

My life is in Technicolor

About multicultural families, coffee, and the increasing need to give a voice to people from mixed backgrounds.

A quick note: *this is not a work of fiction. In fact, this is a very personal essay. Wherever I am being corny or clichéd, I ask for the reader's forgiveness. Such glitches and slips will be few, I promise. The same thing goes for rambling; this essay is written as a collection of short experiences illustrating my point. While I did try to be concise, it is hard to abbreviate a topic as complex as immigration's effects on national, ethnic, and racial identity to a few pages. Also, if you don't like coffee, this might be a painful essay to read. You have been warned.*

I. At the airport.

"Hello. How can I help you?"

The bald man before me is in his fifties, stands about five foot six, and has a pair of big, thick glasses, and a black beard with patches of white and gray distributed unevenly. He's smiling affably, but I'm especially moody tonight and in no condition for making friends.

"You could bring my plane back," I muse.

He looks confused, "Excuse me?"

"Could I have the largest cup of coffee that you have and my change in quarters please?" I ask, now out loud.

I need the quarters, and the caffeine would be a welcome relief. His smile accentuates.

"Long night, eh?" he asks.

I just nod. I don't mean to be impolite; it's just that I don't want to talk right now. Unfortunately, we are the only living beings in a two hundred-meter radius, and he's not willing to give up his attempts to establish conversation that easily.

While grabbing a disposable cup and some napkins from a cabinet, he strikes again:

"Where are you from?"

Oh, God. Not *that* question again.

"I was born in Mexico," I reply cautiously.

There is a moment of silence only broken by the coffee brewer. *Buzzzzzzz*, it reverberates around the deserted waiting lounge. I can almost feel the walls vibrating and the ground shaking in unison.

“Oh, so you are Mexican! You don’t look Mexican!”

I sigh. I’m tempted to ask what a Mexican is supposed to look like, but every time I do it there is an awkward pause while my interlocutor tries to find a politically correct terminology. The problem is that my cultural identity is too complex to be discussed in five minutes, and I’m growing impatient. That is why I answer automatically and without thinking:

“I’m not Mexican! I was born there, but...”

“Well then, *what* are you?”

“I don’t know.”

It’s not that I don’t know, but I just need the dollar in quarters to make a phone call. That’s the point of buying the coffee: staying awake and calling someone. Not talking about my weird family, failed relationships, diverse childhood traumas, and future goals with a complete stranger as if I was going to the therapist.

“Therapists? Psh. That’s what aunts are for,” my grandma would say.

“What do you mean you don’t know?” This man’s ability to smile has impressed me. It’s as if he had been carved into stone, perpetually happy about a world in which unicorns exist and planes don’t leave people stranded in airports. “It’s going to be two dollars and thirty-five cents,” he adds.

“It’s complicated.” I take my coffee and change, and say “okaythankyouandgoodbye” in an almost mechanical voice.

“Okay, have a nice night!” responds the barista cheerfully.

Have a nice night, he said. Have a *nice* night.

I’m aware that my night could be worse, but right now I’m in the middle of an empty airport and I have to wait for the morning bus to go back home. Not to mention the fact that I just missed my flight and the people waiting for me across the ocean are not going to be happy with that. I’m still immersed in these thoughts when I realize that I dialed my friend’s number and he just answered the phone. He, unlike the barista at the coffee shop, does not sound happy at all.

“Hey man, it’s me... Me! Your roommate! Were you asleep?... Sorry... Yes, I know it’s late... I said I’m sorry!... Yeah, but you are not going to believe this...”

II. “It’s complicated”

I was born in Mexico twenty years ago. The Soviet Union had just dissolved, President Bush (the other one) fell violently ill at a meal with the Japanese Prime Minister, and Clint Eastwood won the Academy Award for Best Director. The GPS was just starting to appear and there was no internet, email, or Facebook (which I wouldn’t have access to it until I started high school anyway), and at that time I didn’t even know what a computer was so I don’t remember any of that. My childhood, as is any normal childhood, was a mixture of awesomeness and ill-fated

moments aggravated by the fact of being born into a family as original as mine. I never worried about *what* I was until some years later: when you are a kid you just don't care that much about concepts such as race, religion, or social class –or if they even exist. You just spend most of your time staring at your navel and wondering why a crushed Gatorade bottle in the rear wheel makes your bicycle sound like a motorbike, while tetra packs are useless. Hey, at least that was me.

Staring at one's navel and Gatorade bottles might sound uninteresting, and it is. There's nothing that makes me special or unique. On the other hand, Mexico does deserve a couple of words. It's justified as I lived there most of my life, and yet I don't answer "Mexican" when I'm asked *what* I am.

I grew up in Mexico City, an enormous metropolis that has –as of today– 21 million inhabitants. It began as the capital of the Aztec Empire, was called Teotihuacán (with an accent) and was founded sometime during the first quarter of the 14th century; three centuries later it was going to be conquered by the Spanish. Then the city started to grow by swallowing smaller settlements like a hungry and insatiable whale until it became what it is today. Since Teotihuacán was built in a lake in the middle of a swamp, and the current Mexico City was constructed on the ruins of the Aztec settlement, the oldest parts of the metropolis are composed of layers of history and are also slowly sinking. Excavations performed right next to the main avenues and inside the most important cathedral on the country have uncovered spears, urns, skulls, and sometimes ancient temples buried underground.

Even though the capital consists of approximately twenty percent of the country's total population compared to Mexico, which is very vast and diverse, it is very relatively small in extension. To the southeast of the country there are tropical forests, while on the north lies the desert. From the eastern part of the country comes a coffee that is exported to many countries

and considered one of the best in the world. The south is famous for its chocolate. There can also be hurricanes and floods on one side of the country, while the crops die on the other due to the droughts. The only thing that Mexico doesn't have is proper snow –or seasons in general. Most of the places I lived alternate between hot (30 °C) and cold (5 °C), with some rain in between. It is very comfortable since in the winter you can put a sweatshirt on and that's your "winter clothing."

Speaking of winter, I was stunned when I first arrived in Boston and discovered that the winter lasted until April (and started in early November). For me, winter means two months or less of dusty sweatshirts that I don't wear any other time of the year. Snow is some kind of black magic that falls from the sky like in the movie *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, and the mere concept of having night time at four in the afternoon was –and still is– just ridiculously impossible. I won't lie, there are some places where snow and cold *do* exist, but it's high on the mountains; few people live there, and even less people go there.

The people that live up high in the mountains are often direct descendants of the northern tribes, nomads that never accepted the Spanish dominion but eventually had to "agree" –nobody asked them for their permission– to the addition of their settlements and mineral-rich lands to the newborn nation. Even though the country was built around immigration, the original inhabitants of Mexico are still there. During and after the colonization they had to pay for their right to stay with something more than their lives, since most of the population are now in extreme poverty. Every single economic or social "change" in the country always ends up aggravating their situation, and yet they preserve what the real Mexican culture is: the nobility, the valor, and the exuberance that make the country what it is. Most of them are descendant of the Spanish, African slaves and Native Americans that were not killed, and very few of them have managed to thrive and grow in a society as racist ("classist," they say) as Mexico's.

The concept of race in Mexico and other Latin American countries is considerably different than in America, and is mostly based on the skin tone and accent. Throughout the Spanish colonization and up until the independence a caste system was established, although now abolished, its remnants are still present today inside people's minds. There is this strange syndrome where outsiders (especially Americans) are both despised and looked up to at the same time. Say something with traces of a foreign accent, and you'll have everyone's attention in five seconds. However, don't even dare criticizing anything because you'll end up receiving a rain of insults in Spanish that will bend the toughest to their knees.

The average Mexican is a complex and proud character: they won't let foreigners tell them what to do, but at the same time they try to emulate them as much as they can. They are generally friendly and open, and will always invite you to have a *cafecito* (a cup of coffee) *sometime* –the temporal imprecision is on purpose, because it forces other people to take initiative if they are really interested. Unfortunately if you get on their bad side they can be one of your worst nightmares, since they are forgiving but will rarely *forget* an offense. Of course, you can try to mend that mistake by inviting the person for a *cafecito*; it is in a coffee shop, sitting at a table, where all the world's problems are solved.

Due to the same ideology of skin tone that I previously talked about, my grandfather had a hard time when he was young. A descendant of farmers, he wanted to have a future different to what was in the cards for him. Against his father's wishes, he fled to Mexico City. There he got a job and went to college, struggled for years and ended up earning a Ph.D. in Geneva. He is always proud of his Native American and African heritage, and became a strong-willed leftist that wanted the instauration of a communist state in Mexico. He got into lots of trouble for that but he hasn't given up. He also tried to pass all his ideologies on to his children and grandchildren.

Life, however, had other plans.

III. The Spanish

Have you ever seen the stereotypical little kid that always tries too hard in sports, only to end up being picked last all the time? You know, jumping and smiling so that people realize that he is there, ready to play?

Yeah, that was me. I don't blame anyone, actually. I was a little chubby kid that instead of playing sports would rather spend his time reading or looking for new rocks for his collection. Don't misinterpret me: I was very fond of both basketball and soccer. My problem was (and still is) that I'm terrible at it. The thing I remember best is my grandma, with her coffee-smelling breath, yelling at me in very rough-sounding Spanish with a lot of words from another dialect: "Son, you need to stop playing barefoot or the rocks are going to eat your feet! Remember Cinderella?"

Of course I remembered Cinderella. *I still do*. In this case, I do blame my grandmother: when I was little, she used to come to our apartment and keep my brother and me from burning the house down while our mother was at work. Sometimes we would naïvely ask her for a bedtime story. She loves telling stories; she's loud and tough and she was a high school teacher. In other words, she is good at making an impact on lesser, impressionable minds such as my brother's and mine. Her version of Cinderella was remarkably impressive due to the amount of violence included in the story. Every single time we heard her adaptations of Little Red Riding Hood or Cinderella or any *normal* and cheery Disney story, we couldn't sleep for *weeks*. Naturally,

my mother would notice our altered mental states and try to talk to my grandma: “Betty, don’t you think you should soften up the tone of your stories? I mean, they are six years old.”

“Nonsense! I grew up with these stories and I’m perfectly fine! They need a taste of what the real world is.”

I have never talked with my grandmother about her childhood, mainly because she is very reserved about her personal life. Most of my family knows little or nothing about her, and the few things that I know –or think I know– are small pieces of conversation and bits of history that I have picked up throughout the years. Anything related to her or her brothers is kept in secret. That’s because the Civil War that tore Spain apart ended in 1939, and my grandmother had fled her country two years before. She left everything behind: her parents, her house, her life. She started a new life. And with the exception of her first name, she erased everything else.

My grandmother kept the temper, bedtime stories and toughness of the Spanish, but her accent has softened up with the years, and she has made Mexico her country of origin. Although one part of her Spanish nature was never lost: her way of drinking coffee is like drinking fire.

IV. Drinking fire.

When I was twelve I asked my grandmother why she divorced my grandfather. I remember that it was raining outside and Édith Piaf was singing from the speakers of the old radio something about l’amour and that she didn’t regrette rien. We were sitting in our kitchen, and I was enjoying a glass of milk while she chewed on some cookies. When I casually asked about her

divorce, I caught her off guard. She started choking on her food and had to gulp down half of her coffee cup in one second. After she recovered, she stared at me for what I felt like an eternity, looked at her now empty mug for a while, and answered: “because your grandfather doesn’t know how to make coffee.”

In the background, Édith Piaf was yelling about how starting from zéro was causing her to not regrette rien, rien de rien.

During the fifties, my grandparents met in college, and got married. They had three children in Chicago, and a few years later got divorced. To be honest, I didn’t expect anything else: they both have a strong, passionate temper that run wild like a river. When they clashed, my mother says that she and her brothers used to get below the tables because everything that wasn’t nailed to the ground or was a piece of silverware started flying along with expletives in five seconds. My grandmother, who was used to being heard and had strong opinions, had met my grandfather, whose traditionalist education expected a submissive and devoted wife. The coffee making was only the tip of the iceberg: religion, culture, history. Everything was different. They did love each other, but they had a complete and utter inability to communicate between themselves. While my grandfather got married again (and again, and again), my grandmother devoted her whole life to raising her children. At the end of the day, they grew up having a curious mixture of American and Spanish cultural heritage that would influence my brother and me years later.

My mother always quotes a Turkish proverb that says: “Coffee should be black as the night, hot as the devil, pure as an angel and soft as love.” One day, I tried to drink my mother’s coffee, and I almost died. It was strong and without any sugar, but, as I would find out years later, substantially less concentrated than how my grandma prepares it. It is “softer.”

Some people in my family disagree with my mother's idea of how coffee should be made. My aunt, who is Cuban, prefers a different version of the beverage: hers basically is caffeinated syrup with a hint of water. When she married my uncle around ten years ago, my grandmother hated her. Coffee aside, she used to complain that my aunt didn't know how to cook (she does, and so does my uncle), didn't have a job (she was a ballerina and is now a ballet teacher) and didn't understand the family. Fortunately, four years later she went to Havana to visit my aunt's family and realized that she was an exile, just like her. Just like all of us.

When they came back from Cuba my grandmother took my aunt to a coffee shop, and talked for a very long time. She tried to drink my aunt's coffee, and basically ended up drinking "some thick mixture of water and sugar," (as she would later describe it to me) "which I must say, is not that bad!" (As she would immediately add, lying).

My aunt, on the other hand, couldn't finish her cup of fire disguised as coffee.

V. Foreigners.

My brother and I were both raised by my mother, who was born in Chicago and never spoke English to us. She argued that there was no point in learning it in a country where everyone else was talking in Spanish. When she lived with my father they used to speak in Spanish with each other, largely due to the fact that it was the only language that they had in common: my father was born in Chile, but when he was very young he and his family had to escape to Italy.

The story of my parents has a lot in common with my grandparents': they met in college and were together for a very long time, and got separated because of their total inability to "prepare coffee". They argued a lot, and at the end of the day they only agreed on the fact that they were completely incapable of agreeing on something.

My father left when I was very young, so the vague memories I have of him involve a cigarette-smelling man with a beard that had a weird pronunciation of most words and a strange emphasis on the incorrect syllables (later I would find out that his accent was a mixture of Chilean Spanish and an Italian accent that made every single word he said incomprehensible to the untrained ear). Five years after president Pinochet was denied another term in the government, my father decided to go back to Chile, to visit the country that he belonged to, but had never seen. It is very similar to what happened to my grandmother with Spain, because it's been said that Chile changed a lot after the coup. Nowadays people have a hard time trusting each other, and often it is hard to establish conversation with someone since you can't tell whether they supported the dictatorship or not. My father's family ended up scattered across Italy, Chile and Mexico, and we don't have a lot of contact with them. I can understand Italian fairly well, but I don't speak it. In the same vein, I can tell the difference between a macchiato and an espresso without trouble (it's the milk).

My brother and I are the first to be born in Mexico in a long time, while all the other members of my family are from other countries. Most of my life I have felt disconnected from the country I lived in for nineteen years, and this is mainly due to the fact that my mother never embraced the Mexican culture. Also, my grandmother insisted that my brother and I attend a Spanish school that was founded by coffee-smelling, funny-speaking exiles like her.

As I said, I speak Spanish because that was the only way of communicating with other people when I lived in Mexico. To be honest, I don't regret it because that way I could grow up as a native speaker of a beautiful, subtle and complex language where every sentence is delicate and elusive and the words resonate with every syllable that is said out loud. The order of the words, the absence of pronouns in a sentence and the infamous subjunctive tense make it rich and multifaceted. Also, as the alert reader may have noticed, I tend to use the Metric System a lot more than the Imperial System (it makes more sense!), and I present some trends of Hispanic culture (like believing that a cup of coffee can solve every single problem in the world).

However, when I have time and I meet someone new, I never say I'm Mexican: I just give a fifteen-page long explanation of why I was born in Mexico but I feel more identified as an American that grew up abroad. This is due to the fact that the United States is based on multiculturalism and that's pretty much what I am. Being in a different country for most of my life gave me the advantage of viewing things with a different perspective and at the same time preserving my mixed identity. I have family from Cuba, Chile, Italy, U.S., Spain, Mexico, and several other places; sometimes they don't even speak a common language. Their manners, their ideas, their way of drinking coffee: everything's different. At the same time, we are all family. We all drink coffee. It doesn't really matter where you were born, where you are from, or what are you supposed to look like, as long as you are confident in who you are.

Quick question! Where does coffee come from? More importantly, where did it come from in the first place?

Now ask yourself: do you think about that every single time you drink a cup of coffee? Does it actually matter?

Exactly: It is still coffee. You drink it to keep yourself awake, to look cool or basically because you love the smell of the roasted grains in a rainy and cold day. You don't drink it because it might or might not have been discovered in Ethiopia around the ninth century.

This is why I have always felt that you cannot limit yourself to what you are to a small checkbox: how could you constrain all the things that you represent or have lived and learned in your life to a single word or stereotype?

VI. Epilogue.

It's been exactly two weeks and three days since I missed my flight and ended up being stranded in an airport for six hours with a pen, my thoughts and an apparently unlimited supply of napkins. It was quite an eventful night, since my roommate still can't forgive me for waking him up repeatedly during the night –and morning– of that day. Nevertheless, the idea of relating coffee and how it unites my family didn't come from the tiny and chirpy barista of Dunkin Donuts, but from a discussion that I had with one of my best friends two days ago.

She and I have known each other for a very long time, and I can't remember a single day we ever talked without trying to kill each other in the process. We are very close, but our tempers are too similar and we never pass any opportunity of having an argument. The day I'm talking about we were having a routine disagreement on something. While the main topic of the dispute is irrelevant, there is a specific piece of conversation that inspired me to work on this essay: "Why do we fight so much?" she had asked me in what she would later call "a brief moment of clarity

and reason” (or as I often refer to it, “a moment to regain our breath after yelling at each other for ten minutes straight”).

I had no idea. “I don’t know,” I said, and automatically added: “do you want to discuss this over a cup of coffee?”

“Of course. Let’s make it a civilized experience for once!” she said, smiling and happy about my unusually mature response.

I remained silent for a moment. “On a second thought,” I said, “how about a cup of tea? It’s more open and without all the problems of coffee.”

She stopped smiling and just gave me that look that she always gives me when she thinks that my English fails.