I learned to arduously observe people and their actions at a very young age. My childhood required it. I immigrated to the United States with my parents at the age of six and from that moment I was expected to be the family’s linguistic and cultural translator. I was offered no guidebook or instructions on how to interpret the nuances of our new country and its values, beliefs, and diction. I barely knew my native culture before I was required to interpret another. The best course of action was to sit back, observe, and take copious mental notes.

I can remember walking the one block to our neighborhood park Down-Neck in Newark to take my notes. It was endearingly named ‘Mosquito Park’ by the Portuguese immigrants, a colloquial moniker used to make the park feel somehow safe and their own. The renaming of places and things was an often used practice for it provided a sense of comfort. In contrast, what was considered unknown or different was arbitrarily dismissed as inferior or fear provoking. I always asked my parents to sign me up for little league but they always came up with some excuse: “we don’t have the money, we don’t want you to get hurt, what do you know about baseball.” It was always something. What I really wanted wasn’t to play baseball; I wanted to be able to fit in with the American kids. So I was forced to stand behind the right field chain link fence and watch.

In theory I could have played as well as anyone out on the field since I watched intently as their coaches taught them how to bat, field, and throw, but theory and practice are two different
things. I often times had the illusion that one of their coaches would come up to me and say they needed another player, one of the kids was sick, but that never happened. I watched little league baseball, hockey and basketball practices, football pickup games and never once was I asked to participate. It was as though I was invisible on the other side of the fence. I watched and observed and in the process I taught myself not only the rules of the game, I learned how Americans acted. My parents’ reluctance for me to interact with the other side of that fence, I suspect, was either a cultural fear bred from self imposed ignorance or a way to protect me from the unknown. Regardless of the reason, I was left with the same paradox of a conclusion: I was equally uncomfortable with my native and new culture. I was unable to embrace either fully, caught in a cruel and difficult game of cultural limbo, leaving me isolated and lost in translation. I soon learned, however, this circumstance didn’t restrict my abilities and experiences. I consistently questioned both my cultures’ ways and ideals and the answers I received ultimately gave me a more vibrant character; the obstacles and challenges I was forced to face and overcome inevitably molded me into the person I am today.

My memories of childhood are filled with instances in which I was expected to be the American adult of the family. I was expected to interpret the ways of our new country and easily relate them to our Portuguese culture. This was a lofty goal, especially when my parents were always quick to point out the negative in anything that didn’t resemble their known way. In Judith Ortiz Cofer’s essay “Silent Dancing”, she describes coming to America from Puerto Rico and how her memories “those first few years [were] all in shades of grey” (65). She artfully uses color, or lack of such, in her memories to convey her state of mind in those formative years in her new country. As Cofer puts it, “maybe I was too young to absorb vivid colors and details” suggesting that it wasn’t necessarily the colors she didn’t see or understand, but rather the metaphoric
significance behind them (65). It would be expected for Cofer, being three years old, not to be able to fully understand the meaning of what was happening around her. Grey is safe, unilateral, and conveys simplicity, leading to blissful ignorance. In contrast, I was forced to see in blinding colors, which are often times complex and multifaceted, especially to a young boy entrusted with deciphering their subtle hues. Cofer’s grey shades protected her from having to see her new home for what it was: a world unlike her native Puerto Rico filled with new challenges, customs, and ways of thinking. My colors thrust me into the very essence of American culture. They made me categorize the advantages and disadvantages of both my cultures as I decoded the kaleidoscope of cultural nuances along with their meanings and connotations – they permeated, haunted, and left me unsure of myself and their significance.

In the process of interpreting the swarm of colors around me, I was left with a sense of not belonging. Cofer describes how her “father did his best to make [their] ‘assimilation’ painless,” something that my own father preached on one hand and restricted with the other (67). I was encouraged to conduct my observations and subsequent analysis of American culture, much like writing a research paper. My careful observations however did not translate into a seamless assimilation with American society. Assimilation is not accomplished through will and observations alone. It requires the old views to be tolerant and acceptant of the new and vice versa. My parents’ fear of the differences between cultures made me question the vivid colors around me, often leaving me stuck in the middle. Perhaps if I wasn’t expected to be a cultural translator and saw things in grey like Cofer, I wouldn’t feel so lost, paralyzed, and blinded by the colors. I see these differences today as a positive divergence, allowing me to appreciate and respect both my cultures. Back then however, not accepting and silencing these differences was a defense mechanism from the unknown. Cofer is sensitive to these differences, and their silencing
effects, growing up in an immigrant household. She shrewdly maneuvers from her lack of color in memories to a dream and home movie about a New Year’s party where she can’t hear the living, just the dead. The dead are representative of her old culture while the living are the new culture and generation. At first she states that “even the home movie cannot fill in the sensory details such a gathering left imprinted in a child’s mind” going on to describe the Puerto Rican sounds, smells, and tastes she remembers at the party (69). She can clearly hear, smell, taste, and see details about her Puerto Rican traditions, yet can’t hear the new generation’s silent dancers. She was conditioned at that early age to accept only the Puerto Rican ways. How else can you describe her selective sensory deprivations? Differences from her native culture were yet to be perceived as acceptable and therefore remained silent and seen only in grey.

As an immigrant child, like Cofer, I had to decide what identity I wanted to cultivate for myself. Cofer again cleverly reverts to the use, or lack, of her senses to hammer the point home. She describes how in her dream she’s forced to “hear the dead and the forgotten” and “those who are still part of my life remain silent… in their dance” (71). The voices of the old guard are heard clearly while those of the new generation are quelled, forced into silence. Although the dancers are silent, their meaning resonates loud and clear. Cofer is describing her mindset at her early age; silent to her new culture while her old relatives rule the roost. She recognizes this injustice and for the first time takes matters into her own hands, effectively deciding that she will silence the old and hear the new. Her declaration to her father’s uncle to “move back” and “give the dancers some room to move” was her way of ensuring her identity wouldn’t be tethered by the isolating affects of those that seek to smother a new and unknown culture (71). She recognized the dancers needed their sonorous voices heard; they needed to develop their identities on their own terms instead of being filled with the thoughts and ideals of their older relatives.
One’s identity is sculpted by a variety of recurring experiences, none more so than by language and how one is able to express themselves. Cofer writes about how she remembers the tumultuous early years in America and how they shaped her family’s assimilation into and view of American culture. Her determination to choose her own way ultimately defined who she became. Amy Tan in “Mother Tongue” writes about a similar circumstance, choosing instead to describe the unique language she developed with her mother rather than Cofer’s use of sensory deprivations. There were many instances at home where I had to speak a hybrid Portuguese-English dialect when speaking with my parents so that I could explain American ways and language on a level they could understand, something that Tan describes as “our language of intimacy” (250). Speaking in a half-n-half language allowed my parents and me to converse freely. It became a comfortable place for me, the only way I was able to place both my old roots together with my new. I thought my unique position might have “an effect on limiting my possibilities in life” as Tan says, yet in the end it gave me the distinct identity I am proud to have today (252). It ultimately “helped shape the way I saw things, expressed things, made sense of the world”, just like Tan (250). Cofer saw her potential limitation in the silencing treatment of her father’s uncle, while Tan saw it in the language she spoke at home with her mother. Cofer realized that in order to gain her independence from repressive relatives she must silence those that are entrenched in their old ways. Tan realized that her special language with her mother wasn’t a limitation but rather a distinctive, endearing mannerism.

So there I stood in front of that fence watching them catch big flies. Often times my dad would come looking for me if he got home and I was still out. He would always seem to sneak up on me somehow as I gazed out onto the field. It was at those moments when he put his arm around me and said, “Vamos para casa” when I didn’t care much about playing with the other
kids. We all try to be rebellious in our own right when we’re kids, yet in the end all we want is to belong. My parents may not have offered me a typically American childhood but they did their very best and always made sure I got what they could provide for me. The tribulations I experienced having to juggle two cultures in the end made me who I am. I would rather be blinded by color than color blind like Cofer. Although my colors were a challenge, they provided me with a richer experience resulting in a stronger character. Our parents’ native culture and language can significantly impact our mindset and experiences much like Tan, yet our family’s past doesn’t predetermine who we’ll become. We ultimately blaze our own unique path. We are independent vessels. Ironically, what the Portuguese called ‘Mosquito Park’ was actually named Independence Park.
Works Cited
