Before you read this poem, go back to the introduction to this text and re-read the opening poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar. This poem by Elisa Martinez, an elementary school teacher of severely disabled children and former director of Teatro de los Pobres, was written in Spanish, but the power of its message in explaining the importance and advantages of recognizing and celebrating diversity within each of us comes through clearly in this English translation.

**Having the Choice of Who to Be**

*Elisa Martinez*

As Mexican Americans, we are often criticized for not flowing in the mainstream of America. Why do “they” insist on speaking “that language” and retaining “that” culture when “they” live in the United States?

I can’t answer that question for anyone else. But as for me, I find that it makes life more interesting.

By all appearances, I am one person but in reality I am two.

It is one of me who cries when she hears melancholy memories of mother and father; it is the other who sighs when she hears “Goodnight Sweetheart,” with her memories of friends, proms and malts at the drive-in.

It is one of me who enjoys a slice of medium rare roast beef and the other who wraps it in a tortilla and downs it with hot chili sauce.

It is one of me who jerks in rhythm to “Billie Jean” and the other who swirls gaily to corridos and steps in rhythm to a cumbia.

It is one of me who prepares for Santa Claus and the other who breaks the piñata at the Posada.

It is one of me who wants to be always on time and the other who gets there just a little bit late.

It is one of me who interprets Serafina in Tennessee Williams’ “Rose Tattoo” and the other who becomes “La Siempreviva” in Luis Basurto’s “Cada Quién Su Vida.”

**Footnotes:**

1. A Mexican polka.
2. A salsa-type dance.
3. A twelve-day Christmas celebration.
4. La Siempreviva is the leading lady in “Cada Quién Su Vida” (“To Each His Own”).
It is one of me who carves out the face in the pumpkin for Halloween and the other who cleans the sepulcro on Día de los Muertos.

It is one of me who buys the smoke alarm for the safety of the family and the other who has it disconnected when it drives us mad every time a tortilla burns.

It is one of me who buys medication at the drugstore and the other who washes it down with estafiate.

It is one of me who can appreciate Beverly Sills in concert and the other me who can appreciate “The Poet and Peasant Overture” played beautifully by a group of mariachis.

It is one of me who takes great pains to speak English correctly, giving great care to the rules of grammar, and the other me who says “Qué cute!” and “Simón que yes!”

It is one of me who celebrates Mother’s Day on the second Sunday in May and other me who celebrates again on May 10.

It is one of me who feels the patriotic emotion when the Stars and Stripes go by and the other who elates at the tri-colored flag with the eagle in the center as she marches by to the rhythm of the bugles.

The other day as I was cleaning house, I was singing that popular Nelson/Iglesias release “To All the Girls I Loved Before.” My husband, who incidentally does not appreciate my singing (another Mexican custom), asked, “And who are you, Willie or Julio?”

How neat, I thought, that I DO have a choice.

Questions for Reflection

1. What are the choices that you have about who to be?

2. Can you identify the ways in which the “mixes” of your own cultural heritage play themselves out in the decisions and behaviors of your everyday life?

3. What are your personal reactions to both the Paul Laurence Dunbar poem which began this book and this poem?