

Una Cultura Mestiza

I carry a secret that others can't see, though it animates my life. Long before I was born, my parents encountered the name Kamala in Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*. To them, it was serendipity, for it combined their names, Kambiz and Alma, and symbolized the different cultures their love brought together. My father was born in Iran to Muslim parents, who immigrated to the United States to escape the Iran-Iraq War. My mother was born in the United States to Mexican parents, who became Evangelical Christians and emigrated to work for the Church of the Nazarene in California. Coming from different worlds, my parents were never meant to meet, much less fall in love in East Los Angeles, and when they did, they defied all familial, cultural, and religious expectations. I carry their love in secret because my pale skin and brown locks conceal my diverse background.

In my parents' minds, I was whole, a confirmation from the universe that their love was true, despite their different backgrounds and my grandparents' objections. In reality, however, I am fragmented, not quite fit for any one culture or religion. The diversity encapsulated in my name and belied by my appearance challenges people's stereotypes and the common belief that such separate worlds were never supposed to coexist.

Growing up, I had difficulty embracing my parents' enlightened perspective of my existence, until I visited the Cordoba Mosque-Cathedral in Spain. The mosque was erected in the early tenth century over a Visigothic church and was later expanded to become one of the largest, most beautiful mosques in the world. In the sixteenth century, after the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain, the Catholic Church reclaimed it.

Walking through its gate and past the courtyard, I was greeted by seemingly countless columns topped with red and white horseshoe double arches. Beyond the repeating columns was a gorgeous *mihrab* decorated with golden Qur'anic calligraphy, indicating the direction of prayer. At the center of the structure, a gothic cathedral stretched towards the sky. Within it, there were pews and a pulpit, as well as images of Jesus Christ. I sensed a kinship between the jarring fusion of these two different places of worship and my parents' love. Both challenge stereotypes of Muslims and Christians and expose people to new ways of inhabiting the world. I felt at home.

My feeling of belonging did not last long. When I returned from Spain, I began volunteering at Kateri Park, an after-school program for children of refugee families. On my first day, two girls bombarded me with personal questions, one of which was, "What's your religion?" Given that they were Somali Muslims, I disclosed the Muslim part of me to them.

"You don't look Muslim," they said in shock. "Do you even know the prayer?"

I didn't know if I had to justify myself to these little girls. I smiled and recited the *Fatiha* prayer. They joined in, beaming.

My Baba taught my little brother and I the prayer to prepare us for when he dies. The prayer became a part of a morbid routine that filled the ten-minute drive from my house to high school. A school that glared at the two hijabi students who transferred one year. A school that called me a terrorist in the hallway during a bathroom break in Spanish. A school that taught the scene in *Kite Runner* where Amir, a Muslim, prayed on a hospital floor using biblical allegories. I felt a kinship with Muslims, and fervently defended Islam to my mostly White peers. But as I recite the prayer in Arabic today, I do not know what most of the words mean. My dad has translated them for me several times, but they never stuck. Instead, they bring me comfort without knowledge of their exact meaning. I recite them outside of their desired context of *wudu*

and a prayer rug when I am driving in chaotic conditions or walking across a bridge. I carry my fear of heights and the obscure words of God with me. When I recited the prayer for those two Muslim girls, I know I made them feel connected to me while I didn't feel connected to them.

My hyphenated existence as an Iranian-Mexican-Muslim American helps me connect to others, but also deprives me of my own sense of belonging. I was never Mexican enough, Iranian enough, Muslim enough, American enough. Initially, the Cordoba-Mosque Cathedral did not appease my desire for belonging. It merely stood as another example of cultures colliding in a beautiful way. Nothing more than representation. It wasn't until I met Gloria Anzaldúa on a plastic bucket while working at the gas station across from my high school over winter break that I began seeing the Cordoba-Mosque Cathedral in a more enlightened way.

I had always been skeptical of language. I found it often changed to adapt with the times, but when applied to human experiences, more often than not, it impoverished the complexity and diversity present in the world. I saw umbrella terms as threats to my individuality, that forced me to think in terms of a collective identity instead of trying to explore how I could bring my own unique experiences and perspectives to every interaction. In her book *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa wielded language against my previous assumptions. *Una cultura mestiza* was an umbrella term she coined that encapsulated the diversity I saw present in my worlds and embraced both my individuality and a collective belonging. Just as my parents had understood the power of naming me Kamala to symbolize the beautiful fusion of cultures their love brought together, Anzaldúa understood the power of naming the new culture she belonged to as a result of living on the borders of three cultures – white, Mexican, and Indian. She reminded me of the power of truly accounting for, recognizing, naming, and claiming your own space within a collective identity. She claimed exile and displacement as her new culture, and called its inhabitants *las mestizas*, a

mixed or hybrid person. Her words reflected my reality, making me feel seen and understood in ways I hadn't thought I needed. She taught me that language provides the lumber, bricks and mortar needed to create belonging. The Cordoba-Mosque Cathedral thus became a symbol for the new space created from the collision of cultures. It was not just an Islamic or Christian space, but something entirely different, beautiful, and valid in its own way.