

Finding a Voice

By Linda Irene Jiménez

My father's parents crossed the Mexico/U.S.A. border in 1920 when my grandmother was pregnant because they wanted a better life for their children. When I was a kid, I often heard the word wetbacks used when whites addressed Mexicans or Mexican Americans, but I didn't know that many Mexican people swam across the Rio Grande to get to the United States and the term came from this. As a child I had always assumed that my abuelito and abuelita had lived in Texas all their lives. When I got older and understood what the term really meant, it hurt when people called me that. You see, it seemed unfair that people had risked their lives for a better life in this country and in return were put down for it.

My maternal grandparents, on the other hand, were born in Texas. Though American, they still didn't have the opportunity to attend school. Grandma Clara, my maternal grandmother, more than anything wanted to learn to read and write in English. Before her death in 1973, she was able to sign her name instead of just writing an X. She also learned, with her grandchildren's help, to speak basic English and write simple three-letter words. She was as proud of those accomplishments as she was of seeing some of her grandchildren graduate from high school and attend college.

I consider myself a feminist, and I think my paternal grandmother, buelita Trinidad, would have been one also. She was not the typical female of her time. As a matter of fact, she was ahead of her time. She did things that other Mexican women didn't do. She watched out for herself and believed it was important not to allow a male to mistreat you. And she was a character. When I think of developing my voice, I think of a story about her. Now it's funny, but at the time it was embarrassing.

You see, my buelita wore dentures and she was always careless about where she put them, unlike Grandma Clara who placed hers carefully in a glass of water whenever she was not wearing them. One day when buelita couldn't find them, she called the Spanish radio station and asked them to announce that if anyone found her dentures could they please be returned to her! When my sisters, cousins, and my aunt heard the broadcast, we just about died. "Ay, buelita, why did you do that?" Her response was, "Hey, I need my teeth." I don't

believe anyone else of that time, especially a female, would have done that!

My abuelita was also a church-going person; she attended mass daily, yet she also cursed and smoked. As a kid I thought that was really neat. I especially liked the way she held her cigarette between her thumb and index finger while she took long drags.

I have so many memories and stories about my grandmothers and paternal grandfather. (I didn't see my maternal grandfather very often.) I don't think I appreciated them as much as I do now that I have embarked on reclaiming my culture. Now I see my grandparents as role models.

Some of the memories are painful. I know I was influenced by dominant culture messages about looksism, and consequently at times wasn't fair to my buelita. She was short, stocky, and dark-skinned. Grandma Clara was taller and slimmer, with lighter skin. Buelita wore her hair in long braids, while Grandma Clara's hair was shorter and more stylish. Buelita always wore an apron; Grandma Clara took much pride in making her clothes and would wear hats and gloves to church on Sundays. Buelita was not a tidy housekeeper, while Grandma was immaculately clean. To this day, the smell of White Shoulders cologne - Grandma Clara's favorite - makes me think of her and visualize her perfectly organized dresser drawers. When it came to gift giving, I was unfair to my buelita. I usually gave the "prettier" gift to Grandma Clara because I thought she was prettier. But now, looking back, I can see that although they were different in many ways, both my grandmothers struggled in society.

Buelita and buelito owned a mom-and-pop store across the street from the Catholic church in our barrio, thus they were well known in our community. Buelito worked for the Santa Fe Railroad, so buelita ran the store while he was at work. Although her English was limited, she would not shy away from trying her best to communicate when accepting deliveries or ordering goods. And the deliverymen just adored her. I admired her for not being ashamed of her accent when she tried to speak English, especially since white people often mocked this. But my buelita felt she was not pretty because her skin was dark. I remember her telling me that I was pretty because I had light skin.

Grandma Clara was orphaned as an infant and raised by relatives. Her recollections of childhood were of growing up poor. Her philosophy

was, "It doesn't matter how poor you are, there's no excuse for being dirty." So as a young girl she learned how to sew her clothes from flour sacks. She felt that having the ability to sew, along with the fact that soap was not expensive, made it possible to always look presentable. I also remember her looking at books and magazines every day, and we would hear her say, "If I could read, I think I would read all the time." So even though she couldn't read the instructions, she was forever ordering crochet and quilting books. When they came she would look at the pictures and count the loops to crochet or make her own patterns for quilting and use remnants from the dresses she made.

I really miss my grandmothers. I think of them often, especially in my current living situation. I purchased a home with one of my sisters and it's ironic, we are like the odd couple - Oscar and Felix or buelita and Grandma. I am like buelita Trini and my sister is like Grandma Clara. They are an important part of my story.

I was born in west Texas and our family lived in the barrio. My parents were working class. My father worked for a meatpacking company and my mother worked at a dry cleaners. I liked it when she didn't have to work because we always came home to a warm house full of nice aromas from whatever she was cooking.

Our neighborhood was predominately Mexican and Mexican American. We attended school in the barrio from first to third grade. After that we went to an integrated school - Mexicans and whites. For me the transition occurred during the 1960-1961 school year. Before attending this new school, I had heard stories about kids being made fun of for taking tortillas for lunch, so it was either white bread sandwiches or purchasing food at the cafeteria for me. (Actually, there were also stories about a teacher who would trade his sandwiches for tortillas. That guy must have known what good food was all about!) It was a struggle because we wanted to fit in and not be made fun of because of our differences.

I had learned that we were different at a very young age. I remember a time in the mid-fifties when my parents, my sisters, and I went to Sears. My sisters and I were thirsty so we looked for a drinking fountain. We found two-side by side. On one was a sign that read "Whites Only," the other one read "Colored Only." Why wasn't there a drinking fountain for us? Which should we drink from? We knew that we were not "white" because our kind was not allowed admittance at certain parks or restaurants. And we knew "colored" was a reference

to blacks. What would happen if we drank from the "Colored Only" one? At that age, we wondered if our skin would turn black or if our lips would get bigger. My sister Becky was like the Mikey of the cereal commercials - she volunteered. As she drank she turned toward us and we watched for a transformation. "Is anything happening to me?" she asked. To our amazement there was no change! We never questioned what would happen if we drank from the "Whites Only" fountain.

My parents experienced prejudice frequently and really did not want to expose us to it. I remember overhearing conversations between them about the discrimination they and other people around us experienced. For example, my mother's father was a light-skinned Latino who was born in Texas and spoke English well. He had two brothers whose skin was darker than his. He was consistently treated differently than they were in public. Once, the three of them went into a barbershop and the barber refused to cut the two brothers' hair, but because he thought my grandfather was white, he was willing to cut his hair. Whenever my grandfather went to the movie theater alone or with white friends, he was allowed to sit downstairs, but when he went with his brothers or other dark-skinned friends, he was required to sit in the balcony. Simply speaking Spanish in a public place would often result in a person's being asked to leave. Once, my grandfather and his brothers went to eat in a restaurant. They were speaking English, and then after they had ordered, they started conversing in Spanish. They were asked to leave. Incidents like these occurred regularly to people in our family or other people we knew - they were just a fact of life.

My parents tried their best to explain things like the "Whites Only" fountain, and also to shelter us from the racism around us. They told us that even though we were Mexican American, we were lumped in with Caucasians and were considered white. It was difficult to understand this because of the blatant prejudice and discrimination that we faced in our daily lives.

The summer prior to my sixth-grade year, a new Catholic school was built in the affluent area of town. At mass, our priest announced that if kids from the barrio were interested in attending, they would provide a bus for transportation. My youngest sister and I decided we wanted to go, along with about fifteen other kids.

Almost immediately I knew I didn't like it and didn't want to continue. I could see and feel the prejudice. I had attended catechism classes

weekly from the time I was in first grade and the nuns, for the most part, were good to us. They taught us that Jesus loved all the children in the world-white, black, brown, red, and yellow. At this school, however, the nuns weren't very nice to the kids of color, especially Mother Superior (who was the principal and teacher of my combination sixth- and seventh-grade class). Many of the white kids were from wealthy families, and many from the local air force base were transported in a much nicer bus. Our very old yellow school bus broke down almost daily. We were ridiculed again and again. At that school there was a Mexican family with five children-three girls and two boys. The girls wore their hair in the long traditional braids with ribbons woven into them. Sometime they also wore the pretty Mexican blouses the ruffle along the neckline and shoulders. Their mother, a tall, large woman who also wore her hair in long braids, walked with great pride as she delivered a platter of warm burritos each day for her children's lunch. I would cringe with embarrassment for them because other kids made fun. But they weren't ashamed at all,

The youngest boy in that family, Armando, was in kindergarten. He was just learning English. Mother Superior would take turns bringing him and another kindergartner, Kevin, to our room to visit. Kevin was the son of an Air Force major, very articulate for his age - and, of course, English was his first language. She would sit each boy in front of the class and ask him questions. When Kevin was there everyone oohed and aahed over his answers. He was just so cute and smart! But Armando, who didn't even understand many of the questions, would respond in his broken English with a Spanish accent and the class would laugh. I remember feeling so much hurt and humiliation for him. I think this was the beginning of a lot of anger brewing inside of me. I can honestly say that at that period of my life I hated the church and the nuns.

So I told my parents that I no longer wanted to attend that school. I remember not being able to tell them exactly what was going on. Culturally, I suppose, I felt I could not question what the church did. My mother felt that I shouldn't be a quitter, and since I was the one who had decided to go there in the first place, she felt strongly that I had to finish the year. It was very difficult and painful. Ironically, up until that time I had entertained the idea of becoming a nun. The following year I attended a public junior high school in a white neighborhood, which was also integrated. This was my first experience in having a different teacher for every subject. During the ten-minute period in which we changed classrooms, the teachers stood outside their doorways. If they heard anyone speaking Spanish, they

would make that person stay after school and write "I will not speak Spanish at school" on the chalkboard one hundred times. The message was dear to me - being Mexican and speaking Spanish was not okay. I wanted so much to fit in, as I'm sure many others did too.

Later that year we moved to California. That was very hard for me. I didn't want to leave my neighborhood and family. But my mother wanted more opportunities for her daughters and felt that anew life in California could give us that. I remember crying for one whole year that I wanted to go back to Texas. It was such a harsh adjustment to make. In my new school, the enrollment again consisted of whites and Latinos. And there, like in Texas, I was on a roller coaster ride-at times hating being Mexican and wanting to be white, and at other times wanting to be proud of who I was and hating whites for what they had done to me. I had a good friend who was born in Mexico. She and her family raved about their country and heritage. It made me wish that Mexico was my birth country as well.

Throughout high school I was very unhappy and was always complaining of chest pains. In my senior year, my parents insisted that I see a doctor, and she referred me to a therapist. In 1969, seeing a therapist was not the "in" thing to do. I felt that I was viewed as being crazy, but I think that woman saved my life. We worked on several issues, but I always had a nagging feeling that there was something in me trying to emerge. It would also come up in my dreams, but I couldn't pin it down.

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