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Burial Practices Expose Identity Formation: *Muerte y figura hasta la sepultura*

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Abstract

An examination of identity formation and its performative qualities or ways in which one enacts identity emerged as a result of a study of racially segregated cemeteries in a rural South Texas town, a practice that continues to dictate how burials are carried out, according to race. Fieldwork, archives, and *pláticas*, made visible the historical origins of funerary practices for the primary author—whose family lives in Nixon, Texas. Along with documenting funerary practices, this study explores the ways in which Pantoja Perez’s ancestors creatively camouflaged ethnicity to disidentify with their Mexican identity, in the context of an ideology of Americanization. It was found that cultural, as well as funerary practice veiled and protected Mexicans by class, thus not having to enact a racialized ethnicity while rejecting culture and language practices associated with being Mexican in public spaces.

Keywords: Racialization, Americanization, Ethnic Identity Formation, Funerary Practices, Intergenerational Trauma Healing

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In the Legacy of Jim Crow

Burial segregation practices are examined in Nixon, Texas, which is about 60 miles southeast of San Antonio; a town founded by John T. Nixon in 1906 and located in southwest Gonzales County (Gonzales County Historical Commission, 1986). With the exception of Pantoja Perez's grandmother, this town served as the final resting place of matrilineal remains, which lay in the Latin American Cemetery—a sacred site for her since childhood. Despite such a legacy, Nixon is a hazy memory for her. However, her recollections are of the cemetery, and traveling there in her aunt's wood-paneled mini-van as she eyed a thin fence, exposed orange soil on the ground, and headstones. For her, it was a mysterious place, framed by the broad blue sky, and an iron arch towering its entrance—a view associated with the sounds of footsteps crunching the gravel stones beneath their feet. The cemetery would not be the only site where mysteries would be unraveled. Through this process, the production of knowledge would yield new ways of thinking.

As co-authors, we begin with a premise that knowledge is a collaborative project. As such, this article is the product of a praxis that emerged from an original MA thesis research project for Pantoja Perez. While the intellectual point of departure is based on Pantoja Perez's family history and personal knowledge, the end product incorporates Méndez-Negrete's knowledge, as a mentor up to the submission and revisions of the final manuscript. Moreover, our premise is that knowledge does not take place inside an individual's mind, but that what we know, what we can know, and what we publish derives in the discourse of those projects, from conceptualization to final product. Thus, in this article we trace the life experiences of Pantoja Perez's maternal female ancestors to explore the origins of white passing practices and its influences on the family's identity formation.

Through this project, Pantoja Perez documented and carried out multiple trips to the family ancestral burial site. These visits brought forth childhood memories about the family tending to ancestors' graves, pulling weeds that had overtaken the headstones, using towels or discarded clean rags to wipe the dirt off of the façade, and replacing old, weathered flower arrangements in the process. Sometimes, they adorned the headstones with artificial flowers. Other times, they would fasten white plastic crosses to metal stakes.

These traditions, which included adults and children, had come upon the death of Pantoja Perez's maternal grandmother—Celia Pantoja—buried in San Antonio, Texas, at San

Fernando Cemetery #2. It was this final resting place that gave Celia Pantoja ownership of her Mexicaness, despite having lived a life replete with contradictions between racism and classism as a sort of dance of not ever having identified as Mexican.

Given biases and anti-Mexican racism, Pantoja Perez's grandmother was consumed with white passing or as someone who emulates dominant cultural practices or beauty standards to deny ethnicity. A woman of great contradictions, she always found time to socialize and dance at Tejano nightclubs. Relationally, she married men of Mexican heritage. And, she exclusively watched Univision and *telenovelas*, and relied on *curanderas* and folk healers. By all social and cultural standards, Celia Pantoja would have been perceived as a typical Mexican American woman. However, she consciously set herself apart from poor and working-class Mexicans. Her own socialization shaped the ways in which her descendants learned to disassociate Mexican ethnicity and culture from their lives.

Ironically, cemetery research unearthed and fleshed Pantoja Perez's ancestral knowledge of ethnic and cultural roots long buried. Equipped with this truth, Pantoja Perez progressively learned to embrace her Chicana ethnicity, an identity with which Méndez-Negrete identifies. At the Latin American Cemetery, face-to-face with erasure of history that was not transmitted in her home or instructed in the Texas public schools she attended, Pantoja Perez began a process of self-reclamation. However, it would not be until graduate school that she would retrieve her people's collective history, following a path of archival knowledge to make visible her maternal ancestral lineages.

Americanized inside an assimilationist educational system (see Takaki, 1993), Pantoja Perez's upbringing did not include ethnic ancestral knowledge, culture, history, and language. Consequently, her cemetery research awakened a historical amnesia of someone who had learned to reject her Indigeneity, even when her grandmother imparted unspoken messages of being a *mexicana de la casa*, without ever exposing herself as a Mexican in the public sphere.

This project facilitated reconfiguration and reclamation of an identity denied to Pantoja Perez at home and in public spaces such as educational institutions that continue to exclude the culture and history of Mexicans in the United States (Delgado Bernal, Elenes, Godinez, & Villenas, 2006). Pantoja Perez created the space to critically examine the whitening process that had shielded her relatives, and through this process she cast away *la concha de nácar*—the beauty product and an ideology that whitewashed her ancestral ethnic identity.

This research idea began with the untimely passing of Pantoja Perez's uncle in 2009, whereby obscured burial ancestral memories carved out deeper significance for her, as she was not informed of the site in which he had been buried. Thus, she found herself in a town that was no longer familiar, canvassing one cemetery at a time, until she located his grave in the Latin American Cemetery. There, searching through numerous rows of antiquated and modern headstones, she happened upon a cluster of maternal surnames—Cisneros and Pantoja. Pantoja Perez recalled:

I was stunned—my elders never described the grounds where our ancestors remained—they failed to mention its conditions. My eyes were not prepared for the stark contrasts that are found between rural and city cemeteries. However, what surprised and disturbed my mind the most was the name of the cemetery—Latin American Cemetery—an identity that intruded on everything that I had been raised to believe about the family's ethnic origins. Never once in either my childhood or adolescence, did I witness a family member refer to themselves as Latin American, Latino, Mexican or Mexican American. The only ethnicity they ever subscribed to was Hispanic or “white Hispanic,” and yet our kin were buried in a segregated cemetery that ultimately marked them as Mexican.

It would be the name of the cemetery that compelled Pantoja Perez to seek the counsel of Nixon's City Manager whom informed her that her ancestors were buried in a cemetery that “was and continues to be a segregated one” (M. Zepeda, Personal Communication, November 15, 2014). Perplexed, with the realization that the rural town of Nixon maintained segregated burials practices, Pantoja Perez continued to research its history and amenities. What follows is a brief description of three cemeteries, not including St. Joseph's Catholic and Rancho.

Latin American and Other Cemeteries—Unveiling Truths

Located off of an unpaved, red-orange dirt road leading up to a sloped driveway, the Latin American Cemetery is a roadside burial site on the margins of the city limits. It is enclosed by chicken wire and supported by wooden posts. The main entrance is framed with aluminum tubing that frames an iron arch with capital letters, “LATIN AMERICAN CEMETERY NIXON TEXAS.” A silver chain-link gate swings open to reveal an antiquated ribbon-driveway used to transport caskets to a tiny pavilion that sits at the rear. Its grounds evidence cultural maintenance and ethnic pride, based on the number of decorative statues and flowers that

adorn the graves. The lawn is mostly bare, with inconsequential patches of grass. Mesquite trees line the perimeter of the fence and serve as backdrops, rather than shade, and there are no benches or elegant statues to invoke a burial space. Many headstones bear images of Jesus, the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, cherubs, rosaries, and crucifixes.

African American Burial Site—Rising Sun

After visiting Nixon numerous times, Pantoja Perez accidentally happened upon this cemetery's location. It is adjacent to the rear of the Latin American Cemetery, and situated off of an unpaved dirt road. Known to some locals as "the negro cemetery," it cannot be seen from the highway.

Black aluminum poles that frame and support the Rising Sun Cemetery's main entrance display "HC-RS CEMETERY I.M OF SAM MOORE JR." Beneath the arch is a ranch-style gate that swings open for access—to the left and the right of the main entrance are large, white plastic barrels overfilled with discarded boxes, trash, and dried flowers. The terrain is flat and sunbaked, which has rendered the soil rock solid and impervious to the weight of visitors. Organizationally, this particular cemetery is divided into two sections. The majority of the antiquated graves have been placed along the fence line nearest to the front, while more recent graves have been placed at the center. The majority of the concrete headstones are handmade and contain handwritten engravings. Other graves are marked with hollow steel pipes that were welded together to form the shape of a cross.

For Whites Only—No Mexicans Allowed

This cemetery is in the suburbs and is well maintained. Embellished with a U.S. flag, black steel letters read "NIXON CEMETERY." Visible and accessible through a single paved road, the cemetery is designed in the shape of a horseshoe, with main thoroughfare connected to paved sections. It is fenced on all sides, and the front displays donor names affixed to brick columns, denoting financial investment and support of its exclusionary practices.

With the exception of family plots, burial sections are in alphabetical order, according to surnames. It contains several dozen large-scale obelisk gravestones, indicating the wealth and status of the deceased. These gravestones are enclosed within large family plots surrounded by grave curbs that range from simple to unique in design. A final resting place for whites, burial in the Nixon cemetery symbolizes acceptance and membership into the dominant culture. On the

contrary, for Mexicans racialized as non-white, burial in the Latin American cemetery is symbolic of past and ongoing exclusionary practices.

Literature Review

Exclusion of Mexicans

An exploration of existing literature on the topic of Mexican American identity and assimilation in Texas evidences cultural cleansing as even in death, racialized ethnicity impacts belonging. In Texas, forever a group assigned to a second-class citizenship, Mexican Americans have experienced fragmented histories. Anglo derision dictates who they are and where they fit, which pushes many to assimilate, so as to avoid persecution. Samora and Simon (1977), in *A History of the Mexican-American People*, conclude that Mexican history in the United States is incomplete, in their survey dating to the initial Spanish conquest (1500-1800s). Montejano (1987) and Ramos (2010), researching Texas Mexicans revealed a history of exploitation, mistreatment, corruption, separation, and marginalization, which began with segregations of elites through the creation of a dual wage system that relegated and trapped Mexicans in the agricultural labor sector.

Racial segregation in burial sites mirrors the history of racism in Texas. Anglo and Mexican race relations date back to the Texas Revolution of 1837 to 1842. In *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas*, Montejano (1987) chronicles the aftermath of the war and the sentiments that created hatreds and prejudices, explaining:

the occupying power may simply overwhelm the defeated people through immigration and settlement, so that within the space of a few years everything becomes completely transformed. Laws, public customs, authority, even the physical appearance of old settlements become foreign and alien to the native people. (p. 25)

As part of the incorporation of the Southwest, the period immediately after the war became a time of suspicion and retaliation, as recorded by the Texas Historical Commission webpage by Barker and Pohl (2010), observing that “though the Alamo story initially struck fear in the hearts of the Texans, it subsequently led to a relentless thirst for vengeance” (n.p.). Appetite for vengeance continued beyond the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo into the Reconstruction period, creating Jim Crow practices that were brought in by Anglos slave owners enforcing segregation until it was ruled unconstitutional through the Civil Rights Act of 1965. Segregation pervaded in the social institutions of Texas, among which are religion, education, and civic life.

Texas and Race Relations

According to DeLeon (2011), Jim Crow, although often conceived as a practice that marginalized African Americans, became the foundation for segregation practices against Mexicans that permeated every facet of life in Texas. Montejano (1987), in *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986*, provides a compelling backstory whereby he examines the incorporation of the Southwest of racist and classist practices that created a class apart. Likewise, Ramos (2010) unpacks Mexican status and class society in Bexar County and San Antonio, Texas, prior to the Mexican American War and the declaration of independence of the Republic. Many of the social and cultural issues covering the period between 1836 and the early twentieth century continue to plague what plays out in U.S. politics today. In Ramos' (2010) account, the various ethnic and racial backgrounds of the early Anglo settlers in Texas were chronicled. He claims that "Hispanics/Latinos" are a minority group that is gaining in size and with that comes the loss of their language and customs, which was and continues to be perceived as a threat to the fabric of "American" society. He also provides a history of well-known wealthy landowners—such as Richard King the founder of Kingsville, Texas—who developed and named towns after their families and married landed Mexican elite. Aside from the common practice of intermarrying to acquire land, racial tension continued to divide Anglos and Mexicans.

De León (1983) analyzing race relations in Texas between 1821 and 1900, addresses Anglo attitudes toward Mexicans, concluding that, "Whites dehumanized Mexicans to such an extent that some considered them no better than animals" (p. 73). To illustrate his point, De Leon (1983) elaborates on Texas Rangers and the lynching of Mexicans:

The rangers thrived because of the terrifying images whites conjured up of cruel Mexicans. Fears were evidenced in hysteria, over reaction, and retributive violence.

With all of white society ready to strike against any Indian or Black threat with a harsh, brutal, often extralegal form of violence, it is small wonder that the everyday citizen, the vigilante, and the Texas Ranger joined in retaliation against Mexicans as well. (p. 88)

Racial atrocities have not abated. More recently, in their analysis of Hispanic racial and ethnic stratification, Nelson and Tienda (1997) posit that:

Racism was used by employers to pursue economic interests which resulted in a set of conditions that both structured the lives of Chicanos and gave racial and ethnic

prejudice in the Southwest a life of its own. The continued entry of new immigrants maintains and renews this process. (p. 12)

Also, Feagin and Cobas (2014), looking at everyday racism from a middle-class Latino perspective, point out that white vigilante groups continue to patrol the U.S. border with Mexico, stating that many whites support forceful if not, brutal border patrolling methods in controlling the border including an electric fence along the Mexican/US border.

One can assume notions of cultural cleansing in the ways in which immigrants are expected to conform to mainstream society. Samora and Simon (1977), who critically examine the U.S. concept of the “melting pot,” question whether Mexicans can really be absorbed into the mix and whether or not the concept of the melting pot is entirely desirable. Also, despite Anglo racist practices against Mexicans during the Great Depression, which resulted in the repatriation of Mexican citizens and Americans of Mexican descent, he problematizes the role the U.S. played in attracting Mexican laborers through the Bracero program. Racism whether as a systemic oppression or one linked to socioeconomic class demonstrates separation, not only in the agricultural fields and in sociocultural environment, but also in aftermath of life—their final resting place.

Cultural Practices and Traditions

The burial of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in Texas continues to be a practice of segregation. According to Stacy (2002) this separation “extended beyond the day-to-day experiences of the living” noting that communities of color had “separate funeral homes and cemeteries for Anglos and Mexicans” (p. 741). She highlights the 1940s Three Rivers incident with Félix Longoria, in *Mexico and the United States, Volume I*, in a section called “Segregation and Integration.” She writes that Longoria “a Mexican American soldier who died fighting in the Pacific during World War II” was denied service, and “a national outcry ensued, especially because he had died fighting for the United States” (Stacy, 2002, p. 741). Also, the issue of Mexicans facing segregation after returning home from war is addressed by González (2006) whose original work was completed in 1929 and published as *Life Along the Border*. She argues:

Both classes, the middle and the landowners, are thoroughly disgusted with the situation; the former aspires to the social equity it feels it must have, the second simply demands what it always had. They oppose the discrimination that is shown concerning their attending certain public places. They resent the fact that in some of the Valley

towns, Mexicans are not admitted at cafes, picture shows, hotels, and bathing beaches.
(p. 114-115)

While her discussion does not center on the interment of Mexican, through her careful documentation we learn about the conditions that created such an environment. Salazar (2009) speaks directly to the point in her Master's thesis observing, "San Marcos has two separate Mexican cemeteries in addition to the city cemetery. The city cemetery segregated Mexican American dead until the mid-twentieth century. This segregationist policy in the city cemetery is visually noticeable today... in [its] layout" (Salazar, 2009, p. 20).

In *María, Daughter of Immigrants*, María Antonietta Berriozábal (2012) recalls the segregation pertaining to final rites for her ancestors: "[Apolonia] died shortly after Félix and Sebastiana arrived in Reedville. At the time, there was no cemetery where Mexicans could be buried, so her burial site was a plot of ranchland granted by the owners" (Berriozábal, 2012, p. 5). While not clearly articulating that there were only Anglo cemeteries, with her story we find that burials were segregated. If it were not that her family legacy was intertwined with deep connections to the Catholic Church, they would have had to ask their employers to provide them a parcel. She explains:

Both [maternal and paternal] families worshipped at St. Michael's Church in Uhland, about ten miles from Lockhart [...] My father's uncle, Pablo ... was instrumental in raising money among the Mexican community to buy a little piece of land ... [that was ultimately] consecrated as a Catholic cemetery where the Mexican parishioners could bury their dead. Before this, there was only a German cemetery ... [Mexicans] were buried wherever they could get a land owner's approval. (Berriozábal, 2012, pp. 13-14)

In Berriozábal's case, the elders in the community organized themselves to create spaces for their final burial sites. They relied on their Catholic Church and those humane employers who would donate land to deal with such unequal practices. According to Jimenez (2016) mutual societies such as La Sociedad de la Union in San Antonio facilitated the burial of their ancestors. He recalls, "My family—grand-uncles, aunts, and my parents—belonged to La Union for decades. When my mother died, La Union paid off the burial benefit she had been paying for years" ("Normanna Incident," 2016).

With a discussion of *mutualistas*, Jennifer Nájera (2015), in *The Borderlands of Race*, speaks to the prevalence of Mexican mutual-aid societies in Texas, as she writes about a small town in South Texas:

Though some Mexican people in La Feria achieved a level of economic stability (e.g., enough to become small-business owners), the majority ... lived in poverty ... [however,] the structure of segregation precluded opportunities for social and economic advancement. Indeed, many Mexican people depended on their fellow community members for their economic survival. ... Mexican-origin people in La Feria, and in Mexican communities throughout Texas, created and participated in mutual-aid societies. (p. 73-74)

As Nájera clearly articulates, these mutual-aid practices were often organized to meet interment needs of Mexican Americans. For example, in community of Nixon, Texas it was the Woodmen of the World who tended to such needs for the Latin American Cemetery.

Unfortunately, despite the historical evidence of these practices, segregated burial customs continue to be accepted as tradition in the state of Texas. For example, in West Texas, in a public radio story, “A Legacy of Division in Marfa’s Cemeteries,” Mia Warren (2014) speaks to these contemporary practices: “Just off Route 90 in Marfa, Texas are three cemeteries, divided by fencing—and race ... the separations between whites and Hispanics [nee Mexicans] are still visible among the departed—people remain segregated.” She continued, “There are the Anglo cemetery. The other two—*Cementerio de la Merced* and the Marfa Catholic cemetery—are Mexican” (Warren, 2014). In Warren’s radio report, Alberto Garcia, assistant librarian at the Marfa Public Library, identified a Mexican place for burials “one hundred feet from the railroad tracks,” stating that, “On the other side of the fence is the Anglo cemetery, full of well-groomed, grassy plots” (Warren, 2014). Similar to what I observed in the Anglo cemetery of Nixon, Texas, Garcia argues that “the divisions here aren’t just aesthetic. It wasn’t too long ago that racial segregation was once a way of life in Marfa, Texas” (Warren, 2014).

In Corpus Christi, Jimenez, a columnist of the *Corpus Christi Caller Times*, unearths the “ugly roots of segregation,” documents the case of a “Hispanic man [that] was denied burial in a small cemetery in the Bee County community” (Jimenez, 2016). As was the case with Marfa and Nixon, in Jimenez’s report Hispanic becomes a catch-all alibi for anti-Mexican segregation

practices. Pedro Barrera's ashes "could not be buried because of his ethnicity." Jimenez (2016) asserts, "segregation of the dead was once a widespread and accepted practice all over Texas," reminding us that "bigotry extends even to the grave." Through his narrative, he warns that "segregated cemeteries still exist in Texas," adding that, "some are legacies of history, no longer used, but still bearing witness to a time when segregation was so common place as to not even be questioned" (Jimenez, 2016). And, the controversy continues—MacCormack (2016) of the San Antonio Express-News reported that "two months after a South Texas woman was refused permission to bury the ashes of her Hispanic husband in a "white only" cemetery in rural Bee County, a civil rights group is suing to end the discriminatory practice" (para. 1).

Funerary Customs Inside and Outside Race

Death is an unavoidable fact of life, but it is often taboo to discuss. Blanco (2014) examines the evolution of Western grieving and funerary customs to understand how death has the power to cripple, fascinate, or inspire us. Also, in a discussion of funerary customs, Sweeny (2014) examines the process of death and grieving in the United States, to include the fads and fashions that have come and gone throughout the decades. However, nowhere in this text are there Mexicans and other people of color included in the analysis.

In their groundbreaking article, Juárez and Salazar (2010) explore the commercialization of death and the gender roles that bereaved families take on upon their families' demise. In their ethnography, they document Mexican American women's influence in the flower and grave decorating industry, as they speak to the gendered roles men and women take on for these practices.

In death as in life, Mexican and Mexican Americans are devalued citizens of the nation. Irene Blea (1992), speaking to the conundrum posed by the notion that Americanization disempowers Mexicans from claiming their rightful place as citizens of the nation states offers: "The sociocultural forces behind this Americanization effort were so intense and so successful that to question the premise, even today, is to be un-American" (p. 52). While segregated burial practices are not overt points of contention in these times, even when some isolated cases have surfaced in the social and traditional media, there have been cases that have received national attention, much research has to be done to assess segregated burial practices. As these customs were uncovered, the disidentification of Mexican identity among Pantoja Perez's

maternal ancestral line, and their acceptance of racialized funerary practices emerged—Mexicans in death and Americans in life—the only exception being Celia Pantoja who chose San Fernando Cemetery in San Antonio, Texas, as her final resting place. Celia Pantoja’s narrative becomes a point of examination in this article.

Methodology

The methodology consisted of examining the life experiences of maternal female ancestors, which contributed to the *conocimiento*, and gave insight into the long-term effects of intergenerational trauma. This approach further informed how racial injustices experienced by preceding ancestors impacted the identity and socialization of subsequent generations. From a Chicana feminist epistemological lens, which deconstructs the lived experiences of women of color and how those experiences are perceived, and documented (Delgado Bernal, 1998), Pantoja Perez traced the life experiences of her maternal female ancestors to understand the origins of white passing practices and its influences on the family’s identity based on the intersections of race, class, and gender. The methods utilized in this study are as follows: Narrative interviews, self-reflection, and field research. Additional theories and methods that influenced this study involve Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1987) methods of *autohistoria* and *conocimiento*, Chela Sandoval’s (2000) theory of oppositional consciousness, and Cherríe Moraga’s (2015) “Theory in the Flesh.” These scholarly ways of creating knowledge facilitated the examination of the constructed identities and lived experiences of Pantoja Perez’s maternal female ancestors.

Fleshing the Bone: A Legacy of Secretos

Roy Cisneros, a maternal cousin twice removed from Pantoja Perez, completed a partial genealogy on the Cisneros family and facilitated the process of linking the family’s ancestral line to eighteenth century Mexico. Cisneros documented the significant life events of the line (births, deaths, and marriages) exclusively through the male descendants. Thus, while making hidden knowledge visible for Pantoja Perez, these androcentric documents complicated the task of tracing female ancestors. The names of prominent maternal female ancestors appeared only under two conditions: they were married to or were the offspring of a Cisneros male. Throughout the process of retrieving information on the names, births, and deaths of these women, their history was only traceable through male relations. From stories based on family memories, and retracing the histories of her earliest maternal female ancestors, Perez-Pantoja

examines patterns and practices of daily life, as these related to their ethnic background and the places they occupied in their respective communities. What follows are the findings.

Findings: Who Were These Ancestors?

Isabel DeHoyos, maternal great-great grandmother is the first female ancestor whose life can be traced in its entirety. Records show that DeHoyos was born in 1882 in Reynosa, Mexico and died in 1961 in San Antonio, Texas, living most of her natural life in Nixon. Old documents show that DeHoyos moved with her husband to Cuero, Texas along with sister-in-law, “Angelita.” The entire Cisneros family gathered in Cuero and from there, each family went their separate ways—some went to El Campo, others to Kingsville, and some to Nixon. The initial coming together took place somewhere between 1890 and 1900. Isabel remained in Cuero, Texas long enough to give birth to a daughter, Evangelina before permanently settling in Nixon a few years later.

A young DeHoyos dressed in a Victorian era high-collared blouse and a long skirt; perched on her head is a wide, flat brimmed summer hat, which is evidence of the time. It is possible that this photo (Figure 1) was taken on her wedding day considering that many Victorian era wedding photos depict a bride standing next to a seated groom. If this is the case, because of their style of clothing and the presence of jewelry, her attire indicates a certain level of wealth.

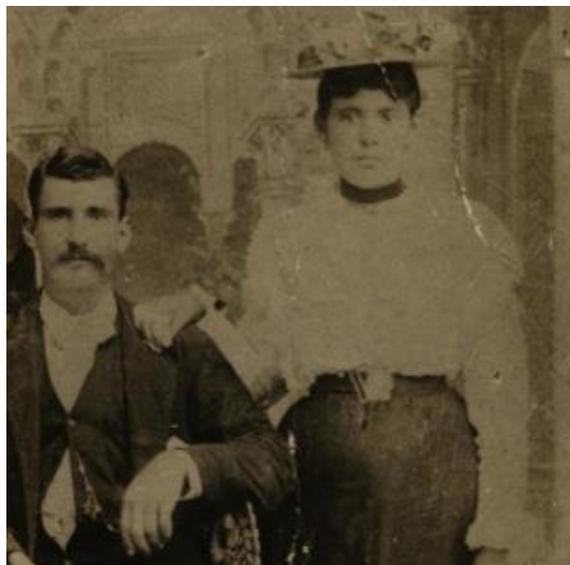


Figure 1. Wedding photo of Isabel DeHoyos and Juan Cisneros (Cisneros-Pantoja family collection).

On the other hand, an elderly Isabel Cisneros reveals a much darker skin tone that can be attributed to time spent as a migrant worker in the borderlands of Texas. This photo (Figure 2) was taken in the 1950s in San Antonio in front of the Cisneros family home; her loose-fitting clothing reflects a simple and modest style of dress that coincides with rural life.



Figure 2. Isabel Cisneros in San Antonio, Texas circa 1950s (Cisneros-Pantoja Family Collection).

Great-grandmother Evangelina Cisneros, a Pantoja through marriage, was born April 1901, in Cuero, Texas. Raised in an agricultural family, she worked alongside them (Figure 3). She was the first of nine children born to her parents, Juan and Isabel Cisneros. At seventeen, with the untimely death of her father, she became a surrogate mother to her eight younger siblings—two of whom were toddlers.

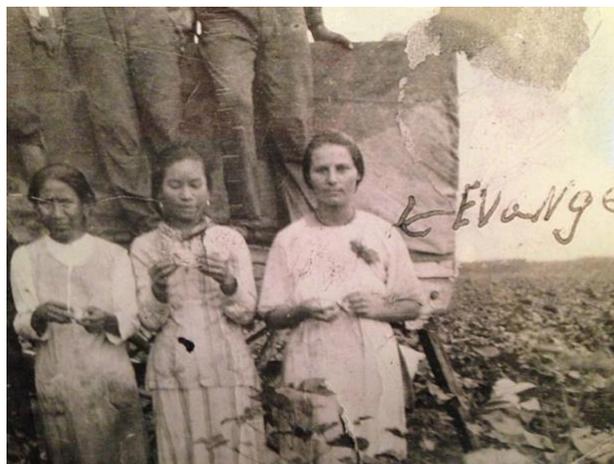


Figure 3. Evangelina Cisneros poses for a photo alongside her brothers and fellow South Texas migrants (Cisneros-Pantoja Family Collection).

In her early twenties, Evangelina Cisneros would create her own family when she married Esteban Pantoja, later experiencing the loss of three children who died in infancy and whose remains are buried in Nixon's segregated cemetery. Her only child to survive past infancy was Celia Pantoja, her first-born child who arrived in the neighboring town of Pandora, in 1927. An old photo in the family depicts a young child standing next to a tiny coffin—it is a grim picture of Celia Pantoja staring back at the camera, head slightly canted to one side, eyes squinting from the sun. The face of her dead, infant brother is exposed through the small window in the coffin, he is wearing what appears to be a white christening outfit complete with a bonnet, head slightly tilted back, eyes half open, and tiny lips parted. Wealth had not spared her family from burying three children in the Latin American Cemetery. The practice of passing availed entry into places that most Mexican residents could not enter.

Class Mobility for Evangelina and Esteban Pantoja

Later in life, the couple would leave agriculture, to become wealthy owners of the first Pool Hall/Dance Hall in Nixon. In pláticas with granddaughter Darlene Diane, her grandmother's origins in the scorching hot fields of South Texas, to later live a sheltered life of luxury and convenience, illustrating it with a trip they took in the late 1960s to the Supermarket in San Antonio:

Grandma Evangelina Pantoja—solely addressed by her married name—had no sense of cost... Grandpa took care of everything. [Her] only job was to stay home, take care of the house, and the children. Money was hardly an object. Whenever Grandma needed anything in Nixon, she went out and got it on account—she never handled any cash money. Grandpa Pantoja had personal accounts everywhere in Nixon, she never looked at the price tag or the bottom line—Grandpa settled all accounts. So, there I was, shopping with my widowed grandmother who had brought a cart full of groceries, she pulls out a few dollars, and says, “This should cover it, right *mija*?” What do you say to that—that naiveté? All I could do was smile, nod in agreement, and send her off with the cart while I settled the remainder of the bill with the cashier. I didn't have the heart to tell her it wasn't enough.

When Evangelina [Pantoja] Cisneros passed in 1985, she left behind a legacy of kindness, love, and care for others, but also nuances of inequality. Her caregiving abilities earned her the

endearment of “*A’ma Chiquita*,” because she was a woman who took care of many and was also tended to in return.

Class mobility did not shelter Mexicans from segregation. Sheltered from racialized treatment, Pantoja reproduced discrimination with those that did not meet her aesthetic, shaping the family’s internalized racism and classism, which eventually led to their separation from “common” Mexicans. Pantoja grew up as a guarded only-child born into a wealthy Mexican American family. Yet, despite the family’s wealth, protection against Jim Crow segregation was not afforded to every family member. Esteban, Celia’s father, was not as fair skinned as his wife and daughter, which proved to be problematic. For example, in the 1940s, the family sought to eat at a diner in Nixon. Because of his color, Esteban was refused entry and was told that he could only receive service at the back door. In contrast, Celia and her mother accessed the diner through the front door.

This and other humiliating encounters with racism and discrimination led the family to internalize their race and class privilege, to separate themselves from Mexicans of lesser status. By the time she became an adolescent, Celia Pantoja did not associate with Mexican migrant children. Moreover, the experience at the diner taught Pantoja a lesson in access—fair skin grants entry to those who are suitable to Anglo racial aesthetics.

In her analysis of segregation in a South Texas town, Nájera (2015) examines the case study of Francisco “Frank” Rodriguez of La Feria, Texas; a Mexican businessman who lived in the Anglo side of town in the late 1940s and “walked on both sides of the street” (p. 94). Despite crossing racial boundaries in other circumstances, Rodriguez was denied access to a notoriously segregated barbershop that was co-owned by his “good friend and business mentor—an Anglo man named Mr. Smith” (p. 95). Nájera elaborates, “The shop did not cut Mexican hair. Smith returned to Rodriguez apologetically and noted regretfully that there was nothing he could do” (p. 95). This situation is reminiscent of the time when Esteban Pantoja was denied entrance into the town diner in Nixon. Rodriguez also confronted racial lines that could not be crossed “despite his entrée into other Anglo realms” (p. 95).

Myths surround Grandma Pantoja’s true-life experiences. *Tío Fonzo* often recalled the Majorette photograph:

Mom was never a majorette, no. That uniform belonged to someone marching in a parade in Nixon... she liked it and wanted to try it on so she convinced the girl to trade

clothes with her so she could pose in it. I noted the pantyhose and asked, [I retorted, “Even the pantyhose, *Tío*”? To which he replied] “Yes, even the pantyhose.” (Family recollection, 2015) (Figure 4).



Figure 4. A photo of Celia Pantoja wearing a majorette costume in Nixon, Texas (Cisneros-Pantoja Family Collection).

Many stories were bandied about when recalling the life of Celia Pantoja, including a myth that revolved around her claims of picking cotton as a teenager, as a justification to scars on her arms that may have been the result of skin bleaching. Eldest *Tía*, Darlene, debunked the story, explaining that “if Mom ever picked cotton—it was because it was *her* cotton.”

Learning to be White, not Mexican American

Celia Pantoja’s socialization created a new legacy that marked a shift in ideology. Language, alabaster complexion, and physical aesthetics thus became a standard of beauty and wealth (See Ruiz (1998) for a discussion of this practice). As a consequence, skin and hair bleaching was adopted to reinforce the use of beauty products that allowed white passing among her progeny. Later generations adopted the use of colored lenses to lighten their eye

color. Relatives with darker complexions appropriated an Americana “prep-school” style of dressing, influenced by stereotypical representations in television, as private education and wealth had not been part of their experience. Thus, the family’s motto was simple: appearances are everything, and, if you cannot be white, you can at least pass or dress like them.

Segregated Burials and Unburied Identities: A Reflection

The Latin American Cemetery, named after an ethnicity that veiled Mexican identity, displays linguistic and symbolic aesthetics of Mexican culture adorning headstones. Situated in front of a massive electric substation, this cemetery is in the outskirts of town. Its funerary practices expose the underlying purpose of segregation, which is to serve Anglo’s past and the fear of being buried in close proximity to “unclean and potentially contaminating” people (Nájera, 2015, p. 95). As Nájera (2015) declares, “even in death Mexican bodies had the potential to ‘contaminate’ white bodies” (p. 95). She illustrates her conclusion, with a quote by LULAC founder George I. Sánchez:

The bodies of Mexicans’ are denied the right of burial.... they are assigned a separate plot of land, far enough from the plot destined for the so-called ‘whites’ so as to be sure that the bodies of the ‘whites’ will not be contaminated by the presence of the bodies of the Mexicans. (Nájera, 2015, p. 95)

In everyday life, in the home as well as in public spaces, skin color and class marked residents for inferior treatment. It was these circumstances under which the Pantojas experienced their daily lives.

The Latin American Cemetery is evidence of the segregationist customs, equal in inferiority in terms of construction and lack of upkeep. In Nixon, Texas, community members identified or labeled as Latino/Hispanic or Mexican are buried in the Latin American Cemetery. The exception to this rule are those parishioners of St. Joseph’s Catholic Church who are granted burial—a resting place reserved for residents who are Mexican, poor, and disempowered.

Understanding the Borderlands of Race: Anglos and Mexican Americans

Mexican Americans in Nixon inhabit borderlands of race, which are demarcated by racialized ethnicity, class, language, and color. To survive in the borderlands Mexican Americans must abide de facto segregation and exist within the confines of racialized spaces even in their final resting place.

At first glance, residents of Nixon conduct daily activities in what appears to be relative peace and harmony. However, relational interactions are often superficial, as is the case with *Las Enchiladas*—a popular Mexican restaurant where all convene, and English, Spanish, and Spanglish are spoken without restrictions. There, all funeral arrangements are announced and posted at the cashier's stand, without interpreting it as an open invitation. A site of cultural contact and further evidence of the continuum of relational interactions in a town where race, color, gender, ethnicity, and language divide—good food unites the residents, if only for a meal. Rather than be marked by race and class with a burial in the Latin American Cemetery of Nixon, in death, Celia Pantoja opted for a place to be herself.

End of Life and Cultural Retrieval

This study explored the life experiences of Pantoja Perez's maternal female ancestors as a means of understanding the origins of white passing practices and its influences on the family's identity formation. Findings revealed a history of segregated burial practices in rural South Texas towns. The origins of these practices can be traced to Anglo and Mexican race relations dating back to the Texas Revolution (Montejano, 1987). These sustained practices facilitated the rejection of Mexican American culture and Spanish heritage language amongst members of Pantoja Perez's family.

Outside of rural towns like Nixon, major cities like San Antonio afforded Mexican Americans with more than one cemetery to bury their loved ones. By all appearances, funerary arrangements for Celia Pantoja in San Antonio followed traditionally accepted practices of Catholic Mexicans. Interestingly, no one in the family including Pantoja Perez's grandmother ever identified as Mexican and yet, her lifestyle and funeral had all the markings of the culture. Pantoja Perez's unveiling and retrieval of family history affirmed and validated the desire to reclaim her ethnic/cultural and linguistic legacies as a means of empowering herself and her progeny.

In summary, Pantoja Perez's study on the racialization of funerary practices, as a field researcher interested in qualitative studies, creates a decolonial shift inspired by the struggle for inclusion in education. With newfound knowledge, she began to reject the internalized Americanization or the legacy of Celia Pantoja. More recently, participation in higher education has allowed Pantoja Perez to amass the sociohistorical and cultural knowledge to make visible people of Mexican ancestry, thus unearthing and documenting a family legacy that has been

hidden (Perez, 1999). Pantoja Perez's aim is to impart this knowledge to those that have been denied their histories, by contesting assimilationist and exclusionary theories that erase others from the national imaginary.

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