YES! For Teachers
P.O. Box 10818 Bainbridge Island, WA 98110-0818 (206) 842-0216
yesmagazine.org/for-teachers
facebook.com/YES-For-Teachers
twitter.com/yesforteachers

WRITING LESSON
Honoring Your Roots

Students will read and respond to the YES! article "Native and European–How Do I Honor All Parts of Myself?" by Kayla DeVault.

Multiracial people are one of the two fastest-growing populations in the U.S., especially for children under 15. Native American author Kayla DeVault's ancestors include Shawnee, Anishinaabe, Eastern European, Scottish, and Irish. She explains that simply saying "I am this" isn't enough. To truly honor her heritage, she found that she must understand and participate in it through rituals like preparing traditional foods with grandmas and aunties, and by exploring family history.

Part 1: The Article "Native and European–How Do I Honor All Parts of Myself?"

Part 2: The Writing Prompt

Part 3: Writing Guidelines

Part 4: Evaluation Rubric

Part 5: Sample Essays

"Brazil: My Heart's Home" by Susanna Audi
"Carrying the Torch" by Madison Greene
"Tying the Knot" by Cherry Guo
"Walking Through the Forest of Culture" by Keon Tindle
"What Being Part of the LGBTQ+ Community Means to Me" by Mia De Haan
"A True Irishman?" by Reese Martin
"Behind My Skin" by Mariela Alschuler

Part 1: The Article

“Native and European–How Do I Honor All Parts of Myself?”

Writer Kayla DeVault explores her roots and how she is connected to the different parts of her identity.

One memory comes to me like a photo. It's a snapshot of my mom's kitchen, the lights dimmed with just the glow of the stove in the background. A line of women, covered in flour, gather together: my grandmas, great-aunts, family from all backgrounds. They read a recipe card from my paternal grandma, mix and roll dough, then pass it down the line to the pierogi molds. My aunt alternates between sauerkraut, potato and cheese, and prune fillings. My maternal grandma seals the dough pockets on a tray. She's not Eastern European, but her grandkids are—and that's how we've grown up.

With so many traditions within extended family, we all learn from each other.

Within my family circle, I never questioned my identity. I was just a DeVault. Some of my ancestors emigrated to find the American Dream; others have had to defend themselves against its impacts. Some ancestors planted churches; others fled religious persecution.

My ancestors include Shawnee, Anishinaabe, Eastern European, Scottish, and Irish. I'm an enrolled Shawnee who must participate in annual ceremonies as part of my membership; I've also participated in Scottish culture, dancing competitively in the Highland Games and celebrating with haggis.

I grew up identifying with all of these pieces of myself.

When I was older, the questions came, which made me question myself. And it wasn't just questions of tribal blood quantum or how long I've lived on a reservation; I'm questioned about my Scottish heritage, as well. People would ask how I could identify with so many backgrounds, if I spoke any of the languages, or if I spent time among those communities. As I study Indigenous research methodologies in graduate school, the question of community belonging resurfaces constantly. I began to wonder how to authentically participate in my heritages when I cannot physically live in them all at once. How can I honor my many identities?

The non-Indigenous members of my family are largely ignorant of my Indigenous cultures, whereas the Indigenous members of my family tend to belong to multiple tribes, including Comanche and Navajo. Sometimes it's hard to keep the traditions straight. And despite having participated in "Celtic (Gaelic) culture" my whole life, I grew up knowing very little about where those ancestors came from.

To truly honor my heritage, I found I must understand and participate in it.

In 2013, I traveled to Europe to trace my European heritage. What I found were Scottish and Irish ancestors with experiences similar to my ancestors on this side of the Atlantic. Because the population there is considered white, I never considered their relationship to British colonizers, who perpetuated stereotypes and enforced genocidal policies on the Gaels. In Belfast, I experienced a sterilized Northern Ireland, one meant for the tourists and doesn't reveal the gaping wound left by 800 years of British oppression. And in Scotland, I found myself searching for the classic image of untamed Scottish Highlands. Later, I realized this image is a stereotype that served to facilitate British conquest over "savage" lands.

People who leave their communities tend to lose touch with traditions, their language, sometimes the meaning behind what they do. This includes people with Indigenous heritage, non-Indigenous heritage, or both. In fact, looking out across the Scottish Highlands, I could only wonder what had really happened there—and what relationship the people still living there today have with that history. These questions are what led me to explore the histories in my own family—on both sides of the ocean.

It doesn't matter how many pieces make up my whole; rather, it's my relationship with those pieces that matters—and that I must maintain. Simply saying "I am this" isn't enough. To truly honor my heritage, I found I must understand and participate in it.

Growing up, my extended family was the glue that made those pieces work. But now that I am older, the picture of our kitchen is fading. One by one, a relative vanishes from the image as I lose another connection grounding the parts of my whole in reality, in a cohesive mosaic. Without these people and the food rituals we shared, I've found myself feeling disconnected from tradition—and the pieces of my identity. Learning about my roots has helped me understand intergenerational trauma and cultural resilience related to my genetics—and now, I think, I must also rekindle my relationship with my family traditions.

I am entitled to my multiple heritages, and I'm beginning to embrace all the corners of the world my ancestors came from, every woman before me who lived, ate, and gave birth.

Part 2: The Writing Prompt

What do you consider your ancestral or ethnic identities? How connected are you to all of these parts? Describe how you honor and participate (or not) in them. Like DeVault, do you find yourself wanting to explore parts of your identity that you feel disconnected from or know little about?*

*Some students who are adopted, fostered, moved between households in divorce or come from other situations may not feel comfortable writing about their ancestral identity. They are welcome to write about their other identities, such as gender, sexual, religious or economic class, instead.

Part 3: Writing Guidelines

The writing guidelines below are intended to be just that: a guide. Please adapt to fit your curriculum.

- Provide an original essay title.
- Reference the article.
- Limit the essay to no more than 700 words.
- Pay attention to grammar and organization.
- Be original. Provide personal examples and insights.
- Demonstrate clarity of content and ideas.

Common Core State Standards:

This writing exercise meets several Common Core State Standards for grades 6-12, including W. 9-10.3 and W. 9-10.14 for Writing, and RI. 9-10 and RI. 9-10.2 for Reading: Informational Text. This standard applies to other grade levels. “9-10” is used as an example.

How did this lesson work for you and your students?
Share your feedback with us and other teachers
by leaving a comment on our website:
https://www.yesmagazine.org/education/2020/02/11/honoring-your-roots-student-writing-lesson/

Part 4: Evaluation Rubric

Our rubric should serve as a guide, not an unreasonable or rigid standard. You've probably encountered similar rubrics before, but here are two quick pointers for using ours:

1. In the left column, find the criteria for evaluating essays.
2. In the top row, find scores from 4 (outstanding) to 1 (poor).

	4	3	2	1
Focus on topic	There is one clear, well-focused topic. Main idea is supported by detailed information.	Main idea is clear, but general.	Main idea is somewhat clear, but there is need for more supporting evidence.	Main idea is not clear. There is a seemingly random collection of information.
Organization	Details are placed in a logical order and the way they are presented effectively keeps the reader's interest.	Details are placed in a logical order, but the way they are presented sometimes make the writing less interesting.	Some details are not in a logical or expected order, and this distracts the reader.	There is no clear introduction of the main topic or structure of the paper.
Originality and strength of ideas	Formulates a thought-provoking, well-developed, and fairly original position on an issue.	Writer takes a clear position on an issue, though it is not developed fully.	Writer's position is evident, though it is vague.	Fails to take a clear position, or writer contradicts herself.
Evidence and/or reasoning	Provides specific reasons and/ or evidence that demonstrate understanding and insight.	Offers adequate – though perhaps vague or incomplete – supporting reasons and/or evidence	Provides less than adequate or contradictory reasons or evidence to support position.	Offers only general reasons or evidence or none, or offers evidence contradictory to the writer's thesis or main idea.
Command of grammar and conventions	Command of conventions exhibited. Creative word choice and varied sentence structure.	Correct use of grammar and conventions (for the most part).	Weak control of grammar and conventions. Errors are distracting.	Use of grammar and conventions interferes with understanding.
Voice	Author's voice is strong and engaging. Draws reader in.	Writing attracts reader's interest. Author's voice shows engagement with the topic.	Technically well written; however, author's voice is weak.	Writing fails to engage the reader. Does not demonstrate writer's interest in topic.

* Adapted from "Rubric for Editorial – Commentary Essay" from LAEP.org and "6+1 Traits of Writing Rubric" from ReadWriteThink.org.

Brazil: My Heart's Home

Susanna Audi, grade 8

Saudades. No word in the English language sums up the meaning of this Portuguese term: a deep feeling of longing that makes your heart ache and pound like a drum inside your chest. I feel saudades for Brazil, its unique culture, and my Brazilian family. When I'm in my second home, Bahia, Brazil, I'm a butterfly emerging from its cocoon—colorful, radiant, and ready to explore the world. I see coconut trees waving at the turquoise waves that are clear as glass. I smell the familiar scent of burning incense. I hear the rhythm of samba on hand-beaten drums, and I feel my grandma's delicate fingers rub my back as I savor the mouth-watering taste of freshly made doce de leite. Although I'm here for only two precious weeks a year, I feel a magnetic connection to my father's homeland, my heart's home.

My grandfather or vovô, Evandro, was born in Brazil to a family who had immigrated from Lebanon and was struggling to make ends meet. His parents couldn't afford to send him to college, so he remained at home and sold encyclopedias door-to-door. My vovô eventually started a small motorcycle parts company that grew so much that he was able to send my father to the U.S. at age sixteen. My father worked hard in school, overcoming language barriers and homesickness. Even though he has lived in America for most of his life, he has always cherished his Brazilian roots.

I've been raised with my father's native language, foods, and customs. At home, I bake Brazilian snacks, such as the traditional cheese bread, pão de queijo, which is crunchy on the outside but soft and chewy on the inside. My family indulges in the same sweet treats that my father would sneak from the cupboard as a child. Two relaxing customs we share are listening to Brazilian music while we eat breakfast on weekends and having conversations in Portuguese during meals. These parts of my upbringing bring diversity and flavor to my identity.

Living in the U.S. makes me feel isolated from my Brazilian family and even more distant from Brazilian culture. It's hard to maintain both American and Brazilian lifestyles since they are so different. In Brazil, there are no strangers; we treat everybody like family, regardless if that person works at the local shoe store or the diner. We embrace each other with loving hugs and exchange kisses on the cheeks whenever we meet. In the U.S., people prefer to shake hands. Another difference is that I never come out of Starbucks in New York with a new friend. How could I when most people sit with their eyes glued to their laptop screens? Life seems so rushed. To me, Brazilians are all about friendships, family, and enjoying life. They are much more relaxed, compared to the stressed and materialistic average American.

As Kayla DeVault says in her YES! article "Native and European—How Do I Honor All Parts of Myself," "It doesn't matter how many pieces make up my whole: rather, it's my relationship with those pieces that matters—and that I must maintain." I often ask myself if I can be both American and Brazilian. Do I have to choose one culture over the other? I realize that I shouldn't think of them as two different cultures; instead, I should think of them as two important, coexisting parts of my identity. Indeed, I feel very lucky for the full and flavorful life I have as a Brazilian American.
.

Carrying the Torch

Madison Greene, university

I have been called a pizza bagel–the combination of a Catholic Italian and an Ashkenazi Jew. Over time, I have discovered the difficulty of discretely identifying the ratio of pizza to bagel. It is even more arduous when the pizza and the bagel have theologies that inherently contradict each other. Therefore, in a society that emphasizes fine lines and exact distinctions, my identity itself becomes a contradiction.

In the winter, my family tops our Christmas tree with the Star of David. I've recited the Lord's Prayer; I've prayed in Hebrew. I attended preschool at a church, and my brother was a preschooler in a synagogue. Every week at Sunday morning mass, my maternal family donates money to the collection basket during the offertory. My paternal family has donated authentic Holocaust photographs to a local Jewish heritage museum. Growing up, none of this was contradictory; in fact, it all seemed complementary. My Jewish and Catholic identities did not cancel each other out but rather merged together.

However, the compatibility of my Catholic-Jewish identities was in upheaval when I decided to become acquainted with the Jewish community on campus. While attending Hillel events, I felt insecure because I did not share many of the experiences and knowledge of other Jewish students. Despite this insecurity, I continued to participate—until a good friend of mine told me that I was not Jewish enough because of my Catholic mother. She also said that families like mine were responsible for the faltering of Jewish culture. I wanted my identity to be validated. Instead, it was rejected. I withdrew and avoided not only my Jewish identity but also my identity as a whole.

I soon realized that this friend and I look at my situation using different filters. My Catholic-Jewish identities have evolved into a codependent relationship, and I am entitled to unapologetically embrace and explore both aspects of my identity. I realized that even without my friend's validation of my identity, I still exist just the same. Any discredit of my Catholic-Jewish identities does not eliminate my blended nature. So, after a few months of avoiding my Jewish identity, I chose to embrace my roots; I resumed participating in the Jewish community on campus, and I have not stopped since.

Kayla DeVault's YES! article "Native and European – How Do I Honor All Parts of Myself?" describes the obligation to one's ancestral chain. The best way to fulfill this duty is to fully dedicate oneself to understanding the traditions that accompany those cultural origins. In this generation, my mother's Catholic-Italian maiden name has no men to carry it on to the next generation. It is difficult to trace my last name past the mid-1900s because my Jewish ancestors shortened our surname to make it sound less Semitic, to be less vulnerable to persecution. Given the progressive fading of my family's surnames, how do I continue the legacies of both family lines?

On behalf of my ancestors and for the sake of the generations still to come, I feel obligated to blend and simultaneously honor my Jewish and Catholic heritage to ensure that both prevail.

Now I know that whether I am sitting next to my Jewish father at my young cousin's baptism, or whether I am sitting at the Passover Seder table with my mother's Catholic parents, it is up to me to keep both flames of my ancestry burning bright. The least I can do is hold each

family's candle in my hands. Imagine the tremendous blaze I could create if I brought the flames of my two families together.

Tying the Knot

Cherry Guo, grade 12

The kitchen smells like onions and raw meat, neither unpleasant nor pleasant. Nainai's house slippers slap against our kitchen floor as she bustles around, preparing fillings for zongzi: red bean paste, cooked peanuts, and marinated pork. I clap my pudgy hands together, delighted by the festivities.

Nainai methodically folds the bamboo leaves into cones, fills them up with rice, and binds the zongzi together with string that she breaks between her teeth. I try to follow suit, but when I try to tie the zongzi together, half the rice spills out. Tired from my lack of progress, I abandon Nainai for my parents, who are setting up the mahjong table.

After raising me to the age of ten, my grandparents returned to China. They dropped back into their lives like they had never left, like they hadn't shaped my entire upbringing. Under their influence, my first language was not English, but Chinese.

At school, my friends cajoled me into saying Chinese words for them and I did so reluctantly, the out-of-place syllables tasting strange on my palate. At home, I slowly stopped speaking Chinese, embarrassed by the way my tongue mangled English words when I spoke to classmates. One particular memory continually plagues me. "It's Civil War, silly. Why do you pronounce "L" with an 'R'?" Civil. Civil. Civil.

At dinner, my dad asked us to speak Chinese. I refused, defiantly asking my brother in English to pass the green beans. I began constructing false narratives around my silence. Why would I use my speech to celebrate a culture of foot binding and feudalism? In truth, I was afraid. I was afraid that when I opened my mouth to ask for the potatoes, I wouldn't be able to conjure up the right words. I was afraid I would sound like a foreigner in my own home. If I refused to speak, I could pretend that my silence was a choice.

In Kayla DeVault's YES! article "Native and European – How Do I Honor All Parts of Myself?" she insists that "Simply saying "I am this" isn't enough. To truly honor my heritage, I found I must understand and participate in it." And for the first time, I wonder if my silence has stolen my cultural identity.

I decide to take it back.

Unlike DeVault, I have no means of travel. Instead, my reclamation starts with collecting phrases: a string of words from my dad when he speaks to Nainai over the phone, seven characters from two Chinese classmates walking down the hall, another couple of words from my younger sister's Chinese cartoons.

The summer before my senior year marks the eighth year of my grandparents' return to China. Once again, I am in the kitchen, this time surrounded by my parents and siblings. The bamboo leaves and pot of rice sit in front of me. We all stand, looking at each other expectantly. No one knows how to make zongzi. We crowd around the iPad, consulting Google. Together, we learn how to shape the leaves and pack the rice down.

The gap in knowledge bothers me. Does it still count as honoring a family tradition when I follow the directions given by a nameless pair of hands on YouTube rather than hearing Nainai's voice in my mind?

Instead of breaking the string with my teeth like Nainai had shown me, I use scissors to cut the string—like I had done with my ties to Chinese language and culture all those years ago. And now, I'm left with the severed string that I must hurriedly tie around the bamboo leaf before the rice falls out of my zongzi.

Walking Through the Forest of Culture

Keon Tindle, grade 11

What are my roots? To most people, my roots only go as far as the eye can see. In a world where categorization and prejudice run rampant, the constant reminder is that I am Black. My past is a living juxtaposition: my father's father is a descendant of the enslaved and oppressed and his wife's forefathers held the whips and tightened the chains. Luckily for me, racial hatred turned to love. A passion that burned brighter than any cross, a love purer than any poison. This is the past I know so well. From the slave ship to the heart of Saint Louis, my roots aren't very long, but they are deeply entrenched in Amerikkkan history.

This country was made off of the backs of my brothers and sisters, many of whom have gone unrecognized in the grand scheme of things. From a young age, White children are told stories of heroes—explorers, politicians, freedom fighters, and settlers whose sweat and determination tamed the animalistic lands of America. They're given hope and power through their past because when they look in the mirror they see these heroes. But what about me? My stories are conveniently left out of the textbooks; I have never been the son of a king or a powerful African leader, just expensive cargo to be bought and sold to the highest bidder. It seems we, as a people, never truly left the ship.

Even now, we're chained to the whitewashed image of Black history. I can never truly experience the Black tradition because there are multiple perspectives. The truth is clouded and lost due to the lack of documentation and pervasive amount of fabrication. How am I supposed to connect to my heritage? America tells me to celebrate the strength of my ancestors, the strength of the slaves, to praise something they helped create. The Afrocentrics tell me to become one with the motherland, celebrate the culture I was pulled away from. However, native Africans make it clear I'll never truly belong.

Even the honorable Elijah Muhammad tells me to keep my chin pointed to the clouds, to distrust the creation of Yakub, and to take my place among the rest of Allah's children. Most people don't have the luxury of "identifying with all of the pieces of [themselves]," as Kayla DeVault says in the YES! article "Native and European—How Do I Honor All Parts of Myself?"

They're forced to do research and to formulate their own ideas of who they are rather than follow the traditions of an elder. For some, their past works as a guide. A walk through life that has been refined over generations. Others, however, are forced to struggle through the dark maze of life. Hands dragging across the walls in an attempt to not lose their way. As a result, their minds create stories and artwork from every cut and scratch of the barriers' surface. Gaining direction from the irrelevant, finding patterns in the illogical.

So what are my roots? My roots are my branches, not where I come from but where this life will take me. The only constant is my outstretched arms pointed towards the light. A life based on the hope that my branches will sprout leaves that will fall and litter the path for the next generation.

What Being Part of the LGBTQ+ Community Means to Me

Mia De Haan, university

Being queer is that one thing about me I am most proud of, yet also most scared of. Knowing that I am putting my life at risk for the simplest thing, like being gay, is horrifying.

Let's talk about my first crush. Her name was Laurel, and she was always in front of me when we lined up after recess in first grade. I remember wishing that girls could marry girls because she had the prettiest long, blonde hair. I left these thoughts in the back of my head until middle school. I couldn't stop staring at a certain girl all day long. That one girl who I would have sleepovers with every weekend and slow dance with at school dances—but only as friends. She changed my life. She was the first person to tell me that I was accepted and had no reason to be afraid.

Being part of the LGBTQ+ community isn't all rainbows and Pride parades. It is watching your family turn away from you in disgust but never show it on their faces. It's opening Twitter and learning that it's still illegal to be gay in 71+ countries. It's astonishing that we had to wait until 2015 for the U.S. Supreme Court to make it legal to marry in all 50 states.

My identity is happiness yet pain, so much pain. I hated myself for years, shoved myself back into a closet and dated my best friend for two years because maybe if I brought a boy home my family would wish me "Happy Birthday" again or send me Christmas presents like they do for my brother and sister.

When I began to explore my identity again, I asked myself, "Am I safe?" "Will I still be loved?" I was horrified. I am horrified. Legally, I am safe, but I am not safe physically. I can still be beaten up on the streets for holding a girl's hand. Protesters at Pride festivals are still allowed to shout profanities at us and tell us that we are going to burn in hell—and the cops protect them. I am not safe mentally because I still allow the words of people and homophobes in the media and on my street get inside of my head and convince me that I am a criminal.

When I read Kayla DeVault's YES! article "Native and European—How Do I Honor All Parts of Myself?" I could feel how proud DeVault is to be Shawnee and Irish. While we do not share the same identity, I could tell that we are the same because we both would do anything for our cultures and want to show our pride to the rest of the world.

I honor my LGBTQ+ identity by going to Pride festivals and events. I also participate in an LGBTQ+ church and club, where, for years, was the only place I could be myself without the fear of being outed or harmed. Whenever I hear people being ignorant towards my community, I try to stay calm and have a conversation about why our community is great and valid and that we are not doing anything wrong.

I don't know if the world will ever change, but I do know that I will never change my identity just because the world is uncomfortable with who I am. I have never been one to take risks; the idea of making a fool of myself scares me. But I took one because I thought someone might listen to my gay sob story. I never expected it to be heard. If you have your own gay sob story, I will listen, and so will many others, even if you don't realize it yet.

A True Irishman?

Reese Martin, grade 11

Similar to Kayla Devault in her YES! article "Native and European-How Do I Honor All Parts of Myself," I hold holistic pride in my cultural identity. As a descendant of Irish immigrants, my childhood was filled with Irish folk music, laughter, and all things green. I remember being a toddler, sitting on my Popo's lap wearing a shiny green, slightly obnoxious, beaded shamrock necklace. There, in the living room, I was surrounded by shamrocks hanging on the walls and decorations spread throughout, courtesy of my grandmother who always went overboard. My father and his siblings were Irish fanatics, as well. My aunt, whom I loved spending time with as a child, was notorious for wild face painting, ear-splitting music, and crazy outfits on St. Patrick's Day. The holiday typically started in Detroit's historic Corktown for the annual St. Patrick's Day Parade with the promise of authentic Irish corned beef and soda bread at the Baile Corcaigh Irish Restaurant following the festivities. Charlie Taylor, a local Irish musician, belted folk songs from Baile Corcaigh's makeshift stage. It was one of the few days a year my father and his large family came together. Although my aunt and grandparents have passed, our family's Irish pride is eternal.

There was, however, one peculiar thing about our Irish heritage— none of my family looked classic Irish. My father and his five siblings have nearly black eyes and fairly dark skin, not the typical Irish traits of blue eyes and light skin. DeVault wrote, "When I was older, the questions came, which made me question myself." I fell into a similar predicament, questioning my heritage. It truly came as a shock when a couple of my paternal aunts and several cousins took DNA tests through 23andMe and AncestryDNA. The results revealed the largest percentage of our ethnicity was Lebanese and Middle Eastern, not Irish.

Lebanese.

It felt like a punch to the gut. I was clueless on how to move forward. According to the numbers, we possessed an insignificant amount of Irish blood. How was it possible to be wrong about such a huge part of my identity? Not only was I confused about my culture and history, but I also experienced a great deal of shame—not of my newfound Middle Eastern heritage, but the lack of Irish DNA, which I had previously held so close and felt so proud of. It felt as though I was betraying the memory of my late grandparents and aunt.

Even amidst my confusion, I found this new heritage intriguing; I was excited to explore all that my newly found Lebanese culture had to offer: unique foods, unfamiliar traditions, and new geography. In addition to the familiar boiled and mashed potatoes, my family now eats hummus and shawarma. I also know more about the basic facts, history, and government of Lebanon. One thing dampens my enthusiasm, however. I wonder how I can fully develop a love for my newly discovered culture without being too deliberate and appearing to be insensitive to cultural appropriation.

It is here, in the depths of uncertainty and intrigue, I relate most to DeVault's question, "How do I honor all parts of myself?" Although my Irish ancestry may not be as authentic as I once believed, I still feel a strong connection to the Irish culture. I've found that to truly honor all pieces of my identity, I must be willing to accept every aspect of my ancestry. I don't need to reject Lebanese ethnicity, nor disregard the Irish memories of my childhood. I am allowed

to be everything all at once. At the end of the day, with both Irish culture and Lebanese heritage, I am still simply and perfectly me.

Behind My Skin

Mariela Alschuler, grade 7

My roots go deeper than the ground I stand on. My family is from all over the world with extended branches that reach over whole countries and vast oceans.

Though I am from these branches, sometimes I never see them. My Dominican roots are obvious when I go to my abuela's house for holidays. My family dances to Spanish music. I fill my plate with platanos fritos and my favorite rice and beans. I feel like a Dominican American girl. Maybe it's the food. Maybe it's the music. Or maybe it's just the way that my whole family—aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins— laugh and talk and banter in my grandparents' small, beautiful apartment.

Even though I am blood to this family, I stick out like a sore thumb. I stick out for my broken Spanish, my light skin, my soft, high-pitched voice and how I do my hair. I feel like I don't belong to my beautiful, colorful family, a disordered array of painted jars on a shelf.

If my Dominican family is like a disorganized and vibrant shelf of colors, then my European family is a neat and sparse one with just a hint of color. For Christmas in New York, there are dozens of us crammed in the small apartment. For Thanksgiving in Massachusetts, there are rarely more than twelve people in the grandiose, pristine house that looks like something out of House Beautiful. I adore my grandparent's house. It is expansive and neatly painted white. After growing up in a small house on a school campus and visiting my other grandparents' small apartment in New York, I thought that their house was the greatest thing in the world. I would race up the stairs, then slide down the banister. I would sip Grandma's "fancy" gingerbread tea, loving the feeling of sophistication. There, I could forget about the struggles of my Dominican family. I was the granddaughter of a wealthy, Jewish, Massachusetts couple rather than the granddaughter of a working-class second-generation Dominican abuela and abuelo from the Bronx.

I don't fit in with my European family either. My dark skin and my wild hair don't belong in this tidy family. In Massachusetts, the branches of my Dominican family, no matter how strong and extensive, are invisible. The same way my European roots are lost when I am in New York.

So what am I? For years I have asked myself this question. Wondering why I couldn't have a simple garden of a family rather than the jungle that I easily get lost in. As Kayla DeVault says in her YES! article "Native and European—How can I honor all parts of myself?," "Simply saying 'I am this' isn't enough." And it isn't. My race, color, and ethnicity do not make up who I am. I am still a daughter. A sister. A cousin. A friend. My mixed identity does not make me less whole, less human. I may have lightly tanned skin and my lips may not form Spanish words neatly, but behind my skin is bright color and music. There is warm gingerbread tea and golden platanos fritos. There is Spanish singing from my abuelo's speaker and "young people" songs that play from my headphones. There is a little, cozy apartment and a large, exquisite house. Behind my skin is more than what you can see. Behind my skin is what makes me me.