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Diversity

Choosing Me

I slapped him. A slap fueled by my sober mother’s rage when untasteful drug association jokes were made, my dad’s fury when Pablo Escobar the sociopath who ruined his teens became trendy, and by the cavernous hole Jake left gaping in my heart when the minute he found out I immigrated from Colombia, he said “Come on, just a quick bathroom speedball and then we’ll be back”.”

The affluent town I grew up in has a diversity problem- 80% White, 11% Asian, 4% Black with overall 3% Latino/Hispanic population. A town guilty of busing inner city Boston kids under ruse of educational philanthropy to meet a minority quota. These kids, extras to a small town movie where swastikas were carved in stalls and foundation too dark is used for Bill cosby costumes. Ironically Wellesley is the 13.1 of the Boston Marathon where once a year an elixir of runners brings cultural richness, worldly love and acceptance through this infamous halfway mark. But as soon as the last place straggler crosses into Needham effects of neighborly love oozes out with them. It was a town where I dreaded the first day roll call when teachers sneered at my last name and proving myself became the unwritten first assignment. It was where Santiago, my little 6’4 sophomore brother with his clover eyes and pearly complexion got into an argument with his American Spanish teacher where she accosted him of lying about being Colombian because her theory was that he didn’t seem Hispanic. Would a sombrero and cocaine have made it easier?

I wondered if there was a buzzfeed quiz for “How Latina are you”. Can my cultural identity, my parent’s pain, my traditions and morals really be diluted into a 10 bubbled online questionnaire? Google, with its infinite wisdom told me yes and my curiosity compelled me to complete it. Seeking sick justification from a stranger who ended up failing me with an 18% Latina. I chuckled pondering if it was when I ticked no to having a candle lit stove at home or rather the fact I don’t refer to cereal as "con fley". Maybe the fact that I don’t burst out in hysterics with a mood change or think the abomination of spanglish is an acceptable version of communication. Do these things make me too “White”?

Immigration around Wellesley was always a rich topic. I would playfully lay a board of minesweeper topics and watch as those who knew me, laboriously dance around the conversation fearing political incorrectness and my possible detonation. With those who didn’t know me it was a whole different game. A game that provided me an unfiltered version of them and their thoughts about Hispanics or immigrants. These opinions would usually involve the juxtaposition of Hispanics and immigrants being lazy yet somehow stealing jobs the American jobs. This was completely invalidating my dad’s numerous degrees and academic excellence as reasons for his positions. My favorite part was when the conversation was over, after slipping my immigrant nature, they would attempt to atone through “OH but I didn’t mean you, you’re not like them, you’re different!”. Like who? How am I different? Why not?

If I was in a vindictive mood my next step would be to bombard them with these questions. Desperate attempts to slash apart their gilded shield of conceit and clobber away at any attempts of conversational redirection, eventually piercing into the heart of a real beast, racism. This wasn’t an event I allowed myself to indulge in often because once reality was laid they would feel uncomfortable. Never make privileged people uncomfortable. Once speechless, stunned and disgusted with the truth it was game over for both of us and in their eyes I would now become one of “them”. Becoming one of “them” meant I would lose the equipotent status I had with my classmates, a demotion to the credibility of my word and to them become a member of a lower caste.

Senior year I was assistant manager of a local yogurt shop. One day a group of 5 men in their 40’s waltzed in and indulged in our product. It was a light interaction with meaningless small talk and typical scripted conversation prompts, the kind seen in a Wendy's commercial. Pleasant but plastic. After they sat down an Argentinian couple came up and we began to talk in Spanish. The atmosphere began to churn as hushed side comments began complimenting the gentle hum of the yogurt machines. It was my working on the new store banner gave the hushed comments permission to grow into louder audible remarks.

“She spelled color and flavor wrong”.

To which another replied “Well what did you expect from someone like her”.

In 4th grade English you learn to spell those without a U. I shamelessly pointed out that American English differs to British English in this way. Appalled by my response they began to correct me louder and more aggressively. My ignoring allowed it to develop further until their statement of “fucking illegals” flew across the room and pierced me through the heart, bingo. This vile statement resonating throughout a store floor I considered a secondary home. I gathered up my strength and banned them.

“I’m going to have to ask you to leave and never come back” I bellowed from behind the register.

My younger co worker Julia in the back gleaming with pride but with eyes still darkened out of fear. My fierceness followed them out the door and once they were safely out I slumped over left crying. My whiteness was a temporary privilege, revocable by Spanish. It was a privilege for which Dominican, pecan skinned Julia would never feel the intoxicating, brainwashing warmth. When removed, beer goggles on reality gone and the hangover left reminding you of who you are. Julia’s darker features would always betray her and in the eyes of strangers be a condemned “them” and therefore be treated as such.

I figured the White Latina juxtaposition was an American issue. That my inability to fit neatly into the ticky tacky boxes of stereotypes was disorienting to them. During my gap year I engaged in a trip where I backpacked through several countries. I caught glimpses into the minds of foreigners, whose mere demeanor would always alter at the revelation of my origins being purely Colombian. With hungry eyes, interrogations would always pursue in an attempt to figure out how truly exotic of a Latina I was by asking- the age I immigrated, could I dance, where is my accent, do I switch to spanish when I got angry and if I would roll my r’s for them. Then always without my asking they would proceed to give their input of my Latina number. If I failed, I would be quickly informed and chastised for my deficiency. Passing however meant I would now be branded with the word “*exotic”*. Exotic was a double edged sword, a dirty word in my dictionary that punctured my psyche and nonetheless an indolent descriptor for me. It was a word that bore the facade of a compliment, masking the true definition of me now being erotic to them. I would be left feeling like a ripe tropical fruit needing to be consumed, a designer belt for fashion or a rare creature needed for collection. To be branded with exotic was to mutilate my humanity and strip me from my achievements, dreams, and aspirations. I would no longer feel treated like a girl trying to enjoy her life changing trip but rather a woman who needed to be conquered.

This experience with all those Oceania, European and Asian travellers as a whole taught me that being a White Latina was a juxtaposition in the eyes of most of the world. Although we were all foreigners in a distant land, I was the exotic one. It was a different type of “them” but one that was seen as a compliment when in reality left me feeling dirty. It also proved that everyone feels entitled to test and grade you to then inform you of what your culture is, acting like living and breathing buzzfeed quizzes. They also feel empowered enough to be able to try and reject this part of me. I had 2 puppy loves that conveyed my struggle with boys not understanding what it meant to be White Latina. Both of them trying to expunge my Colombianness either on purpose or subconciously.

My first love adorned his friend’s face with a black eye because he had said I had the lips of a black woman. After his confession, my love tried to comfort me with cheshire smile on his face, as if he done right by me. My apparent knight in shining fucking armor. Was he forgetting what I was? I liked my lips. I loved their fullness and the way they showcased the pigment of my overpriced lipstains. I adored they way they framed my smile and puckered pumply with my pout. Was I supposed to be offended by these kind words? Matt clearly was and my weak willed 15 year old self began to question my fondness of them. Latina trademarks I should never have even hesitated to love or question. Regretfully for the next few years I began to pursue them into a straight line in attempts to conceal their volume.

My second love was more complicated and wasn’t innocent as my first. Ben was far more dangerous with his older guy lure and fierce guitar skills. His sense of humor was dark, twisted, and unpredictable, much like my natural hair. He loved me but hated my story. Wildly and inaccurately opinionated on the “them’s” and minorities of the school- ideas I brushed off as strength of character instead of red flags of a feeble mind filled to the brim with ignorance. In desperate attempts to keep the flame going I allowed myself to become Prometheus, a victim of devotion, and for him to be my eagle tearing me apart. He rejected what wasn’t liked and as if I was a girlfriend Sim, he began to edit me. My salsa moves became trashy, my Spanish meant only for his cleaning ladies, my music ghetto, my mom too emotionally crazy, and my superstitions trademarks of a lower race. He kept the parts that he liked my dyed hair, proper English, love for classic rock and liberal nature. To be in love then meant to me being willing to change, so I deleted it all. Anger and teenage angst helped me temporarily conform to these whitewash ultimatums for 2 years, a time where I refused to be seen as one of “them”, for an us. We lived in a fairy tale world, one I thought was a dreamy Disney creation but in reality was another dingy page of a grisly Brothers Grimm story.

I now understand that real love whether it be yourself or another person is more about embracing and acceptance. I am both Hispanic and Latina today. Unlike a race it is a choice dictated by upbringing and culture. It is a gift that people from certain nationalities have inherited at birth or nurture and can choose to pursue. To be Latina or Hispanic is about the language and culture and although it can be inherited it still has to be earned and learned through time. The Spanish language, traditions, family morals and self acceptance are all choices that are to be incorporated in my daily life.

After years of being in the dark, feeling insufficient and frightened to flash my inner questions, I met a girl on my floor named Katie. Her parents had fled El Salvador during their civil war and became refugees here in the 80’s ultimately resulting in her American birth but irrefutable Latino culture. For hours in the safe space of my room we lay our bare thoughts, unfiltered feelings and engage in a transformative conversations. Conversations about our experiences at CU and how both teachers and classmates shape them daily. We talk about the importance about programs such a McNiel, a program for minorities and how we need more of the safe cultural spaces. We complain about my Wellesley experience and compare it to her Aspen, both living there as outliers to the stereotypes. Most importantly to me, we are able to discuss how different our lives would be had we been raised somewhere else with a higher Latino or Hispanic population. After clutching tightly at these thorns of doubt, afraid to let go and fighting these questions, I am able to loosen my grasp in relief. This is connection I had never experienced because in a world of us vs them I was in the middle, stuck in racial limbo. Fortunately for me she’s stuck in here as well. Together armed with our culture, intelligence and mannerisms we charge daily into a field of oppression, occasionally shielded by our lighter complexions. All of our wounds in the name of accurate representation for Latina women.