

Chapter 2

From the book: “I Met Myself in October: A Memoir of Belonging”

by Jacob Taylor-Mosquera

Context: Jacob Taylor-Mosquera was born in Cali, Colombia and adopted by a white family here in Washington State. He identifies as Afro-Hispanic/Latinx and currently teaches Spanish at numerous educational institutions in Seattle. He is also a newly appointed Commissioner on the King County Immigrant & Refugee Commission and an enthusiastic community connector. This is a small piece from his debut book.

Once back in Washington State, mirrors and a public sea of predominately white faces were a constant reminder that I was different from others. One of the results of getting a small taste of Colombia and being back in the U.S. was yearning for a social group that more closely resembled the ethnic diversity I saw all around me during my visit to Colombia. Was it possible to create something like that in Washington? Nowhere was it more apparent that I was different than when I would visit with my parents.

Perhaps because of my heightened awareness about my developing concept of ethnicity, being out in public with my parents began to cause a quiet consternation in me. People were confused and curious as to why a young black man would be dining with a white couple considerably older than he was. My parents never seemed to notice the stares or occasional confused bits of laughter. I noticed all of them. Yet I never mentioned anything to my parents. They were content to exist in a color-blind world. Conversations regarding race and ethnicity were virtually non-existent in our home growing up and that extended into my first few years of adulthood. I do not want to give the impression they didn't care about these issues, nor do I find it appropriate to label them as ill-intentioned parents. Nothing could be further from the truth. However, for reasons I will never fully comprehend, I think it is fair to claim they have always clung to a certain level of reluctance regarding the topics of ethnicity and privilege. My assumption is this was a result of there simply not being an abundance of resources available both before and after they adopted my sister and me, nor did they have any friends with similar experiences regarding adopting children from other countries. In addition, I think they genuinely find it uncomfortable to engage in those kinds of discussions. I have come to understand this reality and harbor no ill-tempered thoughts toward them. We simply have developed different ways to ponder who we are.

Our relationship and, frankly, lack of conversations regarding these topics only stoked the flames of curiosity within me and I was inspired to seek out more answers about who I was as well as who

others perceived I was. The first step in that process came while beginning to piece together my academic future.

For enrollment at Tacoma Community College (TCC), I needed to fill out paperwork detailing my identity. The familiar bubbles requesting I select an ethnicity appeared, somehow more perplexing and intimidating than the multiple previous times throughout my life because of my recent experiences in Colombia. The instructions were clear: PLEASE SELECT ONE. The 'please' fascinated me because it implied an attempt to be polite while still demanding a single response. But, what about those of us who feel a tremendous pull to check two boxes? Three? I chose the option for 'non-white Hispanic' but felt it did not fully express who I was, especially since I knew that people did not immediately perceive me to be part of the Hispanic group. The average person seeing me in my car or at the bank, for example, would assume I ought to fill in the African American box and selecting anything else would, at best, be met with prolonged confusion.

In my mind, the logical conclusion was to tackle the formidable question head-on: am I black? If the answer was to be "yes", then I needed and wanted to know how and why. Similarly, if the answer was "no", I also wanted to dissect why. It made sense to take the question to my black friends in order to get their perspective on the matter. There was just one small problem: I did not have any black friends. I WAS the token black friend in my social circles. The task before me was to determine what the concept of self meant for me and my particular set of experiences.

George Herbert Mead was one of the first to articulate the very complex idea of what constitutes the self. I am unable to discuss his ideas and academic or philosophical contributions at length, but I do think the following helps to unpack what I was starting to grapple with in the quest to answer my question about being black:

The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process.¹

Following Mead, my views surrounding my ethnicity (or ethnicities) depended greatly on how I felt I was perceived by others. As I mentioned, others saw me in public as African American, yet I wanted to find a way to belong to the Hispanic community too. I yearned for the best of both worlds. What constituted my *self* was (and remains) inextricably bound to how others identify me, and vice versa. If others see me as black, then, in a way, I am black, regardless of how much

¹ George Herbert Mead, "The Social Self", *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods* 10, 1913: 374-380.

I wish to confirm or deny it. Even if these concepts were beginning to make logical sense to me, others had conflicting ideas of who I was.

At TCC, I sought out the Black Student Union only to hear from one of the leaders that I had not passed the test: “Nah bro, you ain’t even that black.” That was my first and last interaction with that particular student organization. What did “that black” even mean? What would it look like to change this leader’s perspective? Who or what held that power? The following week I recall going to the Latino Student Alliance introductory meeting and while initially my presence was met with visible skepticism by the mostly Mexican-American and Puerto Rican leaders, I was eventually elected vice president. What did that mean? Was I more accepted by the Hispanic community and rejected by the black community in general or exclusively at TCC?

I want to highlight one perplexing episode that contributed to how I was unpacking my concept of self, especially pertaining to my ethnicities. It is related to the falling out with a particular group of friends. To provide some context, the five of us met during elementary school on a soccer team. As the years rolled on, we developed a friendship both on and off athletic fields which included baseball, track and our preferred soccer. Our families became relatively close as we embarked on the journey to navigate the perils of puberty. We trusted each other and became almost inseparable, even as two of them left us for a private high school in neighboring Tacoma. Still, we remained united and as I began to piece together my ‘blackness’, something happened. One evening we were somewhere enjoying some beers, most likely engaged in a conversation about women or soccer (it was almost all we knew how to talk about), when one of them said, “hey reggin, pass me another beer.” There was music playing and I didn’t hear exactly what was said, but my friend was looking only at me, so I tossed him a beer and we continued our night. A short time later we were somewhere else, doing the same thing. Again, this word surfaced. And again. And again. Then it was another foreign word: “hey nooc, when are we going to play soccer again?” one of them asked gleefully. I remember this time we were at my parents’ house, outside in the driveway. At this point these strange words had seeped into nearly all of our interactions and I was beyond curious as to what they meant. So, I asked one of them, who at the time I considered to be my best friend. I will never forget how he looked first at the ground, as if debating with himself whether or not to tell me, his freckles almost turning pale. “You really don’t know?” he murmured. “No idea, man.” I replied, waiting and by then a bit concerned, given his reaction. He let out a sigh in a way I had not seen from him before. It was a sunny day but I remember feeling cold even before he said quickly, “just spell the words backwards and it’ll make sense.” The words that had been used, ‘reggin’ and ‘nooc’, backwards spelt one word I was familiar with and one I

was not. I was shocked.

Realizing my friends had taken the time to mask not one but two racial slurs and use them on me was, in my opinion, inexcusable and deserved nothing less than me turning my back on them and the friendship we had built over more than a decade. They did this repeatedly and with smiles on their faces. They did it in bars, on fields, in restaurants and, that day, at the house I grew up in. I couldn't fathom a lower form of disrespect. Immediately they were cast aside, all four of them and, unfortunately, their families as well, which hurt deeply because I had grown to love them. To me the most reasonable course of action was to forget about them, focus on the people in my life who were not disrespecting me and work on developing a richer understanding of Colombia and my relationship to it.

That spring, I launched into making Colombian culture more of a priority. The Spanish I was sporadically learning was a fusion of Mexican, Peruvian, Puerto Rican and Honduran accents and slang by virtue of who I was playing soccer and socializing with. I had no formal instruction, but I was listening to Colombian pop music on a weekly basis and maintaining an emerging curiosity for the politics of the country. I did not have any friends or acquaintances born and raised in the country nor did I have my current network of fellow Colombian adoptees. Besides my good friend Daniela and her mom Gloria, I simply did not have an outlet to enquire about the country. Imagine, then, the excitement at learning about a viewing party to watch the Colombian national soccer team begin their World Cup qualifying campaign at a bar in Seattle.

I arrived early and alone that night, proudly wearing my bright yellow jersey. Little by little people arrived in couples, families and groups of friends. There were probably 40 people packed into the tight space. The atmosphere was jubilant, even after the first goal was scored by the opponent (I cannot remember if it was Peru or Venezuela). At the bar I ordered another mojito (generally my cocktail of choice) and someone asked me a question. I smiled lightly, shrugged and responded I did not speak Spanish. "Then why are you here?" demanded my interlocutor, his tone immediately territorial. I proceeded to tell him I was adopted from Colombia and I have played soccer all my life, so it made sense to be watching the game. Perhaps I expected what he said next: "ah ok but you're not *really* Colombian then." He patted me on the shoulder, smiled one of those toothless masks of pity people too often perform and disappeared into the sea of yellow shirts with his beer. The game ended 0-1.

Of course, there was a considerable degree of truth behind what the man in the bar said. I was raised in the damp northwest corner of the U.S., far from the humid chaos of my native Cali. I did

not speak Spanish, had only been in the country for three blissful weeks and possessed no accurate grasp on the historical, social, economic or political realities of Colombia. My Colombianness resided exclusively in the sweat of my yellow jersey, my Colombian flag bracelet and the fact that I knew most of the lyrics to Shakira's top hits in Spanish, albeit without knowing what they meant. Yet I was quick to correct people who spelled the country with an infuriating 'U', quick to fire a witty response at any feckless statement about drugs and quick to insist there were good people in the country despite the decades of headlines detailing the country's unstoppable carnage. The question quickly evolved into: How could I become more Colombian without living there and without having Colombian friends?

Surprisingly, the greater Seattle area is home to a significant Colombian immigrant population. As I set out on my mission, I realized there was a growing number of events for the Hispanic community in the city and surrounding cities and towns. I would wear my Colombian soccer jersey to these events in an effort to fish for my compatriots. On the occasions that it did work, I estimate that 50% of the time I was met with more patronizing lectures about how I was not Colombian enough. Of these discussions, the majority would conclude insisting I learn Spanish (but, as one older gentleman put it, "*español colombiano, nada de esa mierda que se habla en Argentina!*"²). People seemed to be perplexed when I asked whether I could be Colombian without speaking Spanish. Their responses varied from "of course not!" to "of course!", each with similarly animated bursts of enthusiasm. The task of mastering Colombian Spanish while living in Washington State seemed like an insurmountable hurdle. It made more sense to focus on what I could control, which meant a devotion to learning about the country's history and contemporary issues with a fervor that approached obsession. I spent countless hours studying the country's geography, which national parks were where, the different musical genres one could find throughout the country and statistics concerning census data. Quizzing myself on the 32 departments, their capital cities and even their individual flags became routine as did comparing and analyzing the variety of regional accents.

In the almost frantic pursuit of becoming a Colombia expert, yet another question emerged: should my allegiance lie more with Colombia or with the U.S.? Was it even appropriate to consider adopting and maintaining loyalties or was it enough to simply be and embrace both simultaneously? A blind nationalism began to materialize within me, which inevitably represented an unforeseen conundrum for those around me since I had never been particularly

² Colombian Spanish, none of that shit they speak in Argentina!

patriotic--not even after the tragedies that unfolded on the morning of September 11th.

Yet I almost sought out (or simply created) opportunities to lecture anyone on Colombia's past and present on a variety of topics including pop culture, history, the armed conflict, popular tourist destinations and culinary expressions. Just saying the word 'Colombia' aloud provided me with certain pleasure. By my own standards, certainly nobody else's, I achieved Colombia expert status in those few short months. As to whether or not I should have a stronger allegiance toward one country or the other, I felt like if the two countries were in a foot race, Colombia should win by perhaps a centimeter simply due to the fact that I happened to be born there. At that time in particular, my feelings of belonging were skewed at best. One could argue it was stronger for Colombia simply because Colombia represented the unknown. The exotic. Mine without truly or fully being mine. Home without having ever been a home. My nationality without having ever possessed a Colombian passport. Yet, as I discovered in my research, the Colombian constitution determined anyone born in the country was a citizen and had the right to that citizenship for life until that person decided otherwise. This was all the justification I needed, and it became my most potent weapon against the Colombian immigrants suggesting I could never achieve their level of belonging.

My favorite class at the community college was an introduction to anthropology taught by the passionate professor Elizabeth Fortenbery. She was a brilliant orator with a sharp wit and explained things in a way that made immediate sense. The classes' exploration of kinship fascinated me as did the lessons regarding linguistics. It was impossible to resist throwing them together and thinking about my biological family in Colombia. If I were to ever meet them, what would we have in common? Would our biological bond suffice for us to construct a sustainable relationship or were the forces of nurture destined to divide us? The idea of hunting them down to unravel the answers to this question gnawed at me fiercely.

And then, one sunny afternoon, I received a phone call from Daniela. "Hey, so I have this crazy idea. My cousin Lucía in Colombia is looking for roommates. What do you say we move down there in August and live with her for a while?"

I was a self-proclaimed Colombia expert, generally bored with my restaurant jobs and prerequisite courses to get to who-knew-what, was still simmering from my first experience with heartbreak and I was more than ready for a change of scenery.

The decision took a matter of seconds. Green light.