

Humanity Amplified: A Borderlands Experience

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For all of my life, I have lived between two worlds. As a second generation Korean-American, the two cultural sides of me have been in varying states of conflict and harmony. In my childhood, the aggression and violence of white culture drove me to view my Korean side with hatred and shame. The community around me would constantly reinforce with aggression both macro and micro that I was a foreigner, and alien, someone who was NOT American. So I crammed my face with pizza and bologna sandwiches while I turned my nose up to Kimchi and rice. I was ashamed of my parents and their foreign accents. I felt and even they felt that I had to prove that I could not only speak English but speak English well. Since that time, I have learned to find some harmony between both cultures by the embracing of the one I once thought I could throw away. In rediscovering my other side, I realized that both were equally a part of who I am, and that both are beautiful.

I allow my experience as a teenager to inform the way I teach in the classroom. In the same way that Jose Antonio Rodriguez cherished the abandoned rocking horse he pulled from the ashes in his memoir, I hug and cherish my teenage self every day in my classroom. I was a girl who was hurting and lost and who needed so badly to be seen, to be accepted, to be loved, to be encouraged to grow. I see those needs in all my students. As a teenager, my world was very narrow, but it was also very fragile. My beliefs were my only ties to stability and confidence. Thus, even though I have shifted a lot over the years, I am very careful to not only teach what I know to be truth from the "I" perspective, but I also allow students the space to find their truth and perspective on their own.

These past two weeks, I have learned that the borderlands are a harsh place. The heat is oppressive. It feels like the sun is bearing and bearing down upon your head and chest. A few minutes walking in the searing heat makes you keenly aware of human vulnerability. The scaly thick-skinned lizard stares at you from a stoney perch and smiles as the tips of your nose, chin, and elbows burn and sear in the white hot light. Water evaporates from your body faster than you can pour it down your parched throat. Your thinking reorients itself to focus on economizing and replenishing water in the way that people who are drowning in the ocean can only think between breaths.

And there's not only the heat. This place is also scarred and wounded with painful memories of land disposition, forced cultural assimilation and subjugation, and the genocide of native peoples. Moreover, the wounds of the past continue to fester in the present with the pain of splitting families, the sorrow of forced segregation via the militarization of borders, the erection of thorny walls, and the death and detention of migrants.

And yet, it is also a place that is intensely, radiantly, and exquisitely alive. Creatures here have to fight to stay alive, and that struggle is poignantly beautiful. It dwells in the sting of picante in what the locals call “mild” salsa, the piercing shriek at 5 am of a obsidian-feathered grackle whose bright yellow eye glints like the tip of the rising sun, and the sucker-punch sweetness that hits your tongue when you take *just a nibble* of the end of a mesquite bean (God forbid you take more!). The people here crave music and art like the body yearns for water. A woman at a swap meet behind a Family Dollar strip mall cries out to the dusty lot, “Musica!” and someone quickly obliged. A man enthusiastically pointed out to me a skillful detail in an oil portrait of an Abuelo, and he was gesticulating with so much energy that his young daughter pulled away and hid behind a pillar in embarrassment. Children languishing for months in detention took bargain basement crayons and paints and made in gorgeous, miraculous color, the emerald and ruby plumage of the birds of their homeland.

The borderlands is a place where the spirit of humanity is amplified. It is a world where stories can only capture a fraction of the power with which it is clenching your heart. And yet, stories are so fundamentally important here because they cannot be contained by borders. No matter who you are or where you came from, the power of storytelling is universal. Our hearts all resonate to stories, particularly the ones that compel us to love and treasure the humanity in ourselves and in others. Those are the stories that most change us because we often long for someone out there to cross the boundaries we set up around our own hearts with the power of love.

I came to the borderlands to see, listen, and learn from what they could tell me. I wanted to witness the power of storytelling and Art to bridge the barriers that hurt so many. What I discovered there was something deeper than a wall and a bridge. What I found was a microcosm of all the pain, the beauty, the passion, the drama, and longing of the American story itself. It is my own story, and the story of my people. We, the people of the United States of America, should all heed the cry of the borderlands so that it can work to break down the barriers we built around our hearts. Then we can see that the part of ourselves that we worked so hard to push away was really something we longed for all along, and that both sides are beautiful.