

Confessions of a Monolingual Americano **by Carlos Sanchez**

This is National Hispanic Heritage Week, so maybe it's time I came out of the closet. Despite my hispanic name and heritage, I can't speak Spanish.

I'm the product of assimilation. Born American, taught American, I grew up denying I was anything but American.

So I once resented reminders of my ethnic past, reminders I wasn't as white as some of my friends. My thoughts, my attitudes were the direct result of a decision my parents made long before I was conceived: to teach me basic American values – and to teach them in English.

My mother has a favorite story that illustrates how completely assimilated I was: As a first grader, I got into a fight with a little boy on the way home from school. When my mother found out and demanded to know why, I answered angrily: "Because he called me a Mexican!" I still remember the sting when she laughed and told me that I was.

I grew up in a solidly middle class neighborhood in East El Paso, Texas. Along with neighbors named Archuleta and Lopez, there lived the Bardens and Robertsons. We played hide and seek, went to John Wayne movies and, whenever we could sneak a towel out of the house, flew like Superman. We hated the Cisco kid.

I grew up happy. I grew up content. I grew up white.

But as I began attending school, my ethnic innocence was slowly chipped away. I remember the disappointment when, during my first Spanish lesson I discovered my name was already Spanish and didn't need to be translated.

I remember my daily humiliation when I found burritos instead of sandwiches in my lunch box. I remember the pain when my best friend Ernie announced one day that he didn't like me anymore because I was Mexican.

From the story of the Alamo, where the villainous Mexicans killed those brave Texans, to the Clint Eastwood westerns, where a filthy Mexican lit a match by striking it against his rotting teeth, I learned to be ashamed of my culture.

And nowhere was that shame more apparent than with my grandmother.

Mama, we'd call her, Juana Galavia de Escobar. Now ninety-five years old. Born an American citizen in 1893 in the Arizona territory. Moved to Mexico as a young bride of fifteen. Widowed three years later. Entered nursing. Got swept up in the Mexican Revolution. Married again. Returned to the United States.

Despite her citizenship, everything about this lady echoed of Mexico. From the food she ate to the saints she worshipped to the language she spoke, Mama was a constant reminder of a culture that I wanted no part of. We'd visit her weekly against my will.

She lived in a musty smelling adobe house in a rough, lower-class neighborhood that, save for the black family next door, was exclusively Mexican.

Often, the only value these visits held for me was Mama's back yard, a big, wonderful, dirt yard where entertainment possibilities were endless.

But to get to that back yard, I had to go through the kitchen, past Mama. I could never get by without her laughing at me. She'd stop me, then barrage me with incomprehensible questions or orders.

My bewilderment only seemed to make her laugh more. “Don’t you understand her?” my mother would ask, and, of course I couldn’t. I couldn’t speak Spanish.

It’s taken me at least twenty years to understand why she was so amused. And I was only able to understand when I saw the situation from her perspective. Here was this little Mexican kid who thought he was white.

By the time I attended high school there was no denying my culture. But I still related to whites better than other Hispanics. I was a coconut, brown on the outside, white on the inside.

They were years of discovery, especially in a border town where all the vice money could buy – even for wide-eyed fifteen year olds – was just a car’s drive away in the red light district of the Mexican city of Juarez.

Even the negative images about my culture fed my psyche. Within the confines of the strip joints, sleaze bars and brothels that we visited regularly, every Mexican woman was a potential whore and every Mexican man was a potential thief.

It was with those experiences, inbred over eighteen years, that I left El Paso for college – and discovered what it really meant to be Mexican.

It began with the realization that the people I gravitated towards, the environment that I felt the most comfortable with, the lifestyles that were most familiar, were white.

I realized, too, that relating to these whites was easy for me, not so for them. Not only was I Mexican, but I was one of a handful of Mexicans in my classes. Not only was I different, but I was the object of the very scorn that I had reserved for other Mexicans throughout my youth.

So I began to fight back. It began with a story I wrote for the college newspaper, detailing my experiences as I went through a fraternity rush in an attempt to join the rich, elitist organizations that were so often polarized from the rest of the campus.

The indignities I suffered, highlighted by being completely doused by buckets of beer as I stood in front of a group of laughing fraternity members, were etched into my psyche as permanent scars.

In the face of incidents such as these, it was self-defeating to be ashamed of my culture. To take shame in my background was to perpetuate the viciousness of these people’s attitudes.

To this day, I often feel like a lesser Hispanic, because I don’t speak Spanish fluently. The irony of that fact would make Mama laugh heartily, because the very assimilation that helped me succeed in my life is also working to undermine me.

The pressure to retain the language of my culture is now as powerful as the pressure to conform to the American culture. My parent’s generation needed night school to learn English. I need it to learn Spanish.

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