

*That Time When My Skin Changed Color:
A Spaniard in the USA*

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Maintenance had come to my apartment to fix a couple of things. Just as they were leaving, one of the two men could not resist the urge to ask a familiar question: "Where are you from?" After pronouncing my answer I saw a surprised look on their faces. "You are Spanish? I thought you were Russian," the shorter man said. Before I had time to answer again, his friend added: "You silly, she is too dark to be Russian, Russian people are white."

At that point in my life I had been living in the USA for three years. As the "exotic" wife of an American, I was already used to strangers feeling entitled to inquire about my ethnic background and nationality on an everyday basis. My appearance was misleading (pale skin, big curly red hair, huge dark eyes), and my accent was subtle, difficult to pin to a place. I knew that no matter how long I stayed in the country, despite having a green card and being on my path to citizenship, I would always be seen as a foreigner. I would always be too "dark" to be "American."

I did not feel this way from the start. I remember the first time somebody denied my whiteness. "It's weird; you look white but you are not white." That sentence kept me thinking. I would glance at my arms, at my pale skin, then look back at Americans, at my own husband. I saw no difference. There were paler people than me, but there were also darker-skinned persons who I would consider white. Having my ethnic identity questioned came to me as something new. I lacked the cultural knowledge that I needed to understand what was going on. At that point I did not know that, regardless of the shade of their skin, Latino or Hispanic equaled non-white in the minds of most the population. I was not aware that "color" was a construction, an imposed category used to judge a person's character, to determine a human's worth.

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Color was not the only thing that was forced on me. People surrounding me commented on my ethnic traits, and made assumptions about my personality based on my "Latinidad":

“How come you don't like tacos? You are Spanish!”

“Everything you say is sexy. I love your accent.”

“You are Latina; dancing comes naturally. I am a white girl. I cannot move my hips.”

I was exotified, my difference was their favorite topic of discussion.

I struggled with the comments that would otherize me, which would not only come from strangers, but also from my new family. A relative's wedding. Smiles all around me, Americans, dressed up in suits and fancy dresses. Me, adorned for the occasion, timidly holding my husband's arm. My father-in-law came up to me casually: “There are so many people who speak Spanish here.”

The hope to find somebody to talk to in a natural accent. “Who?”--a question I would regret.

“The service.” A short answer, a reminder of the dichotomy between me and them. The difference between a Latino and an American. The position I had, a college teacher assistant, and the position people of my ethnicity were supposed to occupy. The service, the new help.

All of these things led me to research, to reading on Critical Race Theory. They made me want to change the image of Latinos, to educate Americans on the difference between stereotypes and reality. But despite my experiences, despite my desire to help, I need to say I am not innocent. Actually, I am to blame, too.

In my home country, in Spain, I was part of the majority. I enjoyed white privilege. When I walked around town there was always somebody like me. When I talked to strangers, they were always supposed to know my language. My skin tone was the rule, theirs an exception. I was unaware of my privilege, and it is not excusable. It is shameful. I am in fact embarrassed about my ignorance. However, now it is different. Now I can see the whole picture.

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My neighbor posted on Facebook. An African male living in the United States is infected with Ebola. Is he a resident? Who knows, my neighbor is probably frustrated, she does not fully understand the situation. “Why do we give experimental drugs to foreigners for free? That will make more Africans come to the States in the pursuit of medical care. The government is undermining its citizens.” She is unaware that her whiteness blinds her. She does not know about immigration processes, about interviews, interrogation rooms. “Are you a prostitute?”, “Do you have another husband in your country?” she will never hear these questions coming from her government. I did.

I read silently. Another Spaniard calls her out in a comment, her coworker. “I have a green card, I pay my taxes.” She is not me, yet you could call us sisters. “I work for this country, I deserve equal treatment.”

“My mother was sick and we paid medical bills”. The American lady responds. *Why is a foreigner treated in a better way if he is inferior to me?* is what the sisters read, what we interpret. Suddenly the discussion is gone. The post is erased. But the conversation continues in the park where we walk the dogs next to home. My husband hears the talk. He is afraid. He does not want me to listen, yet he is aware that I need to know. *Why is a foreigner treated in a better way if they are inferior to us?* --a never-ending echo.

He comes home and discloses what he heard. First I feel betrayed. I think of the barbecues we shared, the gossip, the time. Then remorse forces me to forgive her. My neighbor could have been me. It could as well be you. We could have argued about immigrants together, unaware of our privilege. We could have said they are using our health care or stealing our jobs. We could have uttered thousands of complaints, not knowing how difficult it is indeed to move to a new country, far away from your family. A place where your voice sounds funny, where the color of your skin magically changes, where you are the exception, not the rule.

There are people in that situation right now. You have probably seen them. Their skin color attracts your sight, you want to stare at them, to ask about their exotic world, to inquire about their sultry accent. Fight that desire. Acknowledge your privilege. Ignore the differences in times when they do not matter. Being interrogated everyday of your life is something nobody wants. Now that you know, and if you understand, please, call me sister.

After spending a year in Japan and three in the United States, **Yolanda Pérez Cantón** became a PhD student at the University of Barcelona. Pérez is interested in the representation of Latino minorities in the media. She is researching how colorblind representations of race coexist with stereotypes of Latinos in the U.S.A. mainstream TV. In the text contributed to *Blue Gum*, Pérez attempts to speak about her experience as being part of the majority in her country and becoming a minority in the States.