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CULTURAL WORK

My Brother the Mexican

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Abstract

K. Angelique Dwyer is an American who grew up in Mexico by chance, frequently crossing (geographic, cultural and linguistic) borders. She writes short stories that explore bicultural and bilingual experiences, as exemplified by 'My Brother the Mexican' published in this issue. She is an Associate Professor of Spanish in the Department of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures, as well as chair of the Latina/o, Latin American and Caribbean Studies (LALACS) program, at Gustavus Adolphus College. She has a BA in Communication Studies from ITESO (Guadalajara, Mexico) and an MA and PhD in Latin American Literature from the University of Iowa. She specializes in Mexico/US Intercultural Studies, Chicana/Latina Cultural Production, Performance Art and Film. Her research, teaching and civic engagement highlight identity politics in marginalized populations within a local and global terrain.

Keywords

K. Angelique Dwyer; Spanglish; identity negotiation; Mexican American; Amexican; bicultural identity; siblings; gender relations

El ‘Piti’ le decían, I never knew why. We lived just outside ‘El Barrio,’ at least that’s what they called it, ‘cause it took too long to say ‘Tlachichilco del Carmen.’ Nobody called it that, but my mom. She would make us go to El Barrio a vender ‘panquecitos.’ Two little gringüitos selling cupcakes en la plaza.

— ‘How do you say cupcakes mom?’

— ‘Get out the dictionary’ was her favorite answer.

Panquecitos. Though I later found out from a Spaniard that cupcakes were madalenas. I just figured he was talking about two girls called Magdalena. Íbamos a la plaza los domingos en la noche and by the end of the night those baskets would be empty. Apparently los del Barrio hadn’t tasted seven-minute marshmallow icing before.

Cuando eran las fiestas del Santo Patrón we would go into town for the races. People would ride their horses a pelo. I don’t know how my brother could ride bareback. I rode a mare once por allá por el lago but she threw me ‘cause she was worried about her colt running off. Never again. En las carreras my brother rode Pinto, and his friend Sebas rode Señor, un palomino bien grandote. The winner would get a pollito, a little yellow chicken, like the kind on Easter cards. We had so many pollitos at our house ‘cause El Piti would win every other race. Either the Pirate’s cap he wore gave him good luck or it was all Pinto’s doing. After the races, a Pinto lo bañábamos en el lago, with a big bar of Zote (that pink soap women in town use to hand wash their husband’s work clothes). We washed his face with té de manzanilla ‘cause Pinto’s left eye was always irritated, se le infectaba con el polvo y con el agua de la laguna. Una vez, cuando el Pinto andaba suelto, I went out to give him a carrot and some cool chamomile tea to put on his face. He came over as soon as he saw me and sin querer queriendo stepped on my bare foot. It hurt so bad no podía ni gritar. I just stood there, under his hoof. I tried to push him, but realized that the force of a ten-year-old would never manage. My solution: Aventé la zanahoria and he went after it. It was a close one. Todavía me acuerdo del peso like it was yesterday.

My mom, la señora Linda, was always yelling after El Piti to feed the pollitos but his attention was only focused on his gallos who had now grown enough to become fighters. When we lived in Guanatos he had palomas. He would catch them on the roof of the house we rented. They were a dirty gray, like most city pigeons are, with purple metallic streaks on their wings. He set the pigeons loose when we moved to El Barrio and started a rooster pin instead. My job was to check on the hens, pick up the eggs and take them up to mom, feed the pollitos, and the roosters, and be El Piti’s assistant when one of the roosters got stung by an alacrán. The procedure when this happened was simple: I had to put a piece of garlic in the rooster’s beak, while he held it down. Then, we’d wash it down with milk. This was the antidote ... later used on one of our cats, which didn’t survive the scorpion’s stinger. My mom eventually found out that the scorpion provides its own antidote. Nomás le cortas la cola and then put it in a bottle of rubbing alcohol.

In junior high I started going to tardeadas in town and hung out with the fresas. We’d listen to eighties music or rock en español: Soda Stereo, Alaska, Maná. El Piti was in high school by then, hiding behind his tejana. As soon as the last period of the day ended he’d drive off in his faded gray Grand Marqui ’82 blasting La Recodo’s ‘Acábame de matar, pa’ qué me dejas heridoooo’ and heading straight for El Barrio. The only time I hung out in El Barrio was at the fiestas ‘cause there was a cute guy that would come every year to work at the puestos. ‘El Panadero’ le decíamos... he asked me to dance a quebradita once ... ay, viejos tiempos ... but then he had to go back to the puestos luego-luego a vender pan dulce.

Un día (it was a Sunday night I think) mi papá se había llevado el carro y mi mamá y yo veíamos re-runs of ‘The Golden Girls’ cuando suddenly we heard a knock on the door y nos enteramos que al Piti lo habían llevado a la Cruz Roja ‘cause he got thrown by the bull he was ridding at the toros. They’re supposed to cover the bulls’ horns in town but they never do. Me la han contado tantas veces: He got thrown off the bull and landed on his feet. There was an expression of awe in the crowd. As he started to walk away the bull came behind him y lo corneó puncturing his left lung and causing him to collapse. Mi mamá lo buscó por todo el Hospital Civil de Guanatos.

— ‘Has any one seen my son? My son!!!! ...’ gritaba, y aijo de la chingada, just remembering it makes my eyes water. I thought she was gonna faint, or maybe I was gonna faint ‘cause she was so freaked out. Turned out el Piti forgot his tarjeta de seguro social and couldn’t be treated at the hospital without one so he was sitting in the corner huddled over until my mom and I finally made it there.

— ‘Never again mijo ... never again’ la señora Linda said. ‘Promise me you’ll never ride a bull again.’ Two days later, with a big scar on his back and practically no left lung, my brother, El Piti, admitted to my mom that bull riding was his life and he was gonna do it no matter what.

By the time I was in high school he went away for college. He didn’t want to leave but he didn’t want to go to college in Guanatos either:

— ‘Puros pinches fresas’ he’d say ‘¿qué chingados voy a hacer yo ahí, compa ...?’

So, they sent him to Los Estates, but the farthest he made it was Laredo. Every year for Christmas regresaba al Barrio para las fiestas con botas nuevas y camisas de seda. He had so much gold jewelry hanging off him I had to make fun ... it was too easy. Less than two years later he came back for good. Pos la neta es que no aguantó. He came back to stay, and for once, there was a period of two to six months when we were on the same page. The reason? Around my junior year I dated a vaquerillo. He wore a cowboy hat, botas de avestruz, wranglers, and was always covered in mud ‘cause he worked on his family’s farm. The funny thing was, he had grown up in East L.A. and spoke barrio Spanglish. I still remember what his truck smelled like. It was an odd combination of old leather, expensive cologne and manure. Le decían el Pelón ... pos por pelón, but my mom always called him José. El Piti y el Pelón eran compas, they hung out a lot. We’d go out together al palenque o a los toros and they’d bring the mariachi over o la banda norteña, o lo que fuera hombre. I knew all the songs even though I listened to Madonna and La Unión at home. There was something about those pinches corridos though, they always managed to get under my skin. Aunque no me gustaran, siempre me llegaban. We’d go to the fiestas y al carnaval, we’d drink tequila in the terrazas and dance to La Sonora Dinamita. I even enrolled in the escaramuza, the Mexican Charra equestrian club. El Piti would let me ride Espíritu. He’d actually drive the stallion out to town para que yo lo montara en la escaramuza. Espíritu was a racehorse. Espíritu de Chávez le puso mi mamá, ‘cause he was a fighter. We’d do our runs and El Piti would be in the stands watching so he could give me tips later. This was definitely my vaquera stage.

Years later, I moved to Los Estates and he stayed in El Barrio. Yo siempre me juraba que even though I was living in the States, El Barrio was home. This here, my native land, was only a part-time arrangement. Little did I know the path I took ten years ago would be long, y que me alejaría cada vez más de esa vida que llevo siempre tan close to me.

One summer me vino a visitar, con sus tres hijos y con mis papás. My parents made a long summer road trip through Los Estates with their grandkids and stopped in town to hang out.

The plan was: El Piti would fly in, stay for a week and then take the three kids back with him para que mis papás descansaran y se quedaran acá conmigo otro rato. At the airport waiting for his return flight he begged my mom to leave with him porque un hombre solo no puede con tres niños.

— ‘They’re your own kids’ le dije ‘¿cómo no vas a poder?’

— ‘What if they have to go to the bathroom?’ he’d say ‘I can’t be in three places at once ...’

— ‘They’ve got family restrooms here ... hello ... just look for one’ le contesté. Pero él insistía en que mi mamá lo tenía que acompañar hasta allá y después regresarse sola. Ni más. Not happening. So, that was the day, my brother, El Piti, the left lung-less, banda listener and Wendy’s frosty-lover said to me before he stomped off: ‘You’re too American,’ and aijo de la chingada how that hurt. A shot through the heart that still stings today.