



VILLARREAL EDUCATIONAL ENTERPRISES

ENDEAVORS IN PROGRESS

Becky G: Identity, Belonging, and the Power of Knowing Where We Come From

Essential Question:

How can maintaining connections to our culture help us develop our identity, navigate institutions, and create opportunities for ourselves and our communities?

From Jalisco to Southern California

When we think about a successful musician such as Becky G, we often focus on her music, awards, performances, and collaborations. But behind the celebrity is a family story that connects her to a much larger history of migration and community formation in Southern California.



Becky G was born Rebbeca Marie Gomez in Inglewood, California. Her parents were born in the United States, while all four of her grandparents came from Jalisco, Mexico. Her grandparents' journey to Southern California was part of a larger pattern in which Mexican families moved north seeking opportunities and hoping to create better futures for their children and grandchildren (Johnson, 2013).

Becky has spoken openly about the influence of her grandparents. She has explained that they arrived with very little and worked to create opportunities for their children. She remembers them teaching her Spanish, introducing her to the music they grew up with, and reminding her not to forget where her family came from (Macias, 2022).

That connection became particularly important because Becky grew up in a world that could sometimes make her feel caught between cultures. She was born and raised in Southern California, surrounded by U.S. popular culture, but her family also maintained strong connections to Mexican traditions, language, music, and family relationships.

Her story raises an important question:

What happens when young people are encouraged to succeed in a society but are not always encouraged to bring their entire cultural identity with them?

Learning From Our Families

Families are often the first places where young people learn about culture.

Long before students encounter history in a textbook, they may learn history through conversations with grandparents, family stories, food, music, celebrations, language, photographs, and traditions.

Becky G's grandparents played this role in her life. They did not simply give her a connection to Mexico. They helped give her a way to understand herself.

Her experience reflects an idea explored by historian Mario T. García in *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, and Identity, 1930–1960*. García examines how Mexican American communities developed institutions and leaders while working to secure full participation and citizenship in a society where Mexican Americans frequently encountered discrimination and exclusion (García, 1989).

This history reminds us that culture does not survive automatically. Communities preserve culture by **teaching it, practicing it, sharing it, and adapting it**.

Becky G's music demonstrates one way this can happen. She grew up listening to contemporary music in the diverse communities of the United States while also hearing Mexican music through her family. As an adult, she incorporated regional Mexican traditions into her own musical career.

Her music therefore became a kind of bridge.

She did not have to choose between the culture of her grandparents and the culture of Southern California.



She could learn from both.

When We Don't See Ourselves

Becky G's experience also connects to a larger question in Ethnic Studies:

What happens when people do not see themselves reflected in the institutions around them?

Schools, workplaces, government agencies, media organizations, and other institutions often have their own expectations about language, behavior, achievement, and identity.

These expectations are not always intentionally designed to exclude people. However, when the experiences and cultural knowledge of a community are missing from an institution, people may begin to feel that they must change themselves in order to belong.

This can be especially difficult for young people.

A student may wonder:

- Is my family's history important?
- Is speaking Spanish an advantage or a disadvantage?
- Do I need to change the way I speak to be taken seriously?
- Can I be successful without giving up parts of my culture?
- Does my school value the knowledge that I bring from home?

These questions are not simply personal questions. They are also questions about **power, representation, and belonging**.

Mario T. García's historical research demonstrates that Mexican American communities did not simply wait for institutions to include them. Mexican American leaders organized, created organizations, challenged discrimination, and demanded greater participation in public life (García, 1989).

Belonging, therefore, can be understood as something communities help **create**, not merely something institutions choose to give.

The Mexican American Experience Is Not One Story

Carlos Fuentes's *The Buried Mirror* offers another way to think about cultural identity. Fuentes argues that cultures develop through encounters between peoples and civilizations. Identity is not something frozen in the past; it develops through interaction, exchange, and historical experience (Fuentes, 1992).

This idea is important when thinking about Becky G.

She is not simply "Mexican" because her grandparents came from Jalisco, nor is she disconnected from Mexican culture because she was born in California.

Her identity developed through the interaction of several worlds:

Jalisco + Southern California + Spanish + English + Mexican music + U.S. popular culture + family history + contemporary Latino culture

This is one reason Ethnic Studies matters. Ethnic Studies allows us to examine identity as something shaped by **history, culture, family, institutions, geography, and personal experience.**

There is no single way to be Mexican American, Chicana, Latino, Afro-Latino, or Hispano.

Our communities contain many experiences.



Piri Thomas: Another Story of Belonging

Becky G's story can be compared with the experience of **Piri Thomas**, a Puerto Rican and Cuban American writer who grew up in Spanish Harlem. In *Down These Mean Streets*, Thomas describes poverty, racism, discrimination, and his struggle to understand where he belonged (Thomas, 1997).

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Thomas's experience was very different from Becky G's, but their stories raise similar questions:

- Who gets to define who we are?
- What happens when we do not feel accepted by the institutions around us?
- How does family influence our understanding of identity?
- How can cultural pride help us develop a stronger sense of self?

Thomas's story reminds us that identity and belonging are not simply personal ideas. They can influence our confidence, relationships, education, and opportunities.

Staying Connected While Growing

Staying connected to our culture does not mean that our culture must remain unchanged.

Cultures evolve. Languages change. Music changes. Families change. Communities change.

Becky G's career demonstrates this process. She grew up listening to contemporary U.S. music while also hearing Mexican music from her grandparents. As her career developed, she moved between English and Spanish and eventually incorporated regional Mexican traditions such as ranchera, mariachi, corridos, and bolero into her music.

Her identity did not become less authentic as it changed.

It became more fully expressed.

Carlos Fuentes's *The Buried Mirror* helps us understand this idea. Fuentes explains that cultures develop through encounters and exchanges between peoples and civilizations (Fuentes, 1992).

Staying connected to our culture does not require us to reject everything else. It means knowing our history and traditions well enough to decide what we want to carry forward.

From Cultural Knowledge to Community Power

Knowing our history and culture is important, but knowledge becomes even more powerful when we use it to improve our lives.

Paulo Freire argued that education can help people examine their experiences, understand the world around them, and develop the ability to participate in changing it (Freire, 2018).

This idea connects directly to the purpose of **Capacitando**.

Learning should not end when we leave the classroom. Families and communities can continue learning about history, careers, technology, financial literacy, civic participation, entrepreneurship, and other subjects that can create new opportunities.

Lifelong learning is a form of community empowerment.

When we understand where we come from, recognize the knowledge we already possess, and continue developing new knowledge and skills, we become better prepared to improve the conditions of our families and communities.

Becky G's story reminds us that we do not have to choose between **where we come from and where we are going.**

We can carry our history with us while continuing to grow.



Our Stories Are Part of the Story

Becky G's success is more than a story about a musician. It is a story about grandparents who came from Jalisco, a family building a life in Southern California, and a young woman learning to embrace multiple cultural influences.

Her story reminds us that our backgrounds do not have to limit our possibilities.

They can become part of the foundation upon which we build our futures.

The Capacitando Challenge

Learn your story.

Understand your history.

Stay connected to your culture.

Keep learning.

Use what you learn to create greater opportunities for yourself, your family, and your community.

That is the power of lifelong learning.

Questions for Discussion

Understanding the Text

1. Where did Becky G's grandparents come from, and how did they influence her understanding of her culture?
2. What are some ways Becky G's family helped her stay connected to Mexican culture?
3. What does it mean to say that Becky G's music became a “bridge” between different cultures?

Identity & Belonging

4. Why might a young person feel pressure to change parts of their identity in order to fit into an institution such as a school?
5. How can seeing your culture, language, or family experiences represented in school help create a sense of belonging?
6. How are Becky G's experiences similar to or different from those of Piri Thomas?

Critical Thinking

7. What is the difference between **preserving a culture** and **keeping a culture unchanged**?
8. How can cultural knowledge become a source of strength or power for a community?
9. Paulo Freire believed that education can help people understand their world and participate in changing it. What is one example of how education could help improve your community?

Applying the Ideas

10. Identify one part of your family or community's history, culture, language, or traditions that you believe should be passed on to future generations. Explain why it is important.

Key Vocabulary

Cultural Identity — The way people understand themselves in relation to their culture, family history, language, traditions, and community.

Culture — The beliefs, values, traditions, language, practices, knowledge, and creative expressions shared by a group of people.

Migration — The movement of people from one place to another, often in search of safety, opportunity, or a better life.

Representation — The presence and portrayal of people's cultures, experiences, and identities in institutions, media, education, and society.

Belonging — The feeling that one's identity, experiences, and contributions are recognized and valued by a community or institution.

Institution — An established organization or system in society, such as a school, government, business, or workplace.

Cultural Continuity — The process of passing cultural knowledge, traditions, language, and values from one generation to another.

Cultural Adaptation — The process through which individuals and communities adjust to new cultural environments while maintaining aspects of their original culture.

Lifelong Learning — The ongoing process of gaining knowledge and skills throughout one's life.

Empowerment — The process of gaining knowledge, confidence, skills, and opportunities that allow individuals or communities to have greater control over their lives and futures.

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