

Barrera 1

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**Juntos**

by

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## **Introduction**

### **Why Have Exchange?**

I spent a semester in the Balkans completing my Peace & Conflict Studies minor where very often we would discuss subjects such as suffering, healing, community, and reconciliation. This was a semester that focused on the human soul and the effects war and violence has on us. For my final project I submitted a paper called *Listening and Exchange During Conflict* which explains the need for exchange and how this process fosters in healing. In the essay I cite Christian philosophers such as Paul Ricoeur, Simone Weil, and Emmanuel Levinas. To sum up what this paper says, when we encounter one another, we should listen with intent, take time to reflect, and engage with the other. Through communicating, we can begin to understand one another and ourselves. As someone who is an outward processor, I see how this can start the mourning process and eventually lead to healing.

In my final paper, I also have quotes from the often put aside, Sigmund Freud and his analysis of the mourning process. To make a long story short, Melancholy is a place of despair and destruction while Mourning is a place of sorrow but being able to move forward. The way we transition from melancholy into mourning has to do with identity and how what is lost relates to that identity. An example would be the loss of a parent. Moving forward, one must cope with this loss and understand this means losing part of their identity as someone's child. This being

said, I think through conversation and listening to both older and newer generations in Immigrant families can start to understand their own individual and collective identities, identify and validate trauma and mourn what has been lost. Whether this be loved ones, a sense of innocence, or connection to the motherland I believe we heal trauma and validate each other's experiences. In fact, since this interview, my participants have been seeing eye to eye more regarding their feminine and cultural identities.

### **Process**

When thinking about this project, I kept the things I learned in the Balkans in mind. I wanted to prepare something that would show an authentic conversation surrounding a major issue. So why not make a script for a play? This was actually my original idea. I was not experienced in script writing and thought I could make attempts on my own by looking at videos on the internet and talking to people at local performing arts centers for some review. Due to current world events (the COVID-19 Pandemic), lack of resources, changing mental gears, and stress levels, learning a new skill was at the bottom of my list. Writing and storytelling have been passions of mine, so I thought I would take this opportunity to develop these skills. I finally decided to write something of an op-ed/story piece based on this interview. I have changed the names of the people I interviewed and both of them had signed consent forms. After recording the interview and taking notes, I listened to it and began writing.

### **Immigration**

Immigration is an issue that hits close to home for me and it has been a popular issue within the media. In the past few years, there have been ICE raids in my hometown of San Jose, California and it has sparked more conversation. Immigration is a major life event for many and it plays into culture and family dynamics. Immigrants, especially older generations, have their stories and it is important to hear them. We can maybe even learn something. For example, perhaps there was a reason why it took so long for my grandfather to become a citizen, but I will never have the opportunity to ask him. I am sure his story was just as interesting.

### **Spanish Language:**

Moreover, on immigration and culture, I am aware that some of the Spanish in my story is not grammatically correct. This is a more relaxed sort of Spanish that many people use in the Bay Area. The Spanish my friend's family speaks is a cultural dialect we call Ranchero. Many of our ancestors did not have a proper education and had worked on ranches where a portion of slang and interesting word order were cultivated. Along with this, not many Mexican youth speak proper Spanish or use Spanglish slang that does not always get the verbs tense right. This is the effect of one having their feet in two separate cultures and adapting to both.

**Communications:**

After writing, I was able to pull back the layers of communication concepts and found that there are many things going on. One would be Muted Group Theory. Immigrants are a group that are routinely marginalized and othered. Many have kept quiet out of fear regarding their legal status and the safety of their families. Hopefully, this story will act as a medium for these people to be heard and that those who encounter this text will take time for reflection and thought. I am also aware of Confirmation Bias and Agenda Setting having a hand in the questions in the interview and what I write. In this project I do have an agenda and a bias. I want to focus on the struggles of coming to America and why we must have exchange between generations. This means my work is leaning in a certain direction, Social Exchange Theory, and Social Penetration Theory both come into play as well as other aspects of communication. Another theory to consider is Communication Accommodation Theory is seen in the way my friend Laura and her mother Chayo speak to one another. Chayo's first language is Spanish and Laura's first language is a mix of Spanish and English. While conducting the interview, I could observe Spanglish being used by them both. The mother and daughter had to adapt to each other's communication styles in order to be understood. This was very different from the conversations Laura and I normally have because in the interview there was a heavier emphasis on Spanish being used. I observed Laura switching to Spanish more and

this made me think of Code Switching. I could often see Laura taking a moment to string her words together if she wanted to say something in Spanish rather than Spanglish.

When preparing for the interview, I had to think about Cultural Norms and what that meant for hospitality in my interview. I had to think of making the conversation as comfortable as possible and what that meant for my existence in the space. Once I stepped into Chayo's front door to greet her, I had to switch cultural norms from an American way of being to a Mexican air. This meant looking *la doña* (the older and respectable woman) in the eye when speaking, greeting her with a hug and a kiss on the cheek, and accepting any food that is being offered to me. These were cultural hospitality norms I had often experienced when visiting older Mexican relatives and friends.

All of this being said, I hope this story will help younger and older generations of every background have exchange. I also hope this project will create conversations on immigration and immigrant struggles. Without further ado, I present my short story, *Juntos*.

*Juntos*

“*Quien es Chayo? Quien es Chayo Lopez? Qué es tú storía?* What is *tu* identity?”, Laura asked her mother sweetly. Laura is my best friend and we were both curious about her mother’s immigration story. Her mother’s name is Chayo and she is a hairdresser who immigrated here when she was younger. We planned a time to have coffee and talk about Chayo’s life journey. Chayo sat up and took a deep breath and said “*Tu Chayo...* Here, I changed my name. I am Chayo Sotomayor Rodrigues, but when I come here I am Chayo Villanueva”. Villanueva was her ex-husband’s last name and she was unable to change it back. For a while, she and her daughter discussed the significance of names in the Mexican culture. Someone’s middle name is usually their mother’s maiden name and their last name is their father’s last name. I was familiar with Mexican name order, this being the case for my own mother as well. If my parents followed tradition, I would have been Juan Lopez Barrera but instead I was given a middle name making me Juan Amadeo Barrera.

“Pero, In Mexico we usually use two last names and here, I don’t know”, Chayo shrugged.

“Well, the *nombre* has changed *para gentes, por que los que quieren solo un nombre*, but some people have *solo un* middle name, you know. I think it all depends on the *familia*”, Laura added.

This was an attempt to explain to her mother how younger Mexicans only use their father’s surname but it depends on the family. This part of the conversation went on for some time, but I do see how names are an important thing for identity and lineage.

“So, when you were like, *pequeña* what was your *idea de America cuando* you were in México? Did you watch *películas* or hear anything from *gentes*?” Laura asked. She was trying to ask what she thought of the United States when she was growing up as a little girl in Mexico. Did she watch anything in movies or hear adults talking? Chayo answered “I didn’t know too much because my father too many times came to Florida, and he spent two or three years and go back. He was *un Bracero* and had *documentados*”. A *bracero* is an agricultural laborer allowed in the United States for a limited time. For this group of people there were documents that allowed people to work and send money to their families. While Chayo’s father did this, the rest of her family remained in Mexico.

From here, the recording of our conversation starts to sound a bit muffled and I could not recall the rest of this conversation piece. The audio picks back up with Chayo explaining that her brother and sister had come to the U.S. and sent her a photo of their family. She said “And when I saw the pictures they send to us, it was just different. He said ‘oh let’s go to United States and you are going to make a lot of money’”. Laura cut in with, “*Que año?*”

“I’m talking about the ‘91”

“Oh wow... But like *que años* were you, like *doce años*?”

“Oh yeah, like seventeen, eighteen”.

Chayo was told to come to the United states by her siblings when she was 17 or 18 and when she did, she had to take care of her baby nephew while everyone was at work. She said “They lied to me because they say ‘oh, you’re going to work for a *gringa* and that she is going to pay you



*dolares*. And they lied to me and they bring me”. Laura and I had a shared look of concern for Chayo. She continued talking about her brother, “He never paid me a thing. He’d only buy me something like what I need. Clothes or food. They take advantage, they have pay”.

Chayo took care of her baby nephew for some time. Eventually she was able to talk to someone she knew and got a job at the flea market where she was paid 25 dollars a day. Even with this low pay, she still had to pay rent. “How did you come *aquí*? What was travel like?” I asked to clarify. Chayo responded “We came to *Tijuana*, and right there, we get a *coyote* and my family had to pay him”. Her brother arranged to pay the coyote the equivalent of six hundred U.S.

Dollars to bring her here. She mentioned that now, it would be a couple thousand to have a coyote bring you. Chayo described what the process was like. First, she and two of her siblings were driven into the desert and then dropped off. From there, they walked for two miles to meet someone else who put the three of them in the trunk of a car. She went on to tell us what it was like being in a trunk with two other people for three or four hours. She remembers how hot it was and ended up with a burn on her side from a heated piece of metal. Chayo said “I think I burn something right here. I don’t know what’s it called”, and she gestured toward her lower back.

Laura and I empathized with her for some time. I have been burned by a hot tray of cookies coming out of the oven, but I can’t imagine what it is like to have hot metal applied to your body for three to four hours.

A silence fell upon the three of us sitting at the table. Chayo broke it by saying to Laura “Enough” and let out a chuckle. “because when I go back, I was already with your dad” she

continued. She did not talk about being deported, but she mentioned it had to do with Laura's father filling out marriage documents. Chayo's ex-husband heard it would be easier to get her residency if they said she was still in Mexico. She did not have the correct documentation with her to attain citizenship because it was all still in her home country. The U.S. government had figured this out somehow and told her she could go back on her own or be forcibly sent back.

Chayo began saying, "I like this country. The moment I came here, I like it. I don't want to go back. I like it. You know what's like here?". "What", Laura responded. Chayo went on "The spicy chickens". The three of us started laughing and she continued jovially, "The hamburger that was my favorite. I love it". I could see her passion for American fast food by the way she moved her arms around and clapped when she talked about it. Laura said "Honestly, *porque* there's... *Tambien*, in *México* there was *uno* McDonald's when I was in Cancún. I was like where are all the *hamburguesas*? *Yo quiero un hamburguesa*. You ask the people and they're like *hamburguesas* allá. McDonald's. In twenty miles". We chatted for a bit about the difference between Mexican and American McDonald's and what we like. This subject alone could have been a whole other interview. This was one of the many reasons Chayo likes being in the U.S.

Chayo started again and talked about marriage being a part of her journey. "Como se dice", Chayo paused and turned to me. "I marry him, her dad", she said and turned to Laura with a sudden burst of energy, "Your dad, I don't love him, and I don't like him. I don't like him! Sorry! I like this country!". The three of us had a burst of laughter and she went on to, "Okay, I got to do something, so your father. But after, I love him". Chayo did not like Laura's father but

she says she fell in love after some time. Laura had several questions about this and asked, “Was that the only *solo* option? Did it have to be in that order? Someone told you this is what you need to do to stay *aquí*”? Chayo explained that she had been sent back before the marriage and she had to get some documents from Mexico anyway.

The second time Chayo crossed the border she was about twenty years old and she took her sister with her. “I crossed two times” she said with a smile. They hired a coyote to bring them to the U.S. again. This time there were twenty people total who were with them and they all walked in the desert for two days. Immigration had found the group and took them all back to Tijuana where they were held for a day. Once Chayo and her sister were released, they waited for nightfall to try again. While walking, she had been hurt but the Coyote insisted that she continue on. Their bags of clothes and belongings had been stolen by another coyote who was supposed to meet them at the other side of the border, but they never saw them again.

We moved forward and discussed the citizenship test. Lauraa started by asking “The *examen* was *fácil para ti*? Or was the whole process easy?”. Chayo responded “It’s easy. You married a citizen, and within six month you get the resident”. The process was still a struggle for her because she did not speak English at the time. However, Chayo completed the written citizenship test and was granted her citizenship. She had to answer one hundred questions about the United States. Taking a test in a language you do not know must be extremely difficult. I get anxiety taking a Spanish quiz.

She wanted to eventually bring her family as well but that was even more trouble to go through. The toll of being away from family had gotten to her. “Because I feel alone, I do, I had some brothers, but they was married”, she said. She was finally able to bring her mother here and get her citizenship as well.

We moved onward with the conversation and talked about adapting to U.S. culture. “How about the culture? Did you notice the *diferencias de* culture? Like in *comida* or *religión*”, Laura pressed. Right when this was asked, the recording does not pick up too much. From what I could make out and recall using my notes the culture was different for Chayo. Especially religiously. She grew up with more of a catholic upbringing but when she came to the U.S., she was able to see more diversity in religions. In the U.S. she encountered more Christianity, Judaism, and Hinduism. Since coming here, Chayo continues to go to Catholic mass when she can.

Chayo talked more about cultural norms and dating. A man she dated before she came to the U.S. “That’s man was very old for me. Like 20 years older. He had money. He had a car. I was working in the *zapatería* where all the girls have boyfriend with car. That’s why I’m with him” she stated. When she was in Mexico at fifteen she dated an older man because he had money and it was what all the other girls who worked at the shoe store did. She knew he wanted to eventually get married and that was not something she wanted. When she came to the U.S., she left him behind and later married Laura’s father.

I was curious as to whether Laura and Chayo discussed coming to the U.S. so asked a bit about that. They both said it comes up sometimes. Laura made a remark about how her mom

says Laura's life is so much easier because she was born in this country. "There are times that she tells me that *mi vida es fácil*". Looking back, Chayo had been through some situations and came out the other side. Laura and I were able to see that our lives do seem easy compared to Chayo's. We grew up in a country with technology and resources and never had to question if we would be better off elsewhere. Laura and I have had conversations on our privilege and being born here. This was not unfamiliar territory, but it was a layer of humility that we have had to address time and time again.

We sat there for a while longer and discussed a bit more about the contrast between our experiences. "What is something you want to pass on to your kids?" I read off the question sheet. Laura translated it a bit more and said, "*Que quieres para for tus hijos?* The next generation". Chayo began to respond with, "I want them to be better than us. They dream and can get better job than me because I always have to work. I worked in restaurant, housekeeping. I hate that job". She continued, "I always want to do something, but I don't know how. Because I was thinking to the rent... but was still working in job that I don't want it. In the restaurant with the hat. I hate the hat. But one day I said no. I'm thinking about me". Chayo had worked several jobs she hated and finally decided she was going to cut hair. She went to school, worked, and continued to raise her family. At this point, she turned to Laura and told her to always put herself first and to focus on a career. Chayo said, "When you're not happy, the money is not important".

Chayo began to say more about passing things on. She said, “You ask me what I want to teach her. I...I have to... the ladies, the Mexican ladies, they think all the men has to resolve the problem. Or giving money. They take advantage to us. And for long time, I do not want to be there with you dad. I was not happy, but I didn’t see options that I had. It was hard to be mom. I want her free. She is free to get things by herself. You understand”. Chayo is referring to the patriarchal dynamic within Mexican culture. She wants so much more than that for her daughter. She wants her daughter to be independent and think for herself.

Chayo began to choke up and took a moment to collect herself but eventually released her tears. “Because of many gifts (*from men*), I had to do it. It was hard. I spent the night in a jail and I couldn’t see morning”. She was referring to the relationship she had with Laura’s father and the feeling of being trapped. She went on, “ You asked me ‘why you left me’ and I think ‘it’s my time’” I watched the two discuss the dynamic between them after Chayo divorced Laura’s father leaving Laura to be raised by her dad. . Laura’s parents divorced when she was in high school and this created a rift in their relationship. Chayo took this opportunity to explain why she left and Laura told her mom how she felt abandoned for a long time.

I felt uncomfortable in a deep way. I was listening to a deep conversation between a woman and her daughter. Was I violating my best friend’s privacy by continuing this interview? This conversation was so raw I found myself wiping a few tears off of my notes. Laura and I made a glance towards each other and she reached for my hand to give it a tight squeeze. Laura, wiping her eyes, finally builds up the strength to ask, “How do you feel now” . I saw a beautiful

smile creep across Chayo's face and she said "I feel free, I feel good". The contentedness in her voice was like nothing I had ever heard before.

I asked Chayo if she ever goes back to Mexico to visit. She had only been back once for vacation and she has not been back in twenty years because her family has all moved to the U.S. This country has become their home. Laura implied that she wants to learn more about her mom's life and wants to keep talking like this. She said, "I want more, I want to understand *tu vida*. I understand that *padres no le gusta hablar* about the past, because there's some *cosas* you didn't like, but at the same time you learn from your mistakes. I know you're just looking out for me". The questions I had for the interview were done but the three of us continued to chatter about life. That was when my phone started continuously buzzing and my ears rang to an odd high pitch tone. I checked my phone only to find out an emergency Shelter in Place was being put into act by midnight. I thanked *la doña* for her time and willingness to talk.

Hearing the journey and struggles of those before us is an important piece of our collective identity. This means collectively, these wounds are ours to carry. Immigration is a hard subject to talk about but it is almost inevitable when you come from an immigrant family. I want to remind younger and older generations to pursue a dialogue and learn how to truly encounter the other. Dialogue is a two-way street, meaning the other is necessary in this exchange. I believe we can do it, together. *Si podemos... Juntos.*