

El espectro de empatía

Her left foot tips slightly inward, giving her a shy posture that belies her confident stare. A long overcoat with puffy shoulders gracefully encircles her body. The background of concrete and foliage gives no context. I want to believe this image was taken shortly after my grandmother immigrated from Mexico to Los Angeles. I post it on Instagram with the false hope that recirculating it will make my history seem more real and signal to my followers that I am thinking through my connection to this woman.

I try to consider history-making through Instagram stories too. I take video of my family and write “this is my tía!” or “¡feliz cumpleaños!” during family gatherings. I want to see how this language and identification system sits with me even though I never referred to my aunt as ‘tía’ while growing up nor has my family ever offered any form of congratulations in Spanish. As I try to close generation gaps with these introspective methods, I wonder how many times I must go through these motions until I feel I can own my heritage.

A lens is offered through technology, literally and figuratively, to use the language of my ancestors and process who and what I am. In such contexts I am using technology to perform identity and produce reality. And I am using technology to integrate. I use it to extend certain bodily senses and orientations, not to establish a new and whole

identity. Yet I also feel like I may only be performing empathy when I annotate my videos with Spanish, a language taught to me in school rather than at home. When I post an image of my grandmother I feel disconnected from her experience of immigration because too many times strangers have told me, “You don’t look Mexican.”

Empathy implies I feel and care for an issue, but am not necessarily a part of it. This particular definition of empathy came to the fore during the March 19 LRLX salon when Bonnie ‘Bo’ Ruberg presented their writing and activism that analyzes how video games feel tangible, relatable, and inclusive in terms of gender and sexuality. During the question and answer session of their talk, one member of the audience glowingly gushed about her experience playing video games with her male partner and how they often switched genders when they chose characters. This role-playing choice stayed within the game, and was never meant to manifest in her relationship or as part of her gender identity. Ruberg’s response was key to understanding the implications of such celebration for experiencing gender this way: if we are allowing ourselves to simply step in and out of an identity, we should ask ourselves if this is a valid means to realize ourselves and others. Navigating personal experiences through the body or mind of another’s experience does not promise truly knowing the everyday conditions of a race or gender, and instead manifests as tourism. It is a momentary and gratifying experience, yet remains as distinctly ‘other’ and ‘foreign.’

I struggle to claim my heritage through technology due to the whiteness of my skin and my faulty faculty of the language, as though I too am 'trying on' an identity. As Ruberg questioned, "is [technology] giving me access to what I may not have access to?" I concede that much of what Ruberg mentioned in their talk was about seeing queerness in technology, and I am talking more acutely about race. Yet, identity is explored in such cases via technology to show how it can also be a means of othering. In my case, the core of my dilemma—of using technology to perform identity versus empathy—is known as racial imposter syndrome. It is the feeling that although one may be born into a certain race, they may not feel a part of it due to an inability to speak a native language, they do not possess specific bodily traits, or because of repeated remarks telling them they do not belong.

My grandmother wanted her children to 'Americanize' and elected not to teach them Spanish. The only knowledge that she seemed to want to pass on is the type of food she would make for us grandchildren. When I tried to make handmade tortillas with her I could never seem to shape the masa the right way while rounding it out in my hands. My grandmother would inevitably take the masa from me (gently of course), shape it herself, and throw it on the stove. I never knew what I did wrong because she was a woman of few words. She suffered from schizophrenia and saved all her words and thoughts for the Jesus she claimed was living in her head. I never got to hear about what it was like to leave Mexico at seventeen years old and live in Los Angeles. I never got to hear about what it was like to live in the U.S. with an expired green card for the

rest of her life. I never got to hear about where she grew up in the mountains near Jimenez. I never got to hear about my white grandfather who separated her from her family.

Familial knowledge was not passed down to my mother and has consequently left us both sifting through the sort of meaning and attachment one craves when they search for biological background. The loss of heritage-related information due to illness and assimilation leaves me wondering where I lie on the empathy spectrum. What does it mean when I implement technology to use a language that was not passed down out of an interest for offspring to live happily in the United States? I use technology to try to repair my connection to a lost heritage, but I cannot inherit traditions, memories, or a fluent use of language because these generally accepted insignias of heritage are simply not there for me to access. These aspects feel like they are not for me to claim via technology due to the lack of continuity. I am left with empathy rather than with a sense of self.

What would it look like if we could embrace living partially, lacking totality, permanent ambiguousness within personal and collective selves? To make sense of my identity I am considering a hyphenated reality: one where I add my grandmother's maiden name, Gonzalez, to my current name, literally hyphenating it. Attempting to perform my identity through technology has never brought me to a place of true ownership. Yet I can invite her name to live on in mine as a symbol for the mixed body I live in, and as a

way to negate the patriarchal naming systems we abide by. This is a task that is already unconsciously carried out within my mixed body.

In my soul-searching to alter my name I must also learn to talk about the webs of power that situate me in the turmoil that I feel. As I come from a place of sincerity, I also come from a place of privilege that has historically depended upon unequal cohabitation among people. I hesitate to make an official name change because I question what it means for me—someone who has benefited from white skin and a Germanic last name—to take on a last name like Gonzalez. I think about how Mexicans who have a stronger sense of identity might react to my decision and how I will deserve their criticism, possibly hatred. My line of reasoning here is a way of entering further into the self-deprecation that comes with racial imposter syndrome. In truth, I know that feeling anguish and skittishness cannot be the only way to accept myself. There must be a more productive way to feel. At the end of the LRLX salon, all three speakers—Ruberg, along with sair goetz and Eliza Barrios—came to the conclusion that joyfulness is itself an act of resistance to normative political and social structures. Joy is a reaction that is unexpected. I too can be joyful in my investigation of identity because I know that I am not alone in grappling with where I belong on the Latinx spectrum. I have a perpetual fear of offending because as a society we have not quite caught up with the diversities that currently exist, or developed the supportive language to talk about them. Because of this lack, a falsehood is established of gatekeepers who decide what is ‘enough.’ My voice, full of as much joy as I can muster

here, is a call for conversation to recognize the nuances of privilege and to invite new pairings, new alliances amongst those who feel like they must silently claim parts of themselves. It is a bold call, maybe still entertaining a shy reveal on par with the posture of my grandmother, but bold and joyful just the same.