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Lila Watson once said “If you have come here to help me, then you are wasting your time...But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” When I was first exposed to this quotation my freshman year, I was working at my first of many jobs held at Cornell University as a Community Advocate for the Office of Academic Diversity Initiatives. I thought it was offensive, I remember thinking that it was ungrateful and insensitive to turn away help from someone who cared. I felt like the efforts people contribute each day to causes that they are passionate about were not regarded as useful simply because the advocates did not identify with the group they were advocating for. I was confused and frustrated. Now, looking back about how little I understood about social justice and solidarity, I cannot help but laugh. I don't want to speak for Watson, but I now understand the quote to be directly associated with the differences between acting in solidarity versus acting as a charity. *Tu eres mi otro yo* means being able to work with someone not because you find that you are liberating, or helping or assisting them in some way, but because you see yourself in them. This theme and the themes of unification and love that surround this statement are what inspire me to do the work that I do.

Even now, 4 years later, it is hard for me to write about solidarity because I don't know that I viewed my actions and contributions to the Latinx community at Cornell as something I do with intention. The work that I do is me. It's not me as a non-member, or me as someone who feels obligation to be involved, it is inherent in who I am. I hurt when our community hurts. I succeed when our community succeeds. It wasn't until I wrote this essay that I understood my work as an ally to the Latinx community in a more comprehensive way.

I am often asked to speak on behalf of a community that I am a member of, but through the lens of a population I do not directly identify with. I am now able to make the distinction between those two components of my life and not speak FOR anybody, but open the platform for those who would like to speak.

I told an anecdote the other day in one of my classes that began with the phrase “I’m Egyptian so in my household we...”, and as soon as I began, I was met with shock. I could hear mumblings around me stating things along the lines of “But doesn’t she work at the LLC” and “I knew she was exotic-looking” . **Let me just pause for a moment and tell you all that being “exotic” is not a compliment, for anyone, and the moments we allow terms like exotic to be used to describe women of color, is another moment that we are allowing for the continued fetishism and overseexualization of women of color.** But, back to my story, the comments were to be expected, as I have always been one to succumb to the blessing and curse of being “passing”. I am white passing, I am straight passing, I am put-together-today-even-though-I-have-three-prelims-passing, and despite my efforts to reclaim and remind the room of who I am each time I walk in, I am an unwilling victim of how I look and how others see me. From the work I do with people of color at Cornell whether it is in my role as a Residential Advisor, a past facilitator of the Intergroup Dialogue project and a sister of my sorority, Lambda Theta Alpha, it is my understanding that I am not alone feeling this.

We live in a society where our definition of who we are begins first by how you look, and secondly by how you act. The curse of perception is something that follows you wherever you go, and it can be attributed, in my opinion, to our history of colonialism. When we are given the platform to define who we are for the world, we must first be so sure of who

we are, that we are ready to defend it at any moment. This is what makes solidarity so unique. One who is able to master what it means to work in solidarity must understand both themselves and those that they align themselves with in profound ways. Defending yourself and your intentions is by no means easy, but the journey one undergoes in the process of doing so makes the process worthwhile.

When I embarked on my Cornell journey, my definition of myself was a mere draft. I'm mixed, I'm Brooklyn, I'm "ethnically ambiguous". And what does that mean when you walk onto a campus of predominately white students? This was the question that plagued me until I found the Latinx community at Cornell. I didn't completely discover the beauty that is the Latinx community until my sophomore year, when I began to attend programs and became a member of my sorority. For the first time at Cornell, I felt welcomed and for that, I will be eternally grateful. I am asked at least once on a weekly basis why I choose to be deeply involved with a community I don't identify with. Its more than likely my least favorite conversation in the world, because the question implies that members of one group do not have shared experiences of members of another group. By no means is my experience the same as a young Latinx at Cornell, but many of my experiences share common ground with the communities I choose to act as an ally for. My first response to that question is that although I do not identify as a Latinx, I identify with the community. I am not Latinx, but Latinx people are my people.

My second response to this question is that the amount of love and respect I have received from the Latinx community at Cornell has been what has motivated me to be a better version of myself. Throughout my years working at the Latino Living Center and doing programs with the community, I have found that there is an emerging

acknowledgement of shared experience amongst our community, the theme of this year's Unity Dinner is a testament to that. But additionally, you can see it through our programs, our Café Con Leche series topics discuss the multi-dimensionality of Latinidad, our student organizations have become more diverse in their participants, and the narratives of LGBT students of color are being told more often in our spaces, at our events, and within our friend groups.

I want to switch now to an important discussion I find to be deeply instilled within this year's theme of solidarity. The poem to which this year's theme is inspired by has underlying themes of love and respect, to which many of you know are principles I hold close to my heart. Very recently, there has been an emergence on campus of a necessary discussion about students not being able to afford their tuition. I can not think of a time better than now to say that solidarity is important when discussing such matters. I can not think of a time better than during the summer of 2012, in the middle of class during the Prefreshman Summer Program, when I was told to visit the financial aid office. I can not think of a better time than now to discuss being sat down by one of the aid counselors and being told that they would assist me in completing my transfer applications to another school because they were not only unable to help me with receiving more aid, but because they knew that I would not be able to afford to stay. I can not think of a better time than now to say that just because I struggled to pay my tuition silently, doesn't mean that I did not struggle nonetheless and that the struggle of those who built up the courage to ask for help should not be undermined by then belief that everybody has the same opportunities. I can not think of a better time than now to inspire others to not only advocate for those within your immediate community and the issues pressing to them, but to also advocate for those outside your community, for every

time a student on this campus hears a microaggression, or receives a bill they do not know how to pay, or feels hunger and wonders when they will eat next, you should feel the hunger too. There is no better time than now to decide that being in solidarity with someone means believing and knowing that their troubles, and struggles and needs are REAL and that they are as important as your own, and that the advancement of yourself and others are intertwined with one another. We need to take care of each other, for all of us and for ourselves. Tu eres mi otro yo. And you are the other them.

The Latinx community is the other me because it has consistently validated my thoughts and beliefs and struggles and told me that they were heard. I am the other you because I have been privileged enough to have reciprocated those feelings. I am forever thankful for being welcomed into this community and for the lessons I have learned throughout my time here. Here's to another year of advancement and collective work!

Thank you!