

How do you know when you are valued for who you are—and not just because you provide “diversity”?

*One graduate student discovers the power of knowing that you are good enough to be in particular spaces*

by Anna Medina

Growing up both Mexican and American, I lived on both sides of the border at different times in my life, sometimes sure that I belonged, other times feeling disadvantaged. In dance classes, I felt at home, not just because I loved to dance, but because it was my grandmother’s studio in Tijuana. From the age of two, she taught me tap, my mother taught me jazz, and I also learned ballet. The studio was like a second home where I spent nearly all my time. Back then, I didn’t experience any form of discrimination or think about how my race could affect my opportunities in any learning environment.

I would attend competitions and intensives in LA from time to time, but it wasn’t until age 11 when I had the opportunity to take regular ballet lessons in Southern California. It was there, in the placement class at San Diego City Ballet, that I had my first doubts about whether or not I belonged. The barre felt familiar, so everything started well. But when we put on pointe shoes and were asked to do turns and balances in the center, I felt a knot forming in my stomach. I asked to go to the bathroom, where I started crying. Ballet was my favorite style, and though I had never been the best dancer in the room, I had always felt good enough. Why was I struggling now? Was it because this class was too hard for an 11-year-old, or because I simply was not good enough to be there? Were standards different in the United States? I felt so desperate, I wanted to find my mom and leave. But I didn’t. I took a deep breath and went back into the class, later earning a spot in my first *Nutcracker*.

In dance, I overcame my fears about being different—ballet was a language that I understood. But once I started my bachelor’s degree in Political Science at Boston College, I struggled with insecurity again. I had to write essays in English that demanded a complex vocabulary and an extensive knowledge of American history that wasn’t offered at my Mexican high school. Many of my peers had taken several AP classes on government, history, and literature, also not offered at my high school. In my first semester I had a Freshman Writing Seminar, and I was motivated and excited to learn from my teacher and excel in my assignments. Despite what I considered to be my best effort, I received a C in my first assignment and an invitation to office hours. I attended office hours every week for the rest of the semester after that to “catch up.” I was concerned about my grades and wondered if I had made the right decision by pursuing that major in a university like Boston College, knowing that English was my second language and that I had

never taken upper level classes in English before. But I had always excelled in school and had never failed a class or received Cs before, so why was I struggling so much now? I felt like the little insecure girl at my first ballet class in San Diego.

After a few office hours visits and practice essays, I finished my freshman year with what I considered to be acceptable grades. Then, I decided to take a Rights in Conflict seminar where we discussed issues of race, polarization, and conflict in American politics. One of my assignments was to write about affirmative action in the higher education system and take a stance on the issue. Our conversations in class had included the risk of placing students without the necessary tools to succeed in schools that would otherwise be out of their reach. I understood why affirmative action was put in place and why it was necessary, but it wasn't until I sat down to write my essay I realized that affirmative action could have applied to me too. All of a sudden everything clicked and I couldn't stop thinking that perhaps my admission was based on my Latina identity and not on my merit. Maybe this dream was in fact too good to be true, and that is why I was struggling so much to catch up with my peers. Regardless of my above-average grades in high school, my leadership roles in extracurricular activities, and my better-than-expected SAT scores, I still wondered if I was only there because I was a Mexican "addition" to a heavily Caucasian Jesuit university. I felt like I couldn't take an objective stance on affirmative action, because I might be a product of it. Not knowing what role it might have played in my life made me feel biased and powerless.

After four years in college I wasn't too worried about why I had been accepted anymore. I was used to being the only Mexican in many of my classes and the only Latina in my dance team. Instead of worried, it made me proud, and I wanted to represent my country honorably. It wasn't always easy: in four years I was called Maria twice (once by a classmate and once by a professor); I was also nicknamed "Anna from Mexico," and I was once asked if I knew any "narcos." I did my best to improve my writing skills and my English as much as I could, and I was always proud to share my experiences as a Mexican American student. My place in school suddenly didn't feel like something out of my control, and my cultural identity became something that I could embrace and show, because I felt like I belonged based on my own merit.

The process of applying for the MFA in Dance at University of California, Irvine was very different from what I had experienced before. In my previous government job I constantly felt like I was being underpaid considering my degree, my communication skills and my performance in the job. This made me feel incredibly frustrated because it aligned with the too-familiar story a Latina woman making less than anyone else in the office despite being more qualified than others. I applied to become a grad student with passion and inner drive. I was eager to show up for people like me who are so underrepresented in the higher education dance field. During my interview I did my best to be true to myself and my goals without "playing the Latina minority card." My race is not a marketing tool, but it is truly part of my identity, and it

has played a significant role in my growth and development as a young professional. I make sure to share my heritage because representation is important, and I know that minorities struggle when they don't see themselves in positions of power.

At this point of my life I consider myself to be more aware of the importance of diversity, inclusion and equity. Due to my own experiences, I commit to paying women of color a fair wage if I am ever in the position of determining their salary. I also commit to sharing my platform with others and asking questions that invite them to share their perspectives without making assumptions or reinforcing stereotypes. I commit to acknowledging and discussing the differences in opportunity that people face and taking meaningful steps to make a significant difference. I will make my classes available to people that speak different languages and have different abilities. I commit to researching, investigating and educating myself about the history and cultural background of my dance practice in order to deliver a respectful and truthful learning experience to others. More specifically, I will discuss the presence of African dance heritage in different styles of dance and how the African American and Native American presence in concert dance is often overlooked. I acknowledge that sometimes I will not have the necessary knowledge or lived experience to lead these conversations; therefore, I will create a platform for others to teach and represent their culture.

I have learned that I will continue to have "firsts" as a Latina: my first time teaching a dance class in English, my first time writing a thesis in English (or in any other language); and I will continue using google pronounce before my presentations to make sure no one is distracted by my accent. But I also know that being able to choreograph a jazz number inspired by Fosse with music from Bach for my first graduate concert is a luxury. Because the pressure to make a piece that talks about my Mexican roots is only in my head and it isn't expected of me. I can do it if I feel inspired to but this is only a part of who I am not my whole identity. I know that my ethnic identity isn't the reason I am here today, and I refuse to doubt every opportunity I get because I am "Anna from Mexico."

Looking back to those moments when I felt insecure, I focus on my response. I did not leave my ballet placement class in San Diego, I took a deep breath and walked back into the classroom. I didn't drop out of college and I didn't change my major. Instead, I performed in my first *Nutcracker*, I graduated from Boston College, and now I am a Latina graduate student at UCI. In conversation with a few undergraduate students recently, I heard an African American girl express her doubts about affirmative action playing a role in her admission process. I immediately jumped in and assured her that she was not only deserving but also capable of achieving anything she worked for. As minorities, telling our stories is important because most stories have different characters, yet very similar plots.



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