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His-panics and Mine

Angela María Pérez-Mejía

Like most stories mine starts at the beginning, when the question of my identity in terms of belonging to a particular race group started for me. At the beginning I really did not know the thing about myself, which everyone learns just by my opening my mouth. I am Hispanic. And I am not of the type who grew up here and could eventually aspire to be Surgeon General. No, I am of the kind that causes panic: would do anything for a green card, has a myriad of cousins back home trying to follow in her footsteps and will never stop saying "estation" and "eschool." I am of the kinds who will always "espeak" funny.

To accept what is known about me just by opening my mouth took me some years at school and a lot of juggling of terms. The first time I was confronted with the terminology, from which I was to choose my label, I had just arrived in this country and was struggling to understand a registration form for an English language school. One of the questions offered some boxes with the names of different races from which I had to choose one. Once I eliminated those I obviously was not, like Asian, African-American, or others I did not even understand (like Caucasian), I was left with three categories to choose from. The first one I eliminated was Hispanic, since I knew very well I did not come from Spain. The second I rejected was white, because even though my lack of melanin has always embarrassed me at the beach, I always had the feeling that white meant blonde. I was left with only one box and very sure of myself I marked Native American. I was totally sure I was born in America, excuse me, in the Americas, I know how to say it now.

Soon after I learned, of course, what I was supposed to mark and then I started learning the real content of these terms and how little they had to do with my real racial configuration and how much they had to do with social constructs. At first I understood that race could mean something different depending when and where you are and what you need. On one hand, there is academia, and a constant questioning about race and representation, the realization that there is not such a thing as an identity but rather the overlaying of roles one is assigned to and roles one chooses. In combining those roles there is confusion and there is also a range of possibility. American academia started me thinking again about identity with the same eagerness I had for the subject at age sixteen. Here the obsession was race, what haunted me then was class.

Soon I also realized that in American academia I am read as a container of race and I am expected to perform that role and think from that point of view. Sometimes it is flattering, sometimes it is burdensome, and sometimes it is boring to be forced to be a Latina when

one may be thinking about not being much. In every school I have been at I have been asked to do this talk, to reveal myself in public, to explain the ineffable, to make transparent to others what is a kaleidoscope for me, to justify why I speak funny and yet insist on exercising my right to speak.

Being a teacher has thrown me another curve, this time from the other side of the field. Let me speak for instance about teaching "Latin American Culture," as they call it, to American students of Latino origins. In the beginning my task seemed very clear. I was going to open the doors of Latin America for them, so they could better understand their identity as Latinos in the U.S. I was not that clear anymore when two students showed me the problems involved in my philanthropic task. Victor from the South Bronx, whose only language was Spanglish and was desperate in his freshman year while failing English and failing Spanish, could not care less about Bolivar and the Aztecs. He thought I wasn't qualified to teach a course for Latinos because I could not walk freely in the South Bronx. I was not authentic enough for him. Victor taught me there was a universe separating him and me. He made clear for me that even though we have to choose the same box in the application forms we do not belong to the same experience. Victor made me think that race is a place where sometimes you are put and sometimes you put yourself. His place was 138th St. My comfortable place was representing diversity in academia. The other student was Ver—nica, a short dark woman whose parents had escaped from El Salvador during the worst years of war. One day in a heated discussion about race, several of her classmates were arguing that no one could put you down unless you allowed them to do so. Veronica stood up furiously and told them to look at her face, there was not choice for her, she carried it on her skin: "Hay unos que la llevamos encima," she screamed at them while slapping her cheeks. Veronica thought there was actually just one race, the dark race, while others were viewed as not belonging to a particular race. Now I question the implications of being a teacher for Latino students: at times I am a role model, at times a foreigner speaking for them with a funny voice, at times someone who feels so far away from what they want me to represent. At times I feel they are just like everyone else here, they tamper with my dearest treasure: my language.

As a teacher of Latinos and non-Latinos I feel yet another pressure of representation. They all want me to correspond to whatever notion of being a Latino they created or were handed down, but they are not expecting me to break beyond it. To represent is also to be deprived of choices, to be afraid of not being what is acceptable by others' expectations. It is also the fear of disappointing the group that considers me their own. By choice I am a feminist and students are often scared by the mere mention of the word. By nature I am outspoken and strong. Students find that intimidating, or so they say. Because of my personal history I have a lot of anger; they often find that inappropriate for the salsa-dancer, beans-eater, marriage-oriented, sweet nice Latina I am supposed to be. They may want me to be a Latina, but they do not always want me to be a Latina feminist, they get

scared by it. When I rebel against something or align myself with other women, people doubt me as a pure Latina. Or they question my having come here in the first place. Among other things, I sense that everyone expects me to be grateful for being here, thankful for having the opportunity to be far from my dangerous third world home. But for me it is not always clear that being away is the best choice and the everyday can be tiring and lonely. I have grown so exhausted of translating myself to everyone, of always using a borrowed language, of not being as witty and quick as I can be in Spanish, of always sounding funny.

Those are some of my experiences in academia, but the outside world is another totally different experience. Most people tell me I do not look Latina at all, and they say it thinking that they flatter me. But their opinion soon changes when they learn I am Colombian, which produces their worst panics. Even the most sophisticated people seem unable to resist saying, "Ah, the Medellin cartel," and that is supposed to inform me of how well versed in international politics they are. Not to mention the taxi driver who did not hesitate to ask me if I could get him some dope and then thought I was a snob for not bothering to answer him.

I also know very well there is a place where everything is determined by the little ethnic box which I now mark without hesitation; it is the immigration office. There they have the real power to have an impact in my personal life. There everything becomes clear-cut. I am strictly his-panic, his most furious panic. There, I am yelled at and abused for being so. There, there is no analysis, no middle ground, no class difference, and no points of view, no taking or rejection of identities. They know all too well, I'd better behave as my little square says, otherwise they just do not sign, and my future depends on that signature. Lining up at an immigration office makes years of academic questioning collapse in front of me.

Things change, and race is a place which can move. It is a set of fears you produce in others, a frontier of expectations. When I go back home I become increasingly white for the people over there. The longer I stay here the whiter they see me there, to the point of my mother's neighbors asking me if my stomach can take fried plantain. The longer I stay here, the more I understand that regardless of my academic questioning, I am Hispanic. More and more I take my place in this society obsessed by pure definitions and identities. I have learned that I have to play with the set given to me if I want to get by. But playing with it is playing with fire and that brings my panics to the stage. I fear that I might learn my place far too well and forget to question what is expected of me in that role. I fear I will fall into the binary oppositions encouraged by the frenzy of defining oneself. I fear forgetting to honor the places which are, unknown to me, the mystery of being oneself, the silence between the adjectives that helps to define oneself. I fear the limitations of identity and forgetting that, after all, the only absolute certainty I have is being Josefina's daughter.