect our shared homeland of Ecuador. It is the place from where our families immigrated, and it holds a special place in our hearts. By identifying that Ecuador is our homeland, and Long Island is our home, we assert our right to belong here.

So, have I become *American*?

With the loss of so many aspects of my culture, I can say that I feel like I am an *American*. And that makes me sad because that means that shedding my ancestry, culture,

language is what has, essentially, whitened me, and made me feel like I am one of the crowd. But I don't want to be one of the crowd. I don't want to be white. I also understand that the white *American* public will never see me as white, too. For them, I will always be an outsider. So, while I have struggled with the loss of so many things that my ancestry has tried to give me, I became *American*. This does not feel joyful because I know I will never be accepted as *American*, the same way Ecuadorians in Ecuador will never see me as one of their own. I will always sit on the outside of what *other* people see me as.

So I suggest this: que se joden.

Me, my cousins, and anyone else who finds themselves in a similar situation, have lived far too long learning to balance cultures, or falling between them to feel like I need other people's approval and acceptance into an identity category. Identity is not an either/or phenomenon. We can be both. Becoming American does not mean that we have lost our ancestry. It is possible that a person may lose touch with their roots, but this has not been the case for my cousins and I. We may have become Long Island suburbanites, but that does not mean that we have lost our roots. We have all worked hard to maintain and negotiate our Latinidad and our ties to Ecuador. An intersectional approach to identity, particularly as it relates to Ecuadorian(-Americans) living on Long Island, is the key to breaking through the stereotypes that set us out to be outsiders. We are not outsiders. We belong here. We just do not, and will not, succumb to the definition of *American* that leaves us out.

Becoming American does not mean becoming white or losing our roots. Becoming American means making a home here and living proudly as who you decide to be. My home is Long Island and I am an Ecuadorian-American who identifies as a Latina. My act of rebellion is to lay my claim to this title. I am not an American because of my years of assimilation or whitewashing. I am an American because I dare to be a Latina in white spaces. Coming to terms with the intersectionality of identity has taught me to accept that I am American *and* Latina *and* a Long Islander *and* Ecuadorian. I cannot answer for my cousins if they feel like they have become American, but I know that if they chose to identify as such, I would honor it.

APPENDIX A

Recruitment Script

Recruitment Form via GoogleForms

This is a recruitment inquiry to see if you would be interested in participating in Tabitha Benitez's dissertation research

Are you interested in being interviewed for Tabitha Benitez's dissertation research? The requirements to be interviewed is to be one of Ms. Benitez's cousins, above the age of 18, and have grown up on Long Island. The interview will consist of 29 open ended questions that you may choose to answer or skip. The questions will regard your personal experiences growing up and living on Long Island, your family history as it pertains to being a descendent from Ecuador, as well as your everyday language usage. The interview will be conducted via Cisco WebEx at a time and date of the participant's choosing. The WebEx interview will be recorded and saved on a secure USB drive that only Ms. Benitez has access to. The participant can choose to use their name or remain anonymous to the furthest extent that they are comfortable with. All participants who volunteer will be selected.

☐ Yes

☐ No

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

Introductory

1. Tell me about who you are/how you identify yourself. What plays a role in this? Does Ecuador play a role? Does Long Island? What other pieces play a role?
2. Tell me about where you grew up. How has place influenced the way you identify today?
3. Could you describe what was it like to go to school on Long Island?
4. Tell me what you think when I say the word, "whiteness."
5. Tell me what you think when I say the word, "Latinx."
6. What, for you, is the difference between Latinidad and whiteness?

Migration

1. Tell me the story about how you came to be on Long Island.
2. Tell me what you think of when I say the word, "home."
3. What is it like for you to go/return to Ecuador? Could you share a memory of going/returning to Ecuador that was particularly influential to you?
4. Do you ever feel nostalgic about Ecuador or whatever your home is?
5. What does it mean to you to be *American*?
6. How do you think you are perceived by the Long Island public in terms of *American*ness? Do you think you are perceived as *American*? Foreign? Something else? Does this have any influence over the ways that you interact with the public or vice versa?

Translingualism

1. Tell me about your every day language usage. What language(s) you speak, where you speak them, and to whom, etc. What kinds of movement is there across/between languages, if any?
2. What does it mean to you to be able to move between languages?
3. How do you think your multilingualism is perceived by others? Does this perception of your language skills change according to where you are speaking?
4. Do you feel that Spanish language is necessary to your identity as an Ecudorian-American/[however this identifies]. If not, how do you negotiate your identity apart from language?

5. Do you think there is a link between Latinidad and Spanish language? In other words, between language and ethno-race?
6. Were you ever mandated to take a corrective English class? I.e. ESL, remedial English in high school or college. Tell me about that experience.
7. How important is it for you to be able to speak English in Long Island suburbs?

Latinidad

1. How do you name your latinidad? What kind of parameters do you think are necessary for latinidad?
2. What does it mean to you to be Latinx on Long Island?
3. How does whiteness tie into your understanding of Latinidad? Does it stand in contrast, alongside, both, neither? Explain.
4. When asked on official forms, how do you answer the question of "race?"
5. Do you think your experiences as an Ecuadorian on Long Island differs from the experiences other Latinos have on LI?
6. Discuss a moment of empowerment that you've experienced due to your Latinidad.
7. Talk about a moment of discrimination you've experienced due to your Latinidad.
8. Do you consider your experiences on LI as *American* experiences or Latinx ones? Tell me why.
9. Share with me a defining moment in the construction of your Latinx identity.
10. Tell me what you think of when I say the word, "survival?" Do you think you've had to use any survival strategies in your lifetime? Describe an instance to me.

APPENDIX C

Consent Form

Dear: ______________________

You have indicated your interest in participating in a dissertation research study regarding Ecuadorian-American lives on Long Island. This study will be conducted by Tabitha Benitez, the Principal Investigator and a graduate student within the English Department at St. John's University. Her faculty mentor is Dr. Steven Alvarez of the English Department in St. John's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at St. John's University.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Any questions that are asked during the interview may be answered or not answered according to your own comfort level. If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

- Take part in an interview via Cisco WebEx wherein you will be asked to discuss 29 questions regarding your lived experience as an Ecuadorian-American living and growing up on Long Island. Questions will be in regard to identity, migration literacy, and language practices.

The interview will be recorded with both audio and visual and your responses to discussion may be transcribed and/or appear in my research notes for this project. You may review these documents and request that all or any portion of these documents be destroyed. The audio and visual recordings will remain private and for the principal investigator's use only; the recordings will be kept on a secure USB drive and destroyed once transcribed. Furthermore, you will not be required to turn your camera on during the interview if you do not choose to do so.

Participation in the study will involve an hour of your time. The interview will take place at a time that you and the Principal Investigator agree upon.

Because of the personal nature of this research and study, the Principal Investigator would like to describe the nature of the participant's and her relationship. However, your

privacy is of the utmost importance to the principal researcher. Therefore, mention of your name in future research is entirely voluntary.

This research will help the investigator understand how migration trajectories, Spanish and English language practices, as well as various Latino influences among Ecuadorian-Americans family members living in the white suburbs of Long Island.

Confidentiality of your research records will be strictly maintained by my faculty supervisor, Dr. Steven Alvarez. Your consent forms will be kept confidential; your identity will not become known or linked with any information you have provided if you do not volunteer to do so, with the following exception: the research is required by law to report to appropriate authorities, suspicion of harm to yourself, to children or to others. Transcribed quotes from your responses to the interview may be presented anonymously in the researcher's findings.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty. If there is anything about the study or your participation that is unclear or that you do not understand or if you have questions or wish to report a research-related problem, you may contact Tabitha Benitez at benitezt@stjohns.edu or 631-855-2389. You may also get in touch with the faculty sponsor, Dr. Steven Alvarez at alvares1@stjohns.edu or (646) 549-6516.

For questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University's Institutional Review Board, St. John's University, Dr. Raymond DiGiuseppe, Chair, digiuser@stjohns.edu or 718-990-1955 or Marie Nitopi, IRB Coordinator at nitopim@stjohns.edu or 718-990-1440.

Sincerely,

Tabitha Benitez

Principal Investigator

Graduate Student

MA in English 2019 || PhD in English May 2022

St. John's University

benitezt@stjohns.edu

(631) 855 2389

AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE

_______***Yes***, I give the investigator permission to auditorily and visually record the inter-
view

discussion for transcription purposes only. (Recordings will not be made public
or

shared beyond the principal investigator).

_______ ***No***, I do not give the investigator permission to auditorily and visually record
the

interview.

_______***Yes***, I give the investigator permission to use my response to interview questions

anonymously for their research study.

_______ ***No***, I do not give the investigator permission to use my response to interview
questions

anonymously for their research study.

_______***Yes***, I give the investigator permission to include my name in their research
study.

_______ ***No***, I do not give the investigator permission to include my name in their re-
search

study.

______________________________ ____________

Participant's Signature Date

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Fig. 2. @fabiana_ferrarini. “Our superstitious moms would never allow this!” *Instagram*, 27 Jul 2022.

Fig. 3. @celly_speaks. “Our superstitious moms would never allow this!” *Instagram*, 27 Jul 2022.

Fig. 4. @oshunspiritualcounseling. “Our superstitious moms would never allow this!” *Instagram*, 27 Jul 2022.

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VITA

Name	*Tabitha Andrea Benitez*
Baccalaureate Degree	*Bachelor of Arts, State University of New York at Stony Brook, Stony Brook, NY, Major: French Language and Literature*
Date Graduated	*August 2015*
Other Degrees and Certificates	*Master of Arts, St. John's University, Queens, NY, Major: English*
Date Graduated	*May 2019*