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W.E.B. Dubois once asked, "How does it feel to be a problem?"

The burning undertones of my existence have never come to the forefront as obviously as they did the first time I read that question. See, my problematized existence, that is, my position in society that has regarded me as a problem, has always subtly stung the back of my soul, like a hot peppery aftertaste lingering in my throat. Of course, the more one eats spicy things, the more the taste buds become numb.

And I, born an indigenous woman in Guatemala, have always felt in some way to be wrong. I was a problem when I was the only one to raise my hand in a classroom full of the descendants of European ancestors when asked, "*quien es maya?*", "Who is mayan?"

I was a problem when my vacations were dangerous drives up mountains to hear Poptí, the indigenous language spoken in my family's indigenous community, more than Spanish. I was a problem when my tourist visa expired and my mother and I started a new life, reunited with my father, in a place where we saw opportunity, the United States of America.

I am a problem now, for seeking to carve out a life for myself in a country that debates my very existence with the criminalized, racialized rhetoric of immigration.

So when Dubois's words, written as far back as 1903, asked me, "How does it feel to be a problem?" I felt compelled to answer that it feels so deeply burned into my identity that when I look in the mirror, I see a massive scar that says, "problem personified." I've spent so long being branded problematic that I have allowed psychological conditioning methods to repress the pain, let the scar fade, carefully masking every feeling I experience when I feel pushed outside the margins.

Yet, some things still sneak past the masking barriers, pushing me to the edge of sorrow and anger, and I'm not the only one feeling this pain. As we move throughout not just this

university, but through this country, we, Latinx people, are bound by an unifying understanding that the spaces we enter are often not made with us in mind.

In the Fall of 2015, my best friend texted me that a student at the Latinx Ivy League Conference at Brown University had been physically attacked by a security officer at a party on the night the conference delegates had arrived. She, along with delegates from across the Ivy League, mobilized to receive recognition and demand justice and better treatment for Latinx student across the Ivy League.

As my friends struggled with the racialized brutality that occurred at Brown, I was hurt to my core when students received little recognition from upper level administrators of Cornell University. Seeing their pain and fear, but also their endurance, was a pivotal moment in my experience as a Latinx student at an elite institution.

In the aftermath of this incident, I was reminded that we are in fact problematized people no matter what we achieve or accomplish, meaning that, despite being students at some of the most prestigious institutions in the country, our very humanity continues to be challenged. We are dehumanized and disrespected through acts of cultural appropriation, through limited financial accessibility, through overt racist speech and actions, and through daily micro aggressions, no matter how much we think we've earned.

Yet, I had spent two years experiencing this place with misplaced false optimism, hoping that maybe if I ignored the many problematic structures around me, I could be less "other," and that I could sit out the public fights and challenge the problems facing the Latinx community from afar. Blending in and numbing out was the only way I could cope with feeling so brutally otherized and problematized by almost every element of my Cornell experience.

But at a public forum with late President Garrett days after the events at Brown, I could not let myself hide, nor could I let every emotion that I felt when I knew my friends were in danger stay pushed away for fear of being other.

It was with a deep sense of fear and pain that I spoke out and began my journey as an activist alongside Latinx and undocumented students. But more importantly, that was the day that I let myself defend my right to exist without being a problem. In many ways, this struggle, to be recognized as equally deserving of consideration for our safety, became a unifying factor, a force with which we let ourselves come together.

A mural in the Latino Living Center asks us to consider, “De una misma rama unidad.” While examining this mural, I find it easy to think of all the positivity that makes us uno, juntos en unidad: our cultures, music, languages, foods. We come together often to celebrate these factors and uplift ourselves in self-care.

Yet when we are challenged, as we were in the Fall of 2015, we’re pushed to find strength in that unity. Looking at the LLC mural, I see bodies clinging tightly to their rama, and the branch is fully sustaining them. Without the incredible Latinx community at Cornell serving as mi rama, my branch, I would have surely plummeted from the elite institution tree. I would have never come to value the beauty in the existence of a problematized being, and I would have never valued the unity that we gathered from some of our most troubling times.

I often view myself in the Latinx community as a lost sheep that two members of Sangre Taina: the Puerto Rican Students Association, Claire and Jesse, found and brought back to the flock. As a person from a small Central American country, I finally found mi gente, because our different flags never stopped us from fully appreciating one another.

Months later, after the trauma of the Fall 2015 Latinx Ivy League Conference, we needed each other to become a branch for one another. I found my place on the tree of unity because I couldn’t be silent when members of it, my friends, luchadorxs, were wounded. We’ve interwoven our experiences and stories together because in some way, we’ve felt what it’s like to be a problem, that unifying underlying branch of our lives, despite all we’ve done to be where we are at Cornell.

The pain that the Fall 2015 Latinx Ivy League Conference caused was without a doubt one of the hardest things that this community has endured in recent years. Yet, I look back at the

members of the delegation and the community members that stood by them with an admiration and fondness that I will never be able to quantify.

Today, I ask all of you to think, “How does it feel to be Latinx at Cornell?” Surely, many of us can reflect on Latinx existence at Cornell as an identity that is often marked as a problem. Time and time again, our culture is appropriated, we’re struck by microaggressions, and we’re even attacked with racist speech and actions, yet we are continually told that we are oversensitive and over reacting. Nonetheless, within that state, we have resisted.

We have found a pride and a strength that will always question why we’ve been marked as a problem. We are the products of flawed histories, of pain, of difficulty, but we are also the result of a binding force, the force of the Latinx community. I’ve spent the last year attempting to develop an answer to Dubois’s question, and have never managed to come to a full description of how it feels to be a problem. Yet, within this confusion, I have determined that there is beauty and pride in my otherized, problematized existence: the most beautiful part of it all is that it has brought me to all of you, and you have made me feel an incredible sense of pride in what we share.

We will forever be juntos en unidad.