

## Title: A Perfect Mexican Child

[Soft guitar music playing]

CR: Hello anyone listening to this, this being “A Perfect Mexican Child.” My name is Citlalli Rosas-Soria and I use he/they pronouns. I am a queer Mexican. I say this proudly because there was a moment in my life where I didn’t think I could merge those two identities together.

Although my gender is included in my queer identity, I feel like I still have trouble incorporating that with my Mexican heritage. I identify my gender as trans nonbinary.

Nonbinary is a very broad umbrella term that includes various people who identify as neither male nor female. These are people who exist outside the gender binary and the societal constraints of gender. I am going to list some vocabulary terms that will help explain this further. Gender is what someone will identify as, an example will be nonbinary. Sex was assigned to someone at birth, some examples are male, female, or intersex. Gender expression is how someone chooses to portray their gender identity.

In order to explore this topic, I decided to use the method of testimonio, which Kathryn Blackmer Reyes and Julia E. Curry Rodriguez defines “as a unique expression of the methodological use of spoken accounts of oppression.” They continue to explain that testimonio “allows the narrator to show an experience that is not only liberating in the process of telling but also political in its production of awareness to listeners and readers alike.” Today, I’ll be providing my testimonio of navigating Mexican culture as a nonbinary person because it is a story that represents many more people like me.

[Guitar music playing briefly]

For me, being nonbinary or even identifying as nonbinary is something that took me a really long time to come to terms with. It always felt like something that wasn’t supposed to be

for me because when I did see someone who identified as nonbinary, they were often white. Before identifying as nonbinary, I thought that gender-fluid was a gender that fit me better because it gave me more freedom to dress how I wanted. Genderfluid means that someone's gender identity changes over time.

As I got older, I learned more about what nonbinary means and it seemed more like something fit me more because I was able to let go of some things that I felt connected with my gender expression. I realized that I didn't need to identify a certain way to dress a certain way. I felt more freedom with identifying as nonbinary however there were some aspects of my Mexican identity that I feel clash with my gender identity still.

Because I was assigned female at birth, there were a lot of expectations that I received from my parents. Girls in most Mexican households are held to a certain standard as opposed to boys. Toxic gender roles rule the life of girls and keep them in line. Things like "learning to cook for your future husband," cleaning up after the men in the family, putting the men in the family before yourself, and just existing for the benefit of men. All of these things are ingrained from a young age and are internalized. You have to look a certain way: wearing skirts, wearing your long hair a very specific way, and wearing tons of make-up. You have to act a certain way: never talk back to the men in your family, you must never use "crude" words, and you must always show respect to the elders in your family even if they don't show it back.

[Soft guitar playing over the next sentence]

I was never that type of person when I was growing up.

[Music stops]

I was always the "tom-boy" when it came to how I dressed. I was never comfortable with wearing dresses, skirts, or low-cut shirts. My hair was always messy because I never liked

dealing with my long hair. I didn't like make-up because it always felt so heavy on my face and it felt like it wasn't me. But I did internalize a lot about how I was supposed to act. I never spoke back to anyone, I didn't curse until the 8th grade, I made sure that I never spoke and if I did, it would be very soft. I started questioning why I was taught to be like that. Why was I supposed to act a certain way but not my brothers or my male cousins? I wanted to be like them! I just didn't know how exactly I meant and I was scared to think about differing from what I was taught. Once I started figuring out who I was and what I like in terms of everything, I started rebelling from this ideal that my parents had.

[Spanish guitar playing]

A Quinceañera is a celebration of a girl's 15th birthday, to introduce her into womanhood. This is a party that has Mexican roots but is done all throughout Latin America. It is very similar to the concept of a Sweet 16 party. As I was approaching that age, I was faced with the dilemma of whether or not I was going to have a quinceañera. There's the deal with a big poofy dress, high heels, make-up, and overall a lot of things that I wasn't comfortable with because it was all meant to exemplify my "womanhood."

When I had decided that I wanted a less intense version of a quinceañera, my mom was thrilled to take me dress shopping. As we were walking about the shopping area, I noticed some stores that also sold suits and tuxedos. In my head, I thought about how much more comfortable I would be in a suit as I kept on trying on different poofy dresses. I brought this up with my mom and she laughed it off. "Oh, that would look really funny!" *Que raro.*

It wasn't until that "funny joke" was brought up with someone that my "joke" turned into a serious problem. At the age of 14, you're a mess. So when you are confronted with an older person, who is not politely asking you if you "identify as a boy," you panic. Or at least, I

panicked. I never gave myself the opportunity to think about my gender because it was scary. My family never talked about sex or gender or how I and my girl cousins were treated differently from my boy cousins and brothers. So as I stood there, being outed by some stranger in front of my mom and I saw how my mom looked at me differently, I changed the focus to my sexuality.

My mom looked at me differently. I saw how she was reevaluating different instances in my life that may have given her any indication of my gender. I guess she saw some things differently because she started crying. So when I panicked and changed focus to my sexuality, I wasn't sure if I made things different or worse. But I saw in her eyes that I would never be the same person that I was to her.

This story is very important to my gender story because, in the end, I was forced into the big poofy dress, into the exaggerated hairstyle, into the make-up that felt like it weighed a ton that day, and into the high heels that felt like I was walking on nails. I did all of that because I know that it was the only way that I could still maintain this idea of who I was meant to be for my parents. After the celebration was over, my parents never talked about what had occurred in order for it to happen. They just talk about how beautiful their daughter looked that day. I hated the way that made me feel.

[Guitar playing over the next sentence]

So the next year I cut off all my hair.

[Music stops]

I had a lot of feelings associated with my hair so when it was cut off, I was so relieved. It felt like this was supposed to be this way. Many people assigned females at birth in Mexican culture wear their hair long and would never dare cut it because it's a very important beauty standard. Cutting off my hair was a big step in my gender journey because I associated long hair

with being female. I allowed myself the freedom to play with my gender expression a lot more and I thought a lot of what my gender identity would be. I found peace with myself and having short hair.

However, my dad was someone that really hated that I cut my hair. My dad is someone that I really look up to. He has an amazing outlook on life and how it should be experienced. But it's clouded by gender expectations and machismo. He always opposed me wanting to cut my hair because he said I would look ugly, that I would never get a husband with my hair short, that I looked prettier with my longer hair. These are things that have always stuck with me and have hurt me but I understood why he was saying these things. Like any parent, he was worried. Perhaps his method of showing it wasn't the best but after a lot of reflection on my part, it was the only way that he was ever shown to express his emotions.

He was worried about what people might think of me when they saw someone who didn't fit into their ideal of what a girl should look like and of what they might do to me if they saw me looking like that. He would hear horror stories about people getting bashed or even getting killed because they were different. He was worried that I would get rude remarks from my *tias* and my *tios*. But none of that mattered to me because he always made sure to remind me that he would always be there for me.

I knew that my gender identity was different than my assigned gender, but it was scary to think about, at the time. Figuring that out was similar to what Cherrie Moraga said in *Queer Aztlán: the Re-formation of Chicano Tribe*, "Coming to terms with that fact mean the radical restructuring of everything I thought I held sacred." I hold my Mexican identity to such a high standard, despite knowing that there is so much that could be changed and so many problematic values that needed to be unlearned. I had to let go of the idea that I need to be perfect for my

family, that I have to be this perfect daughter for them. I needed to stop portraying myself as someone who fit all of the stereotypes. I let go of so many things when I cut my hair, especially because it was one of the first things that people noticed when they saw me. I needed to stop classifying certain traits as feminine or masculine that I learned according to Mexican culture. I had to be okay with people judging me and thinking the worst of me because my hair was short. My dad, despite his original objections, realized that I was happier with myself and gave me the space to continue letting me cut my hair. I was grateful for that even if it meant dealing with jokes on his behalf.

Despite any belittling remarks you could get from a Mexican parent, you are reminded that they love you and will always be there for the family. Family is a very important value to Mexican households, in my experience. We are taught from a young age that no matter how much shit family may give you, they will always be there for your best parts and your worst parts. There is an inherent sense of community within Mexican culture that immediately draws you to them and gives you comfort. My dad instilled in me that my family will always be there for me. “Friends may be temporary, but family is forever.”

It’s hard though... It’s hard to think that the family that is supposed to always be there for you, will not understand you and will poke fun at your differences. It’s always excused. “That’s just how we show love!” But it puts people off. If we are taught that we need to put family first, how are we meant to do that when our gender and sexualities are made fun of? How are we supposed to put family first when they refuse to understand the ways that we are different and put us down for wanting to be more than the gender roles that were assigned to us?

It’s instances like these that always make me feel like I have to choose between my queer identity and my Mexican identity. It’s hard to bridge the two because my parents grew up in

Mexico and they still have little to no exposure to queer culture. There are some conservative views that are still ingrained in Mexican parents that are then transferred to their kids. When a Mexican family has a queer child, most times that child has to hide their identity. It's hard to do that for so long because it feels so suffocating. Then I am faced with the question: Am I supposed to choose between my gender identity/gender expression and feeling free or making my family comfortable and feeling trapped?

It's hard to answer that question. Most families would not even talk about queer topics, my family doesn't. While I am out to my siblings, I'm not out to my extended family or my parents in terms of my gender because it feels like that's something they don't want to know. To them, I am always going to be their daughter, Citlalli, female, she/her pronouns even if I want to be known as their child, Chris, nonbinary, he/they pronouns.

[Soft guitar music playing briefly]

While this sounds like a total bummer, I know that I have a community that will refer to me in the way that I am comfortable. As a queer person and a Mexican person, I know that I need to have a family that will be there for me and knows me, and accepts me however I am. I will always love my family, but I understand that some things will take time. The concept of a "chosen family" is crucial for my survival and happiness. As queer people, the value of family is important to us too. I am lucky to have a biological family that supports me, despite it being conditional, but I always longed for a space that gave me comfort in who I am. Others aren't as lucky to have that biological connection so we all look for a family that will accept us. We find that family in a variety of places and when we do, that concept of warmth is always there. Queer folks will always give that sense of community to people in need.

Richard T. Rodriguez talks about how embedded a family structure is into, in this case, Mexican culture in his book *next of Kin: The Family in Chicano/a Cultural Politics*. He starts by saying that “it's not hard to see why [la familia's] retention proves difficult given its placement at the heart of heteropatriarchal value systems. Yet the significance of kinship becomes evident when taking into account the myriad forces of subordination faced by Chicano/a and Latino/a communities.” He makes a point to say that the concept of family is deeply rooted in our culture and is enforced by our parents, who were taught these things by their parents. While some instances of family could be toxic, we are taught to stick with family and family will always know best. But we, as queer people, understand that we cannot flourish within that toxicity.

Rodriguez continues by saying “the queer folk within these communities will undoubtedly continue to critically assess and negotiate their relationship with the families to whom they are born as well as to those with whom they are joined by necessity.” We will continue to reevaluate what “family” means to us and how we can improve our communities by doing so. While it's understood that ‘la familia’ is important, how we choose to participate in that structure is up to us. I found my chosen family in my biological family, my friends, and older people that took me under their wing. There are many people that I choose to have in my life because they give me comfort and they accept me as I am. There's always going to be a community that will do that as long as we choose the people who will be there.

[Soft guitar playing briefly]

There are barriers that anyone would have to go through. When trying to bridge my queer and Mexican identities, the place I find to be most difficult is the language. Spanish is a heavily gendered language and as someone who doesn't like existing within the gender binary, it's hard to express myself. Words like “the table” would be considered to be feminine “*la mesa*” or



something like “the tree” would be considered to be masculine “*el arbol.*” There isn’t even a definite Spanish word for nonbinary.

I know that various people try to find gender-neutral alternatives to gendered words in the Spanish language. When referring to people from Latin America, people will use the term Latinx. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, it was first recorded on various online platforms and used as a way to combat the gendered language. This is a linguistic act of resistance to language that constructs a binary, and many queer theorists center resistance in their definition of queer, such as Michael Warner’s definition, queer is “resistance to regimes of the normal.” The binary Latino/Latina constructs the masculine/feminine binary as “normal.” Being queer in that setting is meant to defy that binary as something that’s normal and to defy most standards placed upon queer folks. Warner continues to describe that “being queer means fighting about these issues all the time, locally and piecemeal but always with consequences.” Our very existence in a Latinx space is about fighting all the ideals that don’t fit us and keeping the things that do.

The term Latinx came up because queer people of Latin descent wanted something they could use. Research done by the Pew Research Center found that only 23% of US adults that identify as Hispanic/Latino have heard of the term “Latinx.” And only 3% of those adults refer to themselves as “Latinx.”

The “x” to many people is an act of refusal to conform to any gender binary roles placed on them. Using the variant of “Latino” puts the focus on masculine people and completely erases the inclusivity of feminine people and people who fall outside of the binary. John Paul Brammer released an article on Mother Jones called “Digging Into the Messy History of “Latinx” Helped Me Embrace My Complex Identity” has commented that the use of Latinx rose to mainstream

usage due to the Pulse massacre in 2016. Because it was such a tragic event, it was talked about a lot and people didn't have a solid term to refer to the community that didn't other people. People would have had to use the "Latino/Latina" variants but those versions would have excluded others. Professors at Brooklyn College, Alan Aja and Maria Scharrón-del Río, that Minhae Shim Roth in their article "What Does Latinx mean?" spoke to have stated that "Perhaps [it was used] as an act of resistance, solidarity, and visibility of non-binary gender identities as the LGBTQ+ [community] was being attacked." It was a way to bridge together the community during that terrible time and to offer support in a way.

Many people do not agree with the word, however. While it's a good attempt and it's used in the mainstream, to some, it alienates the Spanish language. It is seen as a white-washing of the language because there is no way to pronounce Latinx comfortably in Spanish. The "x" sound isn't something we have in Spanish. If a native Spanish speaker would look at the word, they would pronounce it "*Latin-equis*" and it doesn't have the same effect. Examples of further attempts to make gender-neutral alternatives with inserting an "x" into the gendered Spanish words are: "*Amigxs*" and other words. I know what the "x" means to some people and it's a good attempt at de-gendering Spanish, it provides serious barriers for natives speakers and only benefits people that have English-speaking backgrounds.

Another way that people propose we de-gender the Spanish language is by changing the "a/o" to "e." This would make words like "*Latine*" better to pronounce because the "e" is a sound available within the phonological constraints of the Spanish language. This is further exemplified by inserting "e" into pronouns. As opposed to using "*Ellos/Ellas*," changing the form to "*elles*" makes a more gender-less form of the plural "they" in Spanish. While it can be

used effectively, it's a less-used form because of the number of people that have popularized the "Latinx" form.

These variations have been seen as a form of "linguistic imperialism" because of the English influence over the Spanish language and many people think it's a term only used in academia. Alan Aja and Maria Scharrón-del Río explained their rebuttals in their article "The Case FOR 'Latinx': Why Intersectionality Is Not a Choice" on LatinoRebels. An important thing to remember is that most variations of Spanish have been colonized by Spaniards who erased many indigenous languages so therefore Spanish, at its very core, is a form of "linguistic imperialism." Something that has been taught to me is that languages will always change when it's in constant contact with another language. Many people make the argument that the terms aren't used by everyone, but by a small percentage of the community. Yet there are countless documented accounts and academic papers written that include either form as a way to be inclusive.

Although there are methods of adjusting the Spanish language to a less gendered form, it's hard to break away from a mentality that people who speak Spanish have. They don't think that the language should change because they'll have to reevaluate their entire way of thinking. In the same article, Aja and Scharrón-del Río argue against the claim that "we already have a gender-neutral form: Latino" as it is another way people refuse to acknowledge the privilege that is given to the masculine people. Because men are given such high status over women, the Spanish language uses forms that include the masculine "o" as a "gender-neutral alternative." Claiming that "Latino" is already inclusive is problematic because it's a subtle way of perpetuating sexism and hegemonic masculinity by keeping men as the dominant people in any conversation.

[Guitar music playing briefly]

It's hard to accept change and to make change for everyone. As someone who is studying linguistics, I understand that language will change no matter what. It may not change as quickly as I would like but I know that it will. For now, we have these options when wanting to express gender-neutral words in Spanish and we can use whichever best suits our needs.

It's hard to blend two cultures that both have such rich histories but are also at odds. Ingrained ideas have made it difficult for Mexicans, in my experience, to accept many queer ideas. Many people see it as something that's not natural, despite there being many queered ancestors and ideologies in Mexican culture. It's a matter of educating people when possible and giving them time to adjust to things. We also have to create a dialogue that will help further the conversation on queer topics for Spanish-speaking folks.

One way to start that dialogue is to have people tell their stories, and for other people to listen. My story is one of many different ones but it all ties back to how restricting Latinx culture is for queer folks. Being Mexican is one of the best things for me but I will continue to reject the parts that are problematic and work to change them through the use of telling stories to bring awareness.

[guitar music playing over the next sentence]

We are all just looking after our families and we have to find a way to do that together. I told you my testimonio today, thank you for listening.

[A pause, music still playing]

My music comes from the Free Music Archive at [www.freemusicarchive.org](http://www.freemusicarchive.org) and was edited for time.