As an Argentinian in a group of Mexicans, I always knew that I was different from my friends—my skin a different shade too light, my Spanish’s song a little off, my accent less thick. I could never sound right saying their slang, and danced in an awkward circle amidst my quick-toed friends. As a Latina in a group of Caucasians, there was also a disconnect. Though I was led to believe that my intelligence was up to par I knew that my vocabulary lacked, that my pronunciation was too literal, and that my lifestyle was always a little strange in the eyes of my peers. In hindsight, my life has always been that way. Too white to be embraced by my Hispanic and African-American friends, too Hispanic for the white community of my school, always being pulled in one direction or the other, but never fitting a mold.

This phenomenon is not uncommon in this multicultural America. To the many people with multiple hyphens to their identity, this constant struggle of not fitting in to the fullest with one community or another is an everyday challenge. Between having to change languages, behaviors, and nuances in an attempt to blend into whichever group they’re with, you can never learn your true identity as deeply as you’d like, or your place within these communities.

Three accounts, that of myself and two others, have helped me to form a picture of how this type of tug-of-war seems to play out.

The culture one grows up with becomes a part of who you are, but sometimes it’s either not enough, or too much. For example, the first culture I was introduced in, where I began my American identification, was a Floridian one, an area that was rich in diversity, especially in their schools. I was raised around them, all of them with a neutral way of speaking and acting, which influenced my speech more than anything. My mother was born in Connecticut and my English was taught by PBS, making me more of a Northerner in voice which stuck out in the South where I was raised for most of my life.

But though it was easy to learn English, because it’s required of me in the United States, sometimes there’s not really a push to learn the language of your ancestors. Kayla Düngee, a
former classmate of mine now studying journalism, had this to say about her own upbringing, “My Spanish is a little broken, and that’s one thing that’s looked down upon by a lot of Spanish speakers. It’s frustrating because it wasn’t a choice I had a part of, my parents just didn’t focus on teaching me Spanish—something I have no control over.”

This type of issue is something that is prominent in the Latino community, especially amongst the youth. With the influx of immigrants coming into the states, many believe that it’s better to teach them English and ignore the Spanish because it means that no one will question how American they are. Margarita Ojeda, 41, had this to say about her own decision, “Once we had children, [my husband and I] consciously decided we wanted them to feel American first and Colombian second so we spoke English at home and celebrated stupid holidays like San Valentine’s.” Then adds, “I never tried to teach them Spanish, but they all try to learn it on their own ways, love to celebrate Colombian triumphs and enjoy learning about the country and the culture.”

Kayla, like Margarita’s four sons, are proud to claim all aspects of their heritage. To Kayla, the Afro-Puerto Rican and Sicilian blood are all an important part of her identity and she carries it well, but not everyone feels the same.

When I was little, my likeness to my mom always made it easy for me to say that the Italian blood, barely two generations removed, was the most prominent in my features and I carried it with the blind pride that all children do. But as I started learning about the horrors of colonization, I wanted to remove any existence that might lead to being accused of the potential atrocities of my ancestors and eventually my wish came true. As I came into myself, the latent Native paternal blood graced my awkward features and made me want to embrace that newly awakened part of me, but I was afraid to do so, afraid to be called a faker or an instable cultural leech. I didn’t know what to really call myself. I was Argentinian, my birth certificate said so, but was I? My identifiable accent was gone, my features different, so how could I claim what I was when no one would believe me?

There seems to be a tug-of-war between your dueling identities, Margarita explains that growing up she didn’t really have a strong Columbian sense of identity. “My parents were from
two very different, almost opposed, regions of Colombia, who moved to the capital city very young. Their families each kept traditions from their regions to keep their sense of belonging within the big city. But then, when they got married, they lived in several cities in Colombia, Venezuela and finally Medellin. Medellin is a very "regional" city with very defined traditions, very marked accent, long lines of ancestry that impacted last names, businesses, and behaviors. Moving there as a preteen wasn’t easy. I never felt completely accepted, or that I fully belonged.”

My youth was very similar. My “Yankee” mother, my Argentinian grandmother, and growing up in a Southern state all seemed to push me in different directions when it was convenient. After Florida, I lived in a predominantly African-American part of Decatur where I was one of the few lighter toned children in school and in our apartment complex. I learned about their culture and, while I knew it wasn’t mine, the ‘whiteness’ of my behavior and speech pattern always sticking out, it became a part of me as much as everything else. And though I never mastered the usage of y’all, the music and some cultural ticks stuck with me until I moved to Marietta—a drastic change to say the least. The mix of African and Caribbean cultures and faces turned into a new cocktail of Central American and Mexican colors and flavors that, while familiar to my own, were still quite different. And strangely enough, the feeling of ‘foreigner’ never quite left.

As unfortunate as it sounds, that outsider feeling sometimes comes even from those within your own cultural community. As Kayla confessed to me, “Whenever I claim just black, I'm usually met with questions like "Black and what else?"...But then there are other people who will say "one drop of black blood makes you black," and they will give you slack for claiming other parts of you...But something I've gotten from Italians if I've not specified Sicilian is an aire of superiority. Sicilians are stereotypically placed as darker, poorer, and more frequently involved in the mafia than the rest of the country of Italy.”

It always seems like it’s quick to claim someone as one of your own, but even easier to dismiss. As Kayla put it best, “People always try to confine you to one box, or their perception of you.” Those who don’t fit the image that they have of those in their culture, or of other cultures, get dismissed all together. When I first moved to Marietta, one of my classmates commented on
Argentinians, that all of them have large noses, complete with exaggerated child-like hand gestures to convey her point. That’s when my friend laughed and told her that I was from Argentina, which made her make her take back her comment, apologetic but still laughing. I returned that night and looked at my nose, far smaller than my grandmother and mother’s—my father’s nose they said—and my mother laughed, “Sadly, I got the Barbuto nose.” It made me wonder if it made me less of an Argentinian, less of an Italian, less of this and that.

Margarita claims that something similar occurs with her sons. She admits that they get upset when they are called ‘white’ and have their Columbian heritage upstaged and forgotten. But why is it that it’s so easy to forget one aspect of their cultures, indeed a big part of it? Her sons have no trace of an accent, English having been their first language, and are regarded as outgoing and intelligent—her eldest being valedictorian of the Class of 2016—and yet one culture is quick to claim him, the American, while the other somewhat dismisses him, the Hispanic. Likewise, I was never really claimed as a Hispanic, many people never knew I spoke Spanish until I did it out loud and shocked many people. While I was the pride of my people, being voted Most Intellectual just to spite the other two contestants and break the mold set by our previous classes, I was still kept away from things that touched on more of our combined cultures.

Maybe it’s our own faults. Margarita’s father once told her, “A donde fueres, haz lo que vieres,” in short, assimilate the culture of the place where you choose to live and she knew that she had done that. “Although I’m Colombian and get excited when Shakira sings or Montoya wins a race, my life is more defined by the American culture than the Columbian one by choice…but I don’t deny my Columbian heritage.” Kayla responded in a similar fashion, “Mostly everyone is some mix some point down the line, so I see no problem claiming all of my cultures, not just one.”

But I don’t know what to claim anymore. Am I still the little girl who clung to her Italian and Spanish ancestry with the dream of far-off stories that I carried? Am I the little American girl, too white to be claimed by her colorful friends, but still trying to prove that she’s still as colorful
as them? Or am I the young adult being asked how distant my native blood is? Or the current, ethnically ambiguous echo of myself being asked if I’m Native American at one point, then Indian or Middle Eastern at other times?

At a time in our country where the rise in ‘patriotism’ is fueled by that of prejudice, exclusion, and overall racism, it’s no longer a sense of pride that fuels my search for self-identity, but fear. My mother always jokes that, if anything, I am more American than most, “South America still has ‘America’ in its name,” but what will my features tell a crowd? Then what will my unaccented English do to those who feel as marginalized and fearful as I do, will they scoff or accept me as bullied brethren? Kayla commented something that might do many in this country a service, “If people learned more about where their family comes from and their history, they would realize that they are so much more than they realize as well.” But right now we stand in a purgatory of decision, a breath being held before the melting pot of America either gets shut down or embraced once and for all.

While there’s still some ways to go until we can simply be ourselves and embrace the colorful strands that feed our lives, and while I’m still finding who I am, I’m glad to say I’m happy being me. Italian, Spanish, Native Argentinian, American, Me.