

My Prerogative.

I can't remember anything, or that is what I tell myself when memory feels too sharp, too bright, too insistent. But of course, I remember. I remember every moment someone tried to tell me who I was supposed to be. And each semester, when I assign "Se Habla Español," I remember again.

For three years, I have given my students Tanya Barrientos' story about a Guatemalan girl taught to fear the language that belonged to her, a girl raised to believe Spanish was a mark of poverty and shamed, a mark to be erased. A girl who grew up surrounded by people who looked like her but could not speak like them. Many of my students — of all shades — read her words and recognize themselves. They know what it is to be shaped by someone else's expectations. They know the ache of being misnamed.

And I, their teacher, pretend I am only guiding them through a text. But the truth is that the story reaches for me too and, yes, it derives from the color of my skin.

I can't remember anything, but I remember 1988. I remember being a Black freshman girl in Port Arthur, Texas, discovering metal — first Def Leppard, then Metallica, loud and relentless and liberating. I remember ...*And Justice for All* spinning through my room, a world I could enter without apology. And I remember the voices around me: "Black girls don't listen to that trash." "You should be listening to R&B — New Jack Swing, Bobby Brown."

Whenever I switched the radio dial to metal, I was placed outside their comfort zone, unceremoniously pronounced foreign and misguided.

And now, decades later, I watch one of my daughters walk into her own version of that world. She went to a Slipknot concert as a fan; I wondered what the atmosphere would be like, wondered if she would feel out of place the way I once did. Days later, I asked her if there were other Black people there. She shrugged and said, "Not many. Mostly old white men and Mexicans."

Then I remembered a recent conversation with my son. He told me he'd seen videos on TikTok of young Black adults being called devil worshippers or being labeled "white" by their parents because they listened to KōЯn. And suddenly I felt the old sting again — the judgment, the ridicule, the insistence that certain joys do not belong to us.

"There must be other Latinas like me," Barrientos' longing for like-minded souls. My own longing for confirmation. The need to know we are not alone in the ways we are misunderstood. That's why Barrientos' words lingers in my mind, the longing to connect without feeling small. To tell everyone that I listen to the same music as you and something else that has no color boundaries.

I can't remember anything, but I remember this: identity is not something handed to you. It is something you claim, again and again, even when others try to take it. It is the music you choose, the story you refuse to surrender. The woman who listens to Metallica and Slipknot with her daughter, and listens without apology.

And I am still choosing.