



Lesson: What it means to be Latina in North Carolina

Oral history: Yesenia Pedro Vicente

Interviewer: Joel Hage

(<http://newroots.lib.unc.edu/items/show/19>)

Note: This oral history was conducted in English

Objectives	Materials	Time
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Analyze the concept of identity</li> <li>Examine the concept of identity through the experience of Yesenia Pedro Vicente</li> <li>Discuss the concept of Latino/ Latina identity and its complexities</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tablets or computer with access to internet</li> <li>Speakers</li> <li>Copies of interview excerpts</li> <li>Copies of flags of Mayas' countries of origin</li> </ol>	1 hour
<b>Opening Activity: Think-pair-share what my identity is... (15 minutes)</b>		
<p>1. <b>Think:</b> Ask students to think about who they are and their identity(ies). You may want to have them write their thoughts down. Explain to them the following Key Concepts listed on page 2: identity, race, ethnicity, and culture.</p> <p>Some questions that can guide students' thinking are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How do you identify yourself in terms of race, ethnicity or culture?</li> <li>Where did you learn about your identity?</li> <li>What makes you unique and different from others?</li> </ol> <p>2. <b>Pair:</b> Ask students to pair and share their thoughts about their own identity.</p> <p>3. <b>Share:</b> Ask a couple of pairs to volunteer to share their discussions about identity.</p>		
<b>Main Activities (35 minutes)</b>		
<p><b>Activity 1: How does Yesenia define her identity? (20 minutes)</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ask students to read the first excerpt of the interview with Yesenia Pedro Vicente (pasted below) while listening to it aloud.</li> <li>Ask students to pair again and answer together the following questions:             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Where is Yesenia from?</li> <li>What are her multiple identities?</li> <li>What do you think Yesenia means when she says, "So I'm kind of in this in-between"?</li> </ol> </li> <li>Ask students to volunteer and answer the questions out loud. You can use the following questions to guide the discussion:             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What was something unique about Yesenia's history?</li> <li>How can Yesenia be American, Guatemalan and Mayan at the same time?</li> </ol> </li> <li>Show students the name and flags of 5 countries where the Maya communities are from. Using the "Countries" option in the Maps tab, (<a href="http://newroots.lib.unc.edu/country-of-origin">http://newroots.lib.unc.edu/country-of-origin</a>) in the New Roots Archive, ask students to identify the 5 countries where Mayas live.             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What do you think about the fact that the Mayas are all part of one big ethnic group, while also being settled across country borders?</li> <li>How did migration to the U.S. change Yesenia's identity as a Mayan person?</li> <li>Can you think of other groups that live across country borders? (It could be an ethnic, racial or religious group.)</li> </ol> </li> </ol>		

### Activity 2: Hispanic or Latino/Latina? (15 minutes)

1. Play the audio of the interview for the second excerpt (or ask a student to read out loud the second excerpt of Yesenia's interview). Discuss the questions in small groups or as a class:

- a) How did Yesenia realize when she was little that she and her family were different from others?
- b) What is the difference between the concepts of Hispanic and Latino, according to Yesenia? What do you think about this difference? Do you agree or disagree?
- c) What is the role of the Spanish language in the formation of Yesenia's Latina identity in the United States?
- d) Why do we use Latino/Latina instead of just Latino?
- e) Do all Latinos/Latinas speak Spanish? Are there Latinos/Latinas that do not speak Spanish?
- f) What is more important, how others see and identify you or how you see and identify yourself? Why?
- g) How does Yesenia's experience demonstrate that there is a lot of diversity among Latinos/Latinas?

### Assessment (10 minutes)

1. Mention three things you learned today about Yesenia.
2. Mention three countries where Mayas are from.
3. Mention one main difference between being Latino/Latina and Hispanic

### Key Concepts

Identity

Race

Ethnicity

Culture

Latino/Latina

Hispanic

Maya

## Excerpts of Yesenia Pedro Vicente Interview

<http://newroots.lib.unc.edu/items/show/19>

Note: If you want to listen the interview along with reading the following excerpts, please fast forward or rewind the audio to find the excerpt.

### Excerpt 1:

**Audio time: 00 min 05 sec – 03 min 01 sec**

Joël Hage: This is Joël Hage interviewing Yesenia Pedro Vicente in the FedEx Global Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel. It is the afternoon of April 11th, 2013. It's approximately 5:00pm. All right, Yesi, let's go ahead and get started. When people ask you where you're from, what do you say?

Yesenia Pedro Vicente: I say that I - I say that my parents are from Guatemala and then I say, but I was born here. So I think the first thing that comes to mind to me is that - I don't know, I affiliate with what my parents are and so I say Guatemalan. But then I do clarify that I am American – that I was born in America.

JH: Okay. Thank you. And then, how do you identify here in the U.S. compared to how you - I think you've only been to Guatemala once, right? Twice, okay. So, how do you identify here in the U.S. compared to how you identify in Guatemala?

YV: So in the U.S. I do identify as Mayan or Latino. It depends in which context I'm in. Usually I found myself that in the academic context I am Mayan, or even back home in my church community I am Mayan. It is once I am surrounded by other students that come from Latin American countries, where if I'm talking about a broad spectrum, just in general talking about people from Latin America[n] descent, that I then group us all into Latinos because there is a certain, in my opinion - there is a certain Latino experience that I think is shared amongst people that speak Spanish or are of Latin American descent when you're growing up in America. I - this is kind of a joke - but there's a Twitter account that's called "Latino kid problems" and sometimes I'll look at what they put up there and I resonate with what they say, whether it be a Salvadorian or Mexican person who Tweeted something about it. And I laughed because I - you know - I find myself being like oh yeah that happened to me too. So there are certain things that when you put people of Latin descent in America, that makes you kind of unite because of that Latino identity. But then when I'm back home, and it's very much just a Guatemalan Mayan population then I realize oh I am Mayan and everyone here is also Mayan. Whether they speak a different language or not, it doesn't matter because we also share very much like the same foods and even though the traditional dress is different, the cut of it, the corte, the blusa, it's all the same.

[...]

**Audio time: 03 min 28 sec – 4 min 28 sec**

...when I'm in Guatemala though, I'm very much more American than Guatemalan if that makes sense. When I spent this summer with a host family, they - there were times where we got along well, and like, I understood a lot of the references that they knew in terms of pop culture, the food, or just having, you know, tortillas at every meal. But I could tell, even with my own education and the type of music I listen to and the style of clothing that I wear, that it's more American. And so my host mom joked one day that she's like, "O, eres como una gringa." And then she laughed and she's like, "No, pero, no exactamente." So I'm kind of in this in-between where if I'm placed in a Guatemalan context I'm more American than Guatemalan in the country itself. But when I'm here, I'm not exactly American, and so then I identify as Mayan when I'm at home with my community or Latino if I'm surrounded with other peers that speak Spanish.

[...]

**Audio time: 23 min 50 sec - 29min 10 sec**

JH: That's very interesting. All right, this is a deeper question. You may have to think about it for a minute, and that's fine. How do you feel your identity, or the way in which you identify yourself, has changed throughout your life, if at all? And, I know this - like I said, you may have - this may be deep. It may be a long story, complicated, but just...

YV: What do you mean by the way I identify myself?

JH: The way in which - I mean, the titles that you've applied to yourself. The way in which you feel like you fit in to others around you. Yeah, how do you feel like that's - how do you feel like you have evolved mentally to understand that? How has it changed?

YV: I think in terms of my identity, I knew I wasn't white, if we're going to talk about race first. And I think that's the one that's most - is the first realization I made in terms of my identity. I knew I did not look like the other students in class who were predominantly white, and so - or African-American. And so, when I would be in class I did just as well as they did, and so fortunately for me academics - because I - although Spanish is my first language, I started learning English in elementary school in Kindergarten.

By first grade I was pretty fluent. And so academically it was never really a problem because I could do just as well as the other peers but I always knew I didn't look like them. And I think that as far as I can remember, even thinking when I was ten or even eleven and twelve, I knew that my family - I think the first thing I came to identify with would have been Latino. And that's just because I spoke Spanish. And so a lot of times, like starting actually when I was as young as

ten, I would accompany my dad to translate and interpret for anything. It could be a doctor's appointment. It could be to go talk to our insurance agent. And so he would just take me along, which is interesting because my older sister is two years older but she's the more quiet one, and so I was always the more out-spoken one. My dad used to call me a parrot. He's like, oh my gosh, you're just like a parrot. Like, stop talking. [Laughs] But, so like, I was always very outgoing to begin with and so I would notice thought that when I would go translate, it was just seeing my dad - like sitting there next to my dad - then you see usually it's a white person that we're talking to, whether it be the doctor or the insurance agent. And serving as an interpreter, I knew that we were some kind of other and that was probably Latino because that's the language that I was exposed to anyway within the school system, you're identified as Latino. And so I was like, oh, I speak Spanish. I'm called Latino in school, so, like, we're Latinos, we speak Spanish. And we're not like the majority, and so that's the first thing I realized. And then, as I got older - I mean, I always knew we're Guatemalan and so if anyone asked me specifically, you know, "Where is your family from?" I would say Guatemala. But as I mentioned earlier, there - it would have been my Junior year of high school that my youth group coordinator - well she - this woman in the church - and she's really cool herself. She's actually - she's from North Carolina. She's like white, southern. But she ended up studying Spanish in college and then moved to Bolivia, married a Bolivian man, and her children are bi-racial and she's come back to Morganton and she's bilingual at this point. She translates and interprets during the Spanish mass. And so growing up, I'd always see Maurine be at the front of church, and whenever my priest would give his homily she would translate for him. And so we became really close because she was an active member in the church. And so my family would invite her, like if we went out and had dinner, or just - everyone knows her, and she has so many God-children within the church because everyone like loves her because she's always wanting to help people or like will interpret or translate for them. And for a good number of the families, she was their sponsor to get their residency. And so my family became close to her just over time. And then she approached me and my sisters and, you know, said, "Hey, I want to start this youth group within the Guatemalan community. Do you want to help me start this?" And so, we were like, "Sure, why not." And during those sessions where we would meet, as we were starting up this youth group, we would learn about our faith - so we're Catholic - but she would also show us videos on Mayan culture. And she started to explain to us that, you know, "You're more than just Hispanics or Latinos. Do you realize that you're Mayan? That's why the women wear their traje. And like that's why you'll see the marimba being played and it's different from the Mexican culture." And I - you know, that's when I first started realizing, like, wow, it is different. And she got me thinking about that. And I left it at that. So I started being - you know, started to reconcile this notion that, oh, I'm more than just Latino, I'm also Mayan.

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### Excerpt 2:

**Audio time: 4 min 28 sec – 10 min 11 sec**

YV: Okay. Now for your second question, do you mind repeating that?

JH: Yeah, so what does the term Hispanic mean to you?

YV: Hispanic means to me - that's actually a definition that I didn't really solidify until a couple of years ago when I came to UNC. And that's through a Spanish class where my professor asked me, you know - well he asked the class, you know, "What is the difference between Hispano y Latino?" And I thought, oh, they're the same thing! And then he made a definition that I actually very much agreed with because it made sense in my mind, but Hispano is someone who has Spanish descent. And so, they can be from the actual peninsula of Spain or they can be in Latin America but just have - I guess in my mind - have maintained some kind of Spanish heritage or lineage and have kept those Spanish names and maybe even married within each other. And that's something that I've realized, is that there are some people living in Latin America that very much look European, you know, or white if I want to be blunt with it. Where they have - I mean, I met this one kid, honestly, at a finalist weekend, who - I forget his first name, but his last name was like Vasquez, or something - and he said it with a Spanish accent, not "Vaz-kwez" or "Vaz-kez", but Vasquez, and I was like - I walked over and I said, "You just spoke with a Spanish accent," you know, "where are you from?" or "do you speak Spanish?" And he said, not the most nicely - he was a little arrogant - he was like, "Oh, I'm Guatemalan." And I was like, "Oh me too!" But I was shocked because he was pale, blue-eyed, and blonde, and I just did not expect that. That's the complete opposite of what my version of Guatemalan is, where I'm tan, dark-haired, dark eyes. And so I had a bit of a, like a shock, and I had one of those moments where I thought, like, okay so we're both Guatemalan, but it just made me realize, like, he's Hispano because he very much has maintained the Spanish name and apparently his family has stuck, like, within their Spanish circle within Guatemala. And my family is indigenous and so we would be Mayan.

But, to answer the next question, what is Latino then, I would say a Latino is a person who was born in the U.S. and then grew up in America, shaped by this context of just being other within the U.S. and not being American per se, not being white or even African American. So I generally tend to picture that as Latino - is someone who's grown up here but belongs to a Latin American race. And I think that would - then when someone immigrates here, I would say that

they're - because they've spent the majority of their life in a different country, then their identity is more of that country, and so then I accept that you're Salvadorian or you're Honduran. And that's where I think the specificity comes from - is when you hear someone say, "Oh, I'm Honduran" or "I'm Colombian." And if they've actually grown up most of their life there, I think that's pretty valid because that's what you know and that's what your identity is. If you've grown up in America, I think your - your identity is shaped by having been raised in America.

JH: So, if - I would just like to clarify. Would you say that people in South and Central America that don't necessarily speak Spanish as their native tongue, just like your family - that those people, when they're living in the U.S. they are Latino regardless of their culture, regardless of their religion, regardless of their language? It's the fact that they come from Latin America.

YV: If they were born in the U.S..

JH: Okay.

YV: Yes, I think [laughs] regardless of whether they speak Spanish or not. That makes it tricky because I hadn't thought of that because I tend to classify most of Latin America as Spanish-speaking even though I recognize that Brazil and even Guyana or any of the other countries do not speak Spanish. Oh, that's interesting!

JH: Well, just out of curiosity, because yourself, you're a perfect example of this. You speak Spanish as your first language, right? But your family doesn't, so even though you started speaking Spanish as your first language here in the U.S., you technically would have started speaking your parents' language before that. So would you have - in that case - would you have considered yourself Latina? Do you see what I'm saying?

YV: I do. I do.

JH: Because you kind of fall in the same category.

YV: I think that speaking Spanish makes me Latino.

JH: Okay.

YV: If I had grown up and had never learned Spanish and only spoke Q'anjob'al, which is what my parents speak - that's harder to say because I think that because Spanish is a predominant language amongst Latin American countries, you can all communicate, if that makes sense, with each other. It doesn't matter if you're Mexican, Guatemalan, Bolivian - you're all speaking Spanish and I think that's what forms, in my mind, predominantly, that Latino identity. If I didn't

have access to that group because I did not speak Spanish, that's when I would start to question what my identity was, and I don't have a label for that because I haven't experienced it, so.



## Where Mayas Come From

There are between 4 and 6 million Mayas living in 6 countries in Central America: Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador. Find the countries in the New Roots interactive map: <http://newroots.lib.unc.edu/country-of-origin>



**Belize**



**Guatemala**



**Honduras**



**El Salvador**



**Mexico**