

Between Two Worlds

Finding a sense of belonging as a Mexican American.

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NOTE: THE WEBSITE 'ON SHE GOES' WAS PLATFORM DEDICATED TO WOMEN OF COLOR WHO TRAVEL. THE SITE WENT DOWN IN 2021. THIS IS A PDF CAPTURE.



Belonging is a hard feeling to pinpoint. For some, belonging is a deep sense of kinship. Belonging can mean staking claim to a community or to a physical place. For me, belonging is the ability to exist with ease.

I was born to a pair of young, mixed-status Mexican parents in Redwood City, California—a town located in the heart of the San Francisco Peninsula that boasted a Latinx population of 24% in 1990. Nearly all of my extended family lived there too. My mom and abuelita settled in Redwood City after immigrating from Apatzingán, Michoacán, without papers when my mami was just two years old. My papí, on the other hand, was strategically born in Redwood City to secure US citizenship but raised in the small Tierra Caliente pueblo of Aguililla until returning to the US in 1983 to learn English and attend high school.

Although Redwood City was home for the first five years of my life, our family eventually moved to the neighboring city of Belmont. When I started kindergarten, my sister and I were two of a handful of other Latinx kids, and Spanish was my only language. Fitting in quickly proved difficult for a first-and-a-half-generation Chicana in a town that was 86% white. Belmont was a sleepy, uptight suburb that made nationwide news exactly once after a ban on cigarette smoking inside all apartments.

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I never smoked, but even still, Belmont was too constricting. The need to find a sense of comfort and connection with others nagged me as I grew up. I yearned to find my people. In an attempt to assimilate, I spent years of my childhood slowly shedding myself of our culture and of any identifiable markers of Mexican-ness. I refused to speak Spanish and replied to my mami's preguntas in English. I swapped out "mami" for "mom." I prayed to God for blond hair and blue eyes to match my best friend's.

Although I had thought of myself as unequivocally Mexican, I found out that wasn't true either during a monthlong summer stay in my dad's hometown of Aguililla. I was 10 years old, and I had been to Mexico almost yearly since I was born. Every time, I looked forward to my stays. Mexico afforded me the privilege of blending in—of existing without standing out and existing without the need for an explanation.

Surrounded by mountains and cobblestone roads, Aguililla operated at a slower, steady pace. Every evening my papa Nano would corral the livestock grazing in the mountains and weave them through the narrow streets, each lined with vibrantly painted two-tone homes. I played fútbol with kids in the neighborhood, and they were the ones who first told me I had a pocha accent when I spoke Spanish. They saw me as American, but I denied it—then, and for a full decade to come—because to be American was to be rejected from the only thing I ever thought I belonged to.

They saw me as American, but I denied it.

During my adolescence, I developed a heady slew of clothing styles my mami patronizingly (and, thankfully, accurately) deemed stages. In shuffling between punk and prep and chola, each path outwardly marked another attempt to find community and a place that felt like home. Despite my efforts to fit in, Latinx kids called me "whitewashed," while the white kids called me "beaner" behind my back. I wanted desperately to belong, but I needed to know who I was first. And for me, it always came back to my culture.

I've continued to travel to Mexico almost annually as an adult. Because of violence in my father's town, I haven't been able to visit Aguililla in over a decade, but I spent the first month of 2017 in a nearby city for an artist-in-residence program. As I've grappled with what it means to be Mexican American and to feel perpetually at the fringes of two worlds, returning to Mexico this time was healing and provided a sense of closure.

I took comfort in the similarities of the towns. Maravatio bustled with artisan markets nearly every day, and the smell of sweet churros and wet ears of elote reminded me of home. Although the architecture was different, the plaza, hand-painted signs, and ice cream vendors were the same. Unlike our family home in Aguililla, the hacienda I lived in had been in the same family for generations—owners and caretakers alike. The expansive, white adobe structure served as a daily reminder of Mexico's colonial past. Each day, I spent hours mulling over memories of identity, lineage, and homeland while I inhabited the residence of a similarly, but separately, blended family.

What I still love most about Mexico is the ability to blend in. "Vibrancy and spirit" are my default answers when explaining the beauty of Mexico to white people who are afraid to visit, but truthfully, I revel most in the ability to walk in public without being stopped by strangers to answer where I'm from. Until I open my mouth, I am average in Mexico. I'm normal. I am not alien.

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As I moved from Redwood City to Belmont and now to Portland, I realize that I have always felt like a visitor. The age-old question of where I'm from generates a combination of explanations depending on who is asking and how I feel when they ask me. In Portland I might answer, "I'm from the San Francisco Bay Area" or "Fuck off." In San Francisco it might be, "I'm from the Peninsula, but I live in Portland," and in Mexico I might reply, "My mom and dad are from Michoacán, but I was born in the United States."

Internationally, I might have to explain that not all people from the US are blond with blue eyes.

The truth is that living in the margins of two distinct cultures makes summarizing my identity difficult no matter where in the world I am. Traveling between each country has both blurred and clarified my understanding of a homeland, because as a Chicanx, a singular homeland does not exist. There is no physical land that belongs to Mexican Americans, despite the Chicanx obsession with Aztlan. My identity cannot be rooted in patriotism, and while no word can succinctly encompass the complexity of my version of biculturality, I welcome "Chicana" as a term that attempts this—no hyphens.

Instead of continuing to search for a homeland, I seek to create community with those who share my experiences and outlook on the world. While I may never have a census box that neatly labels my experience, I know I won't ever need one again to feel like I belong.

