

My Life As a Light-Skinned *Mejicana*

By Diana Terry-Azios

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Three guys walk up to me in a bar. “Excuse me,” one says. “You have to help us settle a bet. We were just trying to guess what your ethnicity is.” After I explain that I am a person, not a sporting event to be bet on, I tell them that I am Latina, of Mexican ancestry. At that point, the interrogators look at me like I am the last living unicorn, a complete anomaly to the laws of nature that make the earth turn. “No!” they exclaim.

This is a common occurrence in my life. Sometimes, I’m told: “Really. I never would have guessed.” And then there is my favorite: “Wow. You don’t look it.”

Well, what are we *supposed* to look like? The answers I have received would astound you. They range from utter speechlessness and tongue-tied apologies to “Like the ones in the back of the trucks with lawn mowers.”

Some people just accept my answer and go on with life, but others refuse to believe that it can be possible. I’ve engaged in verbal warfare over it, too. Take the instance of the slightly inebriated partygoer, for example:

“Mexican? No you’re not. You are Lebanese.”

“No. I’m Mexican.”

“No. I know a Lebanese person when I see one. You are Lebanese.”

This merry-go-round discussion escalated and eventually drew a crowd.

And there was a friend’s mother: “Mexican? I thought you were Italian. There is this Italian girl I know, and you look just like her. You sure look Italian. I can’t believe you are not Italian.” This happened every time I saw her, until I began to understand that maybe she would have been more comfortable if I had been Italian.

None of this would be of much significance in my life—after all, I am sure of what and who I am—if it weren’t for the other Latinos who believe I can’t be Latina, at least not like they are. Since I don’t fit the typical U.S. definition of what a Latino should be, I can’t understand the experience of being Latino, they challenge.

Maybe they are right. As a light-skinned Latina, I can’t possibly understand the experience of being *morena*. But that doesn’t mean that I don’t know what it is to be Latina, that I haven’t had my own experience, or that they could understand what it is to be at the other side of the spectrum, to be *guera*.

Being light-skinned means I blend in. But in a “blended” crowd, everything that makes the Latino experience is magnified ten times for me.

Among Latinos, it isn't unusual to find chicken's feet in the soup, or a cow's head on the table at Thanksgiving. But mention any of that in a non-Latino group, and it won't soon be forgotten. The normalcy and subtleties of the culture made my traditions stand out even more in mixed company. My experience as a light-skinned Latina has been a little like being the only one in masquerade at a black-tie ball. I draw more attention than if I just looked like what everybody else expects me to.

My complexion means people drop their guard when I am around. Forgetting or never guessing that I am Mexican, people let loose remarks they would never say if they thought there was a Latina around. I have inadvertently been called "spic" and "wetback" and been told that I don't belong because the speakers assumed there weren't any "spics" or "wetbacks" within earshot. You can only imagine their expressions when I say that I, the person next to them at the dinner table or across from them at the conference table, am Mexican.

Latinos who assume I am not Latina and do not speak Spanish are guilty of the same mistakes. I recall one former apartment neighbor who used foul, loud language because he didn't think anyone else in the complex spoke Spanish. I don't think a name has yet been invented for the red color his face turned when I greeted him in Spanish one day.

Though it isn't as easy as some believe, I wouldn't trade my experiences for any other. It has been unique and interesting. I am almost a double agent of the *gente*, the infiltrator no one suspects.

For anyone else still curious, I am only going to say it one more time for the record: Yes, I am Mexican. Yes, I am fair-skinned. Yes, we do exist. And yes. I do know what it means to be Latina. My color can't revoke my culture.

So don't stop me on the street, the bus, at the store, or the bar to ask me what I am. There will be no more long glances followed by curious apologies from people who say, "I'm sorry. We didn't mean to stare. We were just wondering what you are."

I am a human being, a woman, a light-skinned Latina, a proud Chicana.