

As a young girl growing up in Bogotá, Colombia, from a US-born mother and often-absent Colombian father, I learned to speak English before I learned to speak Spanish. When my Harvard-educated mother put me in kindergarten at age three, claiming I was intellectually able, it was in "The English School." My best friends at that school came from many corners of the globe. My first best friend was from Denmark; after that I made friends with a Canadian girl: Tracy Tatersall. I loved her long blonde hair. In fifth grade, my best friend was Johanna Acevedo. I think she was half-British. Because all the classes at school were in English (where it was spoken with a British accent), and my mother was American, I grew up speaking Spanish with an accent. I think the fact that there is no language that I speak without an accent is an interesting reflection of heritage and how it defies categorization.

At age 10, my father decided that the tuition for the English School was exorbitant. He promptly removed us from the school and signed us up for a Colombian school, run by American nuns. The first day at school, I was cornered in the classroom by about 20 little girls who had been told I was a foreigner. My debilitating shyness, compounded by the fact that I was two years younger than all the other girls in the class, made this an excruciating experience that I shudder to recall even today. The most prominent question that I was asked was where I was from. Since I could not muster the courage to reply, some girls started shouting the question in English: where were you born. Well... I was offended. Born and bred in Colombia, I answered defiantly that I had been born in the military hospital in Bogotá.

For the next six years I was immersed in a culture that was completely different from what I had experienced in my early childhood. As a teenager, I loved to walk the streets of Bogota, ride all the buses, and I considered myself solidly Colombian. At age 16, I toured the country as a member of the Colombian Youth Symphony Orchestra. Emphatically supporting my classmates at the Universidad Nacional, in Bogotá, I participated in anti-U.S. imperialism protests. My identity felt fixed. I had overcome being a foreigner in my own country. However, I became aware at the time, that with only a couple good symphony orchestras in the country, my chances for success in the field that I was passionate about (oboe performance) were slim, and my career trajectory was narrow and constrained. I started to dream about studying outside the country. I loved music above everything, and I was determined to succeed. My parents were against me leaving, and studying music above mathematics, which seemed to be my main talent, but they didn't oppose me when I gathered all the necessary paperwork, signed up to take the SAT's and the TOEFL exam, and filled out my applications. That summer, I travelled to the US and auditioned at many schools.

At age 17, I left my family and my country. I moved to New Jersey with my sister, who was going to graduate school, and near to my mother's family, who I was very close to since I was usually given the opportunity to spend my summers with them, while my mother travelled every year to a different country as the leader of the Colombian Mathematics Olympiad team. My first day at Rutgers University, I was scheduled to go to a meeting called "Color me Beautiful." When I finally found the room, in one of the very old buildings on Douglas campus, I was blocked from entering at the door. I was repeatedly informed that I was in the wrong place. I explained that the meeting was on my schedule and I was finally allowed in.

In that meeting, the first event I attended upon moving to live in the U.S., I was informed that I was in fact part of a minority, only now I was a different kind of minority. I was no longer the new "gringa" entering a Colombian school, as I had been in Colombia. I was now a person of color. I found out then

and there, that the U.S. was in fact a very racist society and that, as an ethnic minority (by that time it had been established that that was, in fact, what I was), I more than likely would be subject to discrimination. Until that day, I had never really given any thought to my ethnicity. I had always been given to understand, by my parents, that neither gender nor ethnicity made any difference to a person's potential. Since one of the reasons that I was so excited about living in the U.S. was being close to the Irish grandmother that I adored, I was quite confused.

Making friends was very hard for me while I was in college. The four years were lonely years. In the two years that I spent at the conservatory in Bogota, before I travelled to the U.S., I was always surrounded by people. After class my classmates and I would always go for a drink of coffee and everybody was implicitly and explicitly invited to come along. In the U.S., after a few months of mustering up the courage, I finally asked one of my classmates if he would like to come over to my house after class for a cup of coffee. He looked at me icily and answered: "I don't think so," after which he informed me that he had a girlfriend. I never really understood the faux pas until years had passed. It was years before I made any effort again to break through the loneliness that I found surrounding me the first few years in this country.

In my final year of college, I was befriended by a young Chinese violist. I was grateful for his friendship, and before long we were in a relationship. Largely due to pressure from him and my parents, I ended up married to a man I liked, but did not love, at the young age of 24. Although my parents and immediate family never said a thing, my extended family in Colombia made a concerted effort to try to dissuade me from marrying a person "from such a different culture." To this day, I remember some of my Colombian grandmother's choice remarks. I think those racist comments and behaviors made me more determined to go through with the marriage, and actually overcame the waves of doubt that engulfed me most of the time.

Not surprisingly, a marriage built on such a weak foundation was not able to surmount the instability of one spouse trying to write a Ph.D. dissertation, while the other made ends meet by freelancing while preparing endlessly for auditions he never actually took. A few moments during that time period are memorable. At the beginning of my Ph.D. program, I was again temporarily barred from entering the opening gathering for the recipients of the minority fellowship I had been awarded. I also remember, being in China, and getting into a taxi with my former husband. The taxi driver started to talk to my husband. At the time, I understood a little mandarin, since I had studied it briefly. The taxi driver was tickled to death and boisterously congratulating my husband on having married an American woman, making reference to the fact that Americans had sure had stolen enough of their women.

From 1995 to 2001, in an attempt to remedy the limited opportunities for people interested in concert music, which I had encountered in my youth, I organized an International Music Festival in Colombia. This festival, which started very small but eventually included participants from five different Latin American countries, provided opportunities such as those that I had for many people who would otherwise have never encountered them. The festival was shut down when my father's life project, a university designed to make education accessible to those who were less privileged, which then had 30 campuses including many remote regions of the country and 30000 students, was shut down through an act of political retaliation directed at my father. By chance, I had been seated next to my father shortly before then and heard the then president of Colombia tell him on the phone, that, unless he stopped voicing his dissent to the government, his university would be shut down. That is in fact what happened,

and six months later, with only a fraction of resources and students still remaining, he was forced to rebuild what had taken him 20 years to construct. And he did.

So in my early 30s, and alone, I refocused on my dissertation and embarked on the career path of a music theorist in the U.S. Working with a fantastic mentor, Joe Straus, I was still blissfully unaware of any barriers that could exist from either my ethnicity, or gender. I believed at the time that everything was possible, as my mother had taught me, and all I needed to do was to believe in myself.

Believing in my self was hard enough. My painful shyness was very difficult to overcome. At the time my voice always shook when I tried to address a roomful of people. My shyness froze me in place during my oral exams. I still remember sitting in that room, completely surrounded by men. I still recall mechanically answering “I don’t know” to every single question I was asked. By the time I got out of the room, on the elevator, and then down and out to 5<sup>th</sup> Ave. I had thought of answers to every single question. I thought surely I couldn’t continue on this path. Then I spoke to my advisor, who told me that even if I didn’t have confidence in myself, that they had confidence in me. I have always considered this moment to be the turning point in my career. It is when I learned that I had to overcome my shyness, if I wished to do what I had embarked upon. I loved music theory because of its enticing blend of intellectual, scientific and artistic thinking, which I had always felt perfectly matched my interests, but I found out then, that if I wanted to be a music theorist, as defined in the field, I would have to learn how to speak to others—many others—and to speak up for myself.

I have been very lucky to have had success in my career since that time, but there have been many obstacles. Early in my career (while still a student) I was “hit on” by the president of one of the regional societies where I went to present my paper. One time, sitting at the banquet of another regional society conference, and after revealing that I had had seven job interviews in the past few months, I was informed, by a graduate student who was then at an Ivy league school, that surely I knew this was only because I was a woman. Since I was holding a glass of water in my hand, I felt an almost irrepressible urge to throw the water in his face. Luckily, I had the presence mind instead to merely inform him that that is what I felt like doing. I also told him, in no uncertain terms, that I believed it could be explained by the quality of my work, which had had considerable success in the conference venues in the two preceding years. Learning to speak for myself, in fact, has only become more and more necessary as time has gone on.

Then there was the time when my knowledge of English and Spanish, because of those tricky things known as false cognates, failed me in ways that seemed catastrophic at the time, but that I have derived much merriment from over the years. I was invited to an interview for a teaching fellowship at a New York college. I had virtually no teaching experience at the time, so I vowed not to miss the interview. I purchased a ticket from Colombia (where I was vacationing at the time) to Maine, so I could pick up my dogs, drive to New Jersey and go to the interview. Many obstacles came into play. I got food poisoning on the airplane and became extremely sick. However, I still managed to arrive in New York city at my appointed time, only to be routed by MapQuest to the wrong address with the result of having to reschedule my interview time. I arrived at the interview shame faced and tried to clarify that I had never been late to any professional opportunity in my life. I then explained that I had gotten “severely intoxicated” on the airplane on my flight from Bogota and had ended up in the emergency room at the hospital. These words were met with perplexed gazes. I found out why a few hours later, when I told my

uncle how the interview had gone and repeated my words. I was then informed that in English, the words “severely intoxicated” do not describe food poisoning, as they do in Colombia....

The last fifteen years in my career have been an awakening of sorts. I have had the incredible opportunity to research and write on topics that I found fascinating, and I love interacting with and mentoring graduate students. This, is, in fact, one of the favorite aspects of my profession, and I have always tried to be, above all, an advocate for my students; but there have been challenges. The road towards publication, tenure, and full professorship was most definitely not smooth.

I don't think I could possibly remember or detail all the challenges, nor would I strain your attention by trying to do so, but there have been many. After turning down an offer to go out with a married senior member of one regional society, an offered opportunity to serve on a program committee was somehow forgotten. When I found myself filling in for my colleague as the coordinator of our guest speaker series, I twice found myself having to firmly curb advances by guest speakers who misinterpreted my assigned duty of picking them up at the airport and making sure they had dinner before they were dropped off the hotel, as an expression of interest.

I also remember, years ago, being confounded by all the questionnaires I encountered in this country asking me to choose whether I was “white” “black” “Asian” or “Hispanic.” Later on, when it was generally recognized by the now enlightened questionnaires that being Hispanic was a measure of ethnicity, and not race, I remember a faculty senate meeting when I tried to explain that I found the very appellation “people of color” to be culturally biased. Most members of my Colombian family would have been appalled by any suggestion that we were anything other than “white.” Yet, I do not think I could correctly describe my father as “white” by any stretch of the imagination. In him you could clearly see echoes of that Senegalese ancestor that appears in my DNA genealogy. I object to categorization that imposes identity based on appearances. How does it make sense, for instance, that because of superficial features that are more predominant in one sibling than another my sister may not have encountered resistance to entering the minority group meetings that I was initially barred from? Wouldn't it be better to try to obliterate these arbitrary and misleading categories built on characteristics that are literally skin deep?

Then, of course, there is another story that I have certainly derived much entertainment from in retrospect. When taken to have Japanese food by a student group during a job interview at a different Ivy league school, I was asked how many sushi rolls I wanted with my meal. I loved sushi, but my student income had prevented me, at any time in my life prior to his, from ever going to a Japanese restaurant and ordering sushi for myself. Well, I ordered eight sushi rolls, thinking I would get eight pieces of sushi roll. When the tray arrived, I was flabbergasted than nobody had explained my error. I was clearly not going to hit that mark...

Less entertaining is the memory of the time when, after having published my first article on Boulez, in the Journal of Mathematics and Music, I was invited out to lunch by a European colleague to discuss my work. As I sat at the table he placed my manuscript in front of him. On the front page, in large font the following words were written: “This is irrelevant on the most basic level.”

Becoming a mother put me face-to-face with gender issues that nothing in my previous life prepared me for. Married to a tremendously loving man who finds it impossible to multitask, I have learned to multitask for four people, and the challenges of keeping a career going with of all these additional

responsibilities on my plate have made me a stranger to rest and sleep. But I have persevered because I love the intellectual challenges of my work, and my children are the most wonderful thing in my life.

So, after being in the field for some time, I have found out that the field of music theory is not really about writing those interesting findings that I so enjoyed working on. The field of music of theory has been more about learning how to defend my work. Although this is the case for everybody in the field, gender and ethnic issues magnify and compound the problem. My mixed cultural heritage has led me to have an equal interest in European approaches to music study as well as American methods, which, by the way, has led me to very grateful for my exposure to various languages. It is for this reason perhaps, that I have spent much of my research career these last fifteen years studying Boulez's sketches in Basel. My work has fallen in what was, at one time, a gray area in the field of music theory: sketch studies. Is it musicology, is it theory, is it merely description, does it have "value"? And above all, why do I not apply the methodology developed by a fellow Boulez scholar (work published concurrently with my own award-winning article), who clearly understands the set theoretical underpinnings of Boulez's music much better than I do (at least so claim the reviewers of one prominent journal).

The challenges have been numerous, but I am grateful that my work has achieved recognition. My invitations to lecture in China, a few years ago, Italy just two years ago, and Colombia and Mexico last year, have shown me that my work, which seeks to incorporate elements from various different approaches, and thrives in the cross-cultural connections within which it has developed, has value to explain music that is similarly multi-faceted.

The death of my father in 2018 was the final catalyst that raised my awareness of the tremendous challenges faced by people of different ethnicities and genders. It entangled me in a complex web of inexorable forces, tied to injustice and gender inequality, which I have had to fight with every fiber of strength in my body. And yet at the same time, my father's death took me back home. For the first time in my adult life, I reconnected with the culture from which I emerged. This put me back in touch with that aspect of myself, my ethnicity. I have spent the last few years thinking about how to study the music from my country, music that has always stirred my soul, although in profoundly different ways from the music I have studied, and I have sought to find ways to connect my intellectual work with this aspect of my culture.

I think what I want to convey with all this is how elusive is that, which we call a cultural identity. I have always worked in the space in between, and I have always felt that being able to live in this space is a strength, in that it frees my perspective to embrace that which I find most instructive and positive from the different cultures I have lived in and encountered.