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The Spicy Girls: Writings on the Lived Experiences of Latinas as the Exotic "Other."

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THE SPICY GIRLS: WRITINGS ON THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF
LATINAS AS THE EXOTIC “OTHER.”

by

NINA LÓPEZ

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for Honors in the Major Program in English
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Abstract

The Other in mainstream U.S. society—in this case, the Latino Other—faces oppressive forces in the journey to find belonging. Latinos are marked by stereotypes, regardless of whether such stereotypes have a factual foundation. Latinas specifically are labeled as submissive servants, maids, or nannies. On the other end of the spectrum, Latinas are exotic and enticing sexual beings that must satisfy white men’s fetishes and lechery. Through this thesis, I will explore what Latina women face as an Other that is paradoxically both rejected and desired and evokes aversion as well as awe. In this creative thesis, in creative nonfiction, poetry, and oral history interviews with Latinas in my life, I will survey and expose stereotypes of Latinas, with the goal of uplifting the voices of such women of color and helping bridge the gap of understanding between the “average American” and their “Othered” Latino neighbors. If the non-Latino American public becomes educated on topics such as xenophobia and anti-Latino discrimination, they may do their part to create a community that is more inclusive and welcomes the ethnic diversity that has always been present in America.

Dedication

To The Spicy Girls, the Others, and the Latinas in my life, especially my mother, grandmother, and close friends.

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Introduction

“I also feel there’s just certain times in life where you don’t want to feel special or othered. You just want to exist.”

- Vilma Portocarrero, “Memoria: Re(member)ing How to Heal,” p. 36.

My approach to this thesis combines poetry, prose, and oral history to capture the diverse experiences of Latina women in the United States. The focal point of this thesis is to examine Latinas as the “Other.” In my research, I explored representations of Latinas in contemporary works by writers such as Judith Ortiz Cofer, Ada Limón, and Sandra Cisneros. I also conducted oral history interviews so that I could draw inspiration from Latinas’ recountings of their lived experiences. Alongside these, I incorporated my own lived experiences into my creative work as it felt relevant to the overarching message of my thesis. Overall, through poetry and prose, I have examined the effects “Otherness” has had in Latinas’ lives, specifically in my interviewees’ and my own, and delved into our realities to provide insight for those who do not share the same material reality.

The Others I Live With

For this thesis, I will be reviewing three oral history interviews: one with a high school friend of mine (F), who is in her early 20s; one with my mother (M), who is in her late 40s; and one with my grandmother (G), who is in her early 80s. This range of ages provided an array of cross-generational perspectives. Two of these interviews are with Latina women from my family (M and G), or the Others that I currently live with. My friend (F) served as an interviewee outside of my family. The three interviews I conducted consisted of the following questions:

- Where are you from?
- When did you begin to live on the mainland United States?
- What community did you settle in when you first moved? Which communities are you a part of now?
- How was your sense of identity affected by coming to the United States (if it has been affected at all)?
- Have you ever felt Othered? How so?
- What are some instances in which you felt you were being discriminated against? Has your ethnicity, appearance, name, and/or accent influenced how you have been treated?
- Do you feel represented in the media (meaning, there are people who look and act like you present in what you watch, read, etc.)?
- Why do you think there is no Latina Disney princess?
- Do you know of *la sufrida*? Would you consider yourself one at times, or someone you know as one?

- How do you feel about the puta/virgin binary?
- How do you feel about machismo? Does it exist? Has it affected you?
- Do you speak Spanish? How are you connected to the language?
- If I asked you about the Story of Your Body, how would you respond?

The Story of My Body

After Judith Ortiz Cofer

Skin

I have struggled with acne since I was around sixteen, but a few years ago I unearthed an old product that helped my skin clear up. The tiny bottle is a product from Mexico that was sold to me in a stand at a clubhouse in South Florida. However, due to the facemask I wear daily because of the COVID-19 pandemic, my acne appears to have returned. It's about time I pay up some pesos to the stand's online store porque necesito la cura para mi acné.

Color

I have light brown skin, what white people think is the perfect "tan." I hate that word in regards to myself due to the proximity the word has to fetishization. I am not an "exotic" tan girl; I am just a girl with light brown skin. I am acknowledged for my color even when I do not think I will be; for example, if I'm covered in long sleeves, long pants, and a facemask, the cashier at Steak 'n Shake will still ask me where I'm from (and will proceed to say nothing after he hears I'm Puerto Rican). I wonder if this was a question-of-the-day thing, or if a sliver of my skin just merits this kind of questioning. It's most likely the latter.

Growing up, I was much browner, and when I realized I was the only one in the room with brown skin, I began to resent that. I thought about moving, spending winters in snow. Anything to be a bit paler, since that was seen as prettier to my peers. Now I embrace the sun, and my melanin, and though I am paler, I am proud to still be a bit brown. In fact, maybe it's

time to do what I've seen white women do all these years—lie down outside in hopes of “tanning.”

Size

I used to have a very petite figure; because of this, my father dubbed me “lagartija.” Now I'm taller, and I have a tummy, but I'm hoping to lose the weight soon. As I've grown bigger (both in size and age), the more frustrated I am by the limited options for larger clothing. I must be good at hiding my weight, though, because my friend gifted me a small T-Shirt not too long ago. When I was thinner, I didn't think well of my body. I'm trying to change this conception now (the idea that my body is not good enough), but the temptation to think skinny is pretty and going back to that would make me happy—despite my complex relationship with thinness—persists. This can be just as subconscious and insidious as valuing Eurocentric features such as pale skin and thin noses over what we expect in the Other.

Looks

I have never thought that I looked attractive and my insecurities cloud my perception. I'm trying to follow the trend of believing oneself to be “delusionally sexy.” I just think it's funny and physically faking it until you make it can psychologically work. I remember reading about this in a psychology textbook, something about forcing a smile being able to shift your mood.

I like myself, but I wonder whether love is too extreme. Is the love of the self self-actualization? I personally believe so. How to get there, especially in the era of plastic surgery, heavy makeup, and face “fixing” filters? I have no idea. I think the first step is accepting that you

get to decide what beauty is, and you have to stop inventing feuds between yourself and other bodies.

Language

I never know what to say when someone asks if I can speak Spanish, let alone when someone begins speaking to me in Spanish because they have deduced that I am Hispanic. I want to say “Kind of?” but then I get out an “Hola.”

My parents and grandmother speak Spanish within the house, but for as long as I can remember, I would speak back in English. I also remember something contradicting this—breaking down in tears in front of my classmates in Trinidad & Tobago at age four because I did not understand what was being spoken to me, since their words were in English. Initially, I was born in Pennsylvania, but lived in Ecuador for about half of my formative years and moved to an International School around the age of four. Thus, I only understood Spanish.

A young girl in my class—whose name I believe was María—would translate for me, and we became friends. I guess this was the first time I felt Othered. It was as though my classmates and teacher were speaking as another species instead of people. What was I supposed to say? I didn’t know, so the days would end in tears. It took months to adjust and learn English, but my bilingual friend and family guided me through it all. Now English is my mother tongue and my major at university. I can’t help but wonder: What would have happened if I had stayed in Latin America? Would I be as fluent in English and Spanish as I wish to be to this day? These questions remain unanswered. All I know is that I am frustrated when I can’t identify the correct word in Spanish, ashamed of the fact that I may come off as snobby or prideful by being

bilingual, and scared to open up about my insecurity regarding language and expression. The solution is simple: Just speak Spanglish and don't be afraid of making mistakes or asking questions. Relatives and family friends are eager to practice their English when they come to visit. I will do the same, but in Spanish.

The Story of Their Bodies

For F, the story of her body includes her almond eyes and body shape.

Eyes

F's eyes, inherited from her white Jewish father, are ironically what lead people to believe she is an Other. During our interview, she notes that her eyes serve as a point of ethnic speculation, typically marking her as either Latina or Asian. She has one roommate that to this day is still convinced she is Asian, despite her assurances that she is not Asian. F poetically puts together the story of her eye shape:

“My eyes are probably just like, you know, a metaphor for like me traveling through identities. And how it feels like to be treated as the identity that the person I'm talking to perceives me as. Which is great, 'cause I'm looking at them with my eyes.”

Body

F describes the shape of her body as “curvy,” and refers to it as “straight up Latino shit” (meaning that she has the stereotypical body of a Latina woman). She notes that her curviness is a significant part of herself based on “[h]ow [she's] been spoken to by men regarding commenting on [her] body because all of them are ethnically charged.”

Earlier in the interview, she notes that comments made to her while men are flirting with her are based on “[...] stereotypes in their head that they verbalize towards me. Like, you must be spicy.” Her stereotypically “Latina” body shape unfortunately serves as a point of objectification and fetishization. This leads to the (mis)conception of the spicy Latina, one that

many Latina women are faced with; in this case, due to her body shape, my friend has been perceived that way, to the point in which it defines the story of her body.

For M, the story of her body is her weight, skin color, and hair.

Weight

M is overweight and notes the misconceptions surrounding heavier people: they're lazy, they spend all their time eating, and the weight they're at is their own fault. My mother notes that these people do not think about disease or disability that can bring about weight gain, which are both reasons why M is overweight. She hopes to lose the weight, but due to health complications, she struggles with exercising. However, she shows no shame in this and is secure in the fact that her body is her own, but she notes that her weight has been a source of judgement throughout her life (but most notably throughout her adulthood, as she notes she was fitter and muscular in her earlier years).

Color

Because M has spent most of her time in South and Central Florida during her life in the mainland United States, her skin color is "not a big issue." This is because these locations have a high Latino population. However, in comparison to other states such as Kentucky where she once lived, she has faced some discrimination because of her brown skin. Employees would follow her around the stores, suspecting she would steal something. One time her dogs barked for about ten minutes at 2 P.M. and later that night a police officer went to her door because he received a complaint about her dogs barking. She felt especially mistreated by the police officer,

since he was disrespectful and shone a light in her face, making it difficult to view the paper he had handed her to read.

M notes that she and my father were the only Hispanic couple living in the neighborhood at the time. She says:

“It’s not that I didn’t like living in Kentucky, but in Kentucky we as Hispanics look really different from the people that live there.”

M ends on a positive note regarding this experience, saying that once her neighbors got to know her and the employees saw her purchasing products, they began to treat her better. This is because of who she truly was, not because of the stereotypes white Americans had about her within their heads because of her skin.

Hair

M notes that her hair has been a big part of how others perceive her. She says that even in Hispanic culture, curly hair is viewed as messy. There is the misconception that if you have curly hair, “[y]ou don’t look clean, you don’t look professional.” M says that the societal expectation is to tie your hair back or straighten it flat. She notes that this also happens in mainland America, citing Black women with Afros as an example.

M believes there is a connection between curly hair and other cultural values. For example, in Hispanic culture and in Puerto Rico specifically, she says dressing well is valued. In the mainland United States, she describes that you can see people attending Church in shorts and a T-Shirt, and she had never seen that before moving to Florida. This could be considered a

culture shock and spur a desire for change, yet M has not conformed or assimilated to these ways.

For G, the story of her body is her eye shape.

Eyes

G's eyes have been a subject of questioning ever since she moved to the mainland United States. She describes the diversity of Puerto Ricans on the island, due to the mixture of different races at different points of the island's colonization. Therefore, her eyes are not questionable in Puerto Rico, but in the mainland they are. G specifically describes her eyes as the following:

“I have like, Asiatic, Asian features, like my eyes are smaller and their size...for that reason, as a matter of fact, when I was in Penn State, and in many places in the states, I have been asked if I am from the Philippines, or if I am from Hawaii.”

My grandmother embraces the idea that she may be of Asian heritage, despite her father being from Spain, and she notes: “I think I get [my eyes] from him.”

What makes you a “Latina”?

“Latina” is an ethnicity category and as a noun means “a woman of Latin American origin or descent, especially one living in the United States” (“Latina Definition & Meaning”). Because being Latina means having a connection to Latin America, the Hispanic Caribbean, or Central America (whether as someone born there or descended from people that were born there), Latinas can be of any race. Being Latina does not exempt one from whiteness, such as being Black does not exclude you from the Latina label. One’s inability to speak Spanish or prepare certain meals does not determine whether or not they are part of the Latin community—such inclusion is determined by the person’s ethnicity, which cannot be obtained such as nationality, or pinpointed by physical characteristics which oftentimes denote a specific race.

As a Latina living in the United States, I have learned that sometimes “Where are you from?” means “Why are you brown?” I know this because if I say, “I was born in Pennsylvania” or “I’ve lived in Florida for most of my life,” the follow-up question will be: “But where are your parents from?” This curiosity can come from well-intentioned people; if they’re Latino/a themselves they might be seeking comradery and solidarity. Things get uncomfortable when “What are you?” is asked so close to your face that you feel yourself notice little details on pale skin. A scar, acne, and of course, those big, wide, curious eyes. Well-intentioned, but weird.

Why am I brown? I wondered this in the shower at a young age, staring at my dark brown legs contrasting with the pale white of the bathtub below me. If you see me now, you wouldn’t see me as particularly dark, but as a child that lived and thrived in the heat of South Florida where the sun beats you as though you’re a piñata withholding sweets, you would surely

understand that my “tan” ran deeper than leche con café. Sometimes I would get so tan that my mother would say I looked purple.

I don’t know when I started being aware of my brownness, but I do remember that I was fascinated when my childhood friend (who is Latina) came home from a trip up north. Her tan had faded, and although not entirely snow white, the melanin in her skin had just left, it seemed. She was much paler than she used to be. For some sad reason, I wished that had been me. Her smiling face said everything about our perceptions of our skin: paler was prettier, and it was possible to get closer to that beauty standard.

The Late Latina

I once was mutuals (an Internet term meaning I followed her and she followed me back) with a girl online who “discovered” she was Latina. Her mother’s Puerto Rican past, however, had been hidden under lock and key. Because of this, she turned to me. After answering questions about my Puerto Rican heritage on my Instagram story, I received a Direct Message from her saying:

“I’m jealous that your life was shaped by your culture. I’m barely in touch with it, I’ve always wanted to know about it but my mom hates acknowledging she’s puerto rican:/ [sic].”

I wonder about the privilege of discovering your identity—of not being aware of it because you have not been called names because of it; because it has not invited uncomfortable conversations and questions; because it has not set you back before you’ve even begun.

Why is there a desire to feel Othered? Clinging to a culture may bring a sense of belonging, but if you’ve belonged somewhere else all your life, why would you need a new space to belong? It seems as though she wanted her Latina-ness to cancel the privilege her pale skin and white heritage had brought her. Of course, this is not to suggest she is “less Latina” than me (though I’m sure she felt that way). I just find her wish to be an Other, to be an insider of a nondominant culture, to be a curiosity. As interviewee F put it, my mutual’s situation appeared to be the following:

“You benefit from your proximity to Other, but you are not actually Othered. Which is also a benefit.”

I've heard of people faking their ethnicity or race in online spaces because they wanted to wash away the privilege that accompanies whiteness. Maybe it was due to white guilt or the fulfillment of a fetish. Some would go so far as to "reclaim" slurs from marginalized identities and communities they were not actually a part of.

All I can think of is brown people wanting the opposite—painting themselves white as possible for the sake of being safe or desirable. For the sake of fitting into a system that says minorities are monsters and should go back to where they belong. For the sake of feeling attractive in a society that associates whiteness with beauty. I'm sure that my mutual's mother was deeply affected by assimilation and prejudice and therefore wants nothing to do with the island she left behind decades ago. Is it selfish to want something someone else has locked away?

Despite some Others' desire to exit the ethnic, a parallel social consciousness exists. Beauty standards now say looking (somewhat) "ethnic" is in. Long nails, hoop earrings, and tan skin is sexy. So are curves, curly hair, and big lips. Of course not all Latinas share these features (including myself), but many have been mocked for stereotypical appearances that they had no choice in picking. Now, however, these features are fair game, as long as everyone can still perceive your white privilege—you are still safe, still welcomed as a white American woman who happens to be a bit spicier than the rest.

My mutual's message reminds me that anyone can be Latina, but not everyone can be identified—and therefore targeted and Othered—as one. So, she discovered her identity. What else will she find?

Unlikely, Unlike Me

“What is it like,
wanting to be white?”

Tearing at skin so the red marks us both,

blood
dripping

to the sound of our hearts thrumming.

We are made of the same white bones.

Do we have to break them to be mended?

*And I wonder:
What if I was a person of color?*

Why do you wonder?

How can you know?

My skin is mine, and yours is your own.

Unlike me, you are not perceived as dirty.

It is unlikely that you will ever know.

And, as you wonder, your privilege shows.

Jealousy is a poison we both swallow.

White Wishes

Step into the well.
Fall through the walls, into the depths.
Despite the darkness, the fear, you have your voice
as you begin to sink.

You imagine brightness, illumination, you stick your hand out of the surface and—
You stand.

The light comes like waves, rays shining over your frame.
The water seeps out slowly, letting you emerge.
Looking down at the remaining streams, your hands graze over various bronze coins,
each for your own choosing.
You ponder as your feet rest on the stone steps.
Each coin is an opportunity, a way to be seen, to gleam as someone new.
Which will you choose?
(And once you do, who are you?)

“It’s too bad you can’t be a Disney princess because you’re not white.”

Five princesses in the Disney Princess lineup are women of color: Jasmine, Pocahontas, Mulan, Tiana, and Moana. However, there are no Latinas of color in Disney’s official princess lineup. In fact, there was no Latina leading a Disney movie at all, until the release of *Encanto* in 2021. Elena of Avalor, a brown Latina starring in her own cartoon, is not regarded as one of the main Disney princesses and does not have her own film. Although *Encanto* is a film that features a brown Latina as the main character, she is not a princess, and therefore is not in the lineup. I’ve always wondered why a Latina princess is absent, and others wonder the same. When asked, my interviewees responded differently.

F says:

“The people in power are probably white and male and it didn’t occur to them. Why would it occur to them? And the people who own the stocks of Disney are probably white and male and the shareholders, the white man isn’t like, ‘We need some more Latina women.’”

On representation within the media as a whole, M says:

“[Latinos] have a big presence as part of the community here in America. [...]. I feel that we are well-represented. It’s not like before, where we were the maids. Now we’re the main characters.”

On the subject of the Disney princess, M believes that there eventually will be one, and says the following with a laugh at the end:

“I mean, Hispanics are not the majority in this country, but we should definitely get a princess.”

G says:

“Maybe some Puerto Ricans would [want a Latina Disney princess], I personally don’t care.”

I feel obliged to note that G is very much not the target audience for such films, but then again, F, M, and myself might not be either. I believe that these three contrasting opinions demonstrate the diversity of opinion that Latina women have. When discussing general representation in media, F recalls the moment in which she read Leo Valdez speak slang Spanish within the *Percy Jackson* series and realized:

“I’ve never seen that before. And I hadn’t noticed that I hadn’t seen that before until that moment.”

On the subject of mainstream representation, F says:

“In recent years there’s been more [Latinos in media], but I don’t feel represented by them.”

However, she notes that she “definitely” feels represented in books because the authors can be Latinx. Up until Leo Valdez’s dialogue, “[F] never knew [she] needed [representation] or wanted it because it wasn’t an option until it was.”

My high school friend (who is not Latina) bluntly pointed out the reality of Disney’s lack of Latina representation (“It’s too bad you can’t be a Disney princess because you’re not white”) because we were choosing costumes to wear to visit a children’s hospital. I ended up going as Dora, which I think is pretty funny. I didn’t need to speak in Spanish; in fact, it was recommended not to speak up from within the costume at all, unless I needed a break. Being Othered and then dressing as a representation of a Latina Other seems like a real-life literary symbol. There is a place for the Other among each other, yet part of me yearned to be what I was excluded from.

Years later, this friend posted on Twitter her racial bias results from that Harvard study—she has none, apparently. I do. Apparently I gravitate towards people of color.

What are you? / *What I Can and Can't Be*

I can't be Barbie,
Or a Disney princess.
I can't even tan at the beach,
One of my friends believed.

But now, I know...
Barbie can be brown, and *Encanto*'s characters make me question—
What else *can* I do?
I know I can tan, my skin a stage in which sunshine spotlights.
I can write well in English, switch to Spanglish while speaking,
and I no longer wish for whiteness.

What can I be? What am I?
Una belleza boricua que vive en la Florida. Una niña que puede decirte
"Soy Latina."
Y eso es suficiente.

Galleta Girl

We were in glassy blue water when you first called me a chocolate chip cookie.
You reached out for my leg, and I dove away quickly.
My skin baked brown under the sun, contrasted the cool white surfaces that surrounded me.
I played dumb, pretended I wasn't compared to food;
I wasn't told that I was made to be consumed.
(Was that supposed to be sweet?)
I faked a smile and swam to the edge, afraid you'd try to try me.
The towel stuck to my body, covered up my insecurity.
Headed home that day with a bitterness between my teeth.
Now as I bake chocolate chip cookies for fun, I wonder:
If I was white, would I be sugar?
Or do you reserve your culinary compliments for someone with spice?

“*Spics* is so seventies.”

- Unnamed Protagonist in “How to Leave Hialeah” by Jennine Capó Cruet.

One summer I spent every night with a close high school friend of mine. We would meet at 8 P.M. sharp and video call until late in the night. We talked and laughed about anything, really. Her cat, Twitter, and our friend group seemed to be recurring themes in our conversations. Oftentimes we would use computer applications to share our screens, and we would watch movies, cartoons, and anime together. We cried while watching *Violet Evergarden*, argued whether or not we should skip the boring parts of *Hunter x Hunter*’s Chimera Ant Arc, and cried some more at the climax of *Noragami*’s story. I’ll admit: I was the one doing most of the crying, as my friend had already seen the shows and was introducing them to me. Every night, we would be ready to talk and watch at 8 P.M. The time is important, as we were strangely and consistently punctual, so remember that.

One night, I’m sitting at the desk in my room getting ready to watch and talk with this friend, and half an hour passes. It was now about 8:30 P.M., and I had no notice of her being late or cancelling, so I began to get worried. Not worried in the “Oh no, she’s in the hospital probably” kind of way, but in the “Oh man, what if we’re not gonna talk tonight?” kind of way. Although spending every night together on the phone may seem excessive, it was a routine we fell into. Of course anything that disrupted it would worry me. Maybe a better term is “upset.” Regardless, it was unusual for her to be so late, so I was sending multiple texts and becoming restless.

After an hour of waiting, my friend calls me, absolutely furious. I ask her if she's okay, what happened, and why she was so late. She begins to tell me that she had an hour-long fight with her father.

The fight began with her father telling her: "You're not Hispanic. Your brother is, because he's darker, but you're not."

You see, this friend of mine is Latina. She is of Peruvian descent and has visited Peru on many occasions. She speaks Spanish with her Peruvian mother, and switches to English when speaking to her white American father. Although not quite white, she does not reach a shade of brown that is often associated with Hispanics, making her ethnically ambiguous. Some suspect she's Latina, while others might say she appears to be Asian or Middle Eastern due to her facial features. Despite her skin's lightness, she was still suspected to be an Other, some kind of ethnic minority.

Due to her paler skin tone, her father insisted that she was not Hispanic. As someone who identifies with her Latinidad and cares for her culture dearly, as someone who tells people that she's from Peru, this deeply hurt her. Her skin tone, she argued, did not make her "less Hispanic" than her brother. I'm obliged to agree with her. Her heritage makes her Hispanic, and skin color is not a factor that "cancels" her Latinidad.

By the end of the argument, her father remained unconvinced that my friend is just as Hispanic as her browner brother. However, my friend essentially mic-dropped with one final line to her father:

"The man that called me a spic at Walmart knows I'm Hispanic."

The Defenders of the Race

In the ninth grade, my history teacher began class one day by placing small whiteboards at each corner of the room. Written on each whiteboard were identities: Black, Asian, Latino/a, and Cheerleaders. Don't ask me why she included Cheerleaders among racial and ethnic minorities. In hindsight, it could be a way to ask for stereotypes of white women without triggering any sense of white guilt or fragility.

My teacher asked the class to collaboratively write some traits or stereotypes of each group on the whiteboard. At the end, the entire class would consult what we had written and discuss if there was any truth to the conceptions of each group.

One of the two Black girls in the room was showered with questions: Do you like KFC? Is your father still around? If we were in the dark, would we only be able to see the whiteness of your teeth?

She was not a fan of fried chicken, her dad was home every day, and yes, in the dark all you would see is her teeth because that's how being dark skinned worked.

Next were the Asians. The stereotypes included watching anime, being good at math, and overall having introverted and "nerdy" personalities.

The one Asian girl in the room refuted these claims, saying not every Asian watches anime, she sucked at math, and was an extrovert.

Many of the stereotypes of Latinos could be connected to Latina women: likes spicy food, good at dancing, wears hoop earrings, has long nails, is loud. Hearing this was an annoyance more than anything else, but I wondered why the list was focused on conceptions of women. The other stereotypes were gender neutral, while the Latinas were singled out. I don't

remember exactly what she said, but a Cuban girl spoke against these stereotypes and then we moved onto the final whiteboard.

When it came to the cheerleaders, people wrote that they were mean, uptight, and snobby bullies. Although cheerleaders are not oppressed for cheerleading, this whiteboard caused great offense, specifically for multiple white girls in the class who happened to be cheerleaders. I would say the hurt feelings in the room were amplified more so than when faced with the stereotypes of racial and ethnic minorities. Quite a few of the white girls in class claimed you can't make assumptions based on someone's identity, and this is ultimately what our teacher wanted us to take away from the stereotype whiteboards.

I wonder why the outrage was reserved for negative views of white women specifically. Girls of color had to stand up earnestly and calmly to reject the stereotypes put on the whiteboards. The tone was even lighthearted and sheepish, poking fun at the idea of being invisible in the dark, for instance.

Maybe we've all grown accustomed to the assumptions of what we're like based on our identity. However, unlike cheerleaders, Latinas' identity is not a choice. We, and other Others, have to stand up for ourselves because those that don't understand us will not be doing so on our behalf.

Machismo and Misogyny

One of the interview questions I presented asked about the existence of machismo. All interviewees agreed that it did exist at one point or another. F claims, “Each country has its own special brand of misogyny. So yeah, I do think machismo exists.” Her justification included women’s obligations to serve men within households, to the point that men are infantilized and incapable of performing basic household tasks. She cracked a joke about “[a] man that has never touched a dish in his life” (except, of course, to eat what the woman has cooked for him).

G expresses a different sentiment, saying:

“As a matter of fact, I thought Puerto Rico was a machista society because in previous generations before, I mean, I’m old now but when I look back, when I was a kid, or before I was born, there was a sense that the men, the men in Puerto Rico the men were the leaders and everyone must obey their authority. [...]. Now, I don’t think this is particularly true.”

M’s response combined both sentiments into one:

“It [machismo] hasn’t affected me, but of course it exists. Like, these kind of things have [forever] been around and will [forever] be [around].”

M highlights why this is true by describing her friends’ lives and dynamics within their marriages. In some households, the husbands cook and clean, while the women work. Everything has evolved, she notes, because women now work:

“In the past, women stay home, the guy used to go to work. So it was expected like if he’s all day away working, the woman had to do everything, and the man will come home and she would have to put a plate of food.”

It appears that cooking and cleaning—two expectations, skills, and behaviors expected from Latina women—are a running thread throughout the conversation of machismo. This of course intersects with the misogynistic roles thrust upon women, thus connecting both topics. From the interviews, we see everyone agrees that machismo exists (or did exist at one point), but not everyone believes they have been affected by it.

Does machismo make a man?

“Women are meant to serve men.”

I was 15 when my uncle said this to me.

He’s a macho man with rockstar hands,
spewing bullshit because he can.

Mind you, this resulted in a Facebook ban.

(Do you speak to your mother with that mouth?)

He has a daughter now. Would he put her in that position?

Force her into the kitchen? Or is this recognition reserved for me,

A girl that got in the way of being treated como un rey?

Machismo tan arraigado, no debes hablar con tus labios.

Espero que un día entiendas que vírgenes y putas alike

will not take a liking to your patriarchal pouty face

as you wait on the meal a woman will make.

Are you an “Other”?

Otherring occurs when one is made to feel different than their peers and the people in society as a whole, most often due to “deviant” (different and most likely minority) identities. This can range from bullying to racial discrimination. When the norm is disrupted and people are made uncomfortable, the Other is identified and separated from those that fit into the “normal” place within the societal hierarchy. As a result, the Other does not belong, and is rendered powerless and isolated.

When discussing feelings of Otherness, F expresses that assimilation for her came naturally, as she has been raised in the mainland United States. She feels that although the United States is culturally diverse in its foundation, colonization ultimately uproots this diversity and impacts her identity:

“I’m Americanized, for sure. [...]. [American society is] just clashing cultures. Because I know that, the like, the Americas are like a bunch of immigrants like there’s no overarching American culture but I feel like it’s Westernized, colonized culture.”

Despite her effective assimilation, she does recall her first instance of Othering: while attending Ocala sleep away camp, she was one of two visible Latinos in the mass of people present (her skin was browner at the time), and this was “very apparent” when they interacted with her:

“I got there and everybody asked where I was from, my heritage, why did I look the way that I did.”

Moreover, F has observed Othering affecting not only her life, but her mother’s as well. She notes that:

“People treat my mom differently, especially when they hear her accent than they would an American. Like it’s condescending sometimes. [...]. Or like a foreign object. Like, this is a foreign object in a body.”

Othering is obvious when you are the Other. This self-awareness can be excruciatingly isolating, as you don’t know where you went wrong; after all, all you have done is exist.

In describing her Othering while living in Kentucky, M notes that she was accepted once people got to know her character, her status, and her lifestyle. She considers a dark thought, however: “Maybe if we were different, they wouldn’t have accepted us at all.”

G, on the contrary, says:

“So far as I’m concerned, I’ve never been prejudiced [meaning discriminated against].”

G could not recall a moment in which she had been Othered; she did recall speaking to a white American woman a long time ago who was somewhat averse to Puerto Ricans and recounted what she had said:

“I sort of like Puerto Ricans, but I don’t understand them. Like, when I hear them speaking, they speak loud. And I think they are fighting or something.”

G assured her that this is a cultural trait and how Puerto Ricans express themselves. Talking zealously, apparently, is outside of the cultural norm—more so if you do it in a different language or accent, which may be part of the reason why the woman suspected the conversations were arguments. Even in more current interactions, I myself hear monolingual white Americans say that others should not speak different languages because they are afraid they are being talked about negatively (as if another language automatically hints at nefarious plotting and jabbing). When interviewing F, she mentioned that she has publicly been told to speak English when she

had been talking to her mother in Spanish. In this sense, it is evident that specific ways of expressing yourself are Othered, and that has not changed.

Despite not personally experiencing Othering or prejudice, my grandmother notes:

“I don’t deny that we live in an imperfect world. People are different. Every one of us is different, we don’t find two persons that are the same. And I don’t deny that in this world there is prejudice and there are people that establish differences between economic status or professional status or things like that. That exists in all cultures.”

G concluded the interview on a positive note, with what seems to be a call-to-action, as she refers to all of us and the responsibility we hold, Othered or otherwise:

“We can help to better this, not to make this worse.”

I Hope You Like The Me That I Made For You
Paper #1 Adapted from Latino/a Literature (AML 4630)

As an ethnic minority in the United States, oftentimes living feels like an act. You have different versions that you show to others, mostly keeping your culture to yourself, until you are with others that are Othered. This is when you shed the facade, perhaps speak in a different language, and you let yourself just be. A few works from Latino authors helped me articulate the facade I wear throughout my life based on three ideas: performance, perception, and my Puerto Rican identity.

Firstly, performance defines the act of pretending to fit in. Notably, academic performance determines how you are viewed and whether you are accepted by your peers. In *We The Animals* by Justin Torres, three wild Puerto Rican brothers grow up together, connected in every way possible. As they become older, however, it becomes clear that only one of them is academically engaged to the point where his parents believe he is capable of pursuing higher education. It becomes clear that “[his brothers] hated [him] for [his] good grades, for [his] white ways” (Torres 105). Academia is associated with whiteness, especially courses related to writing, rhetoric, and grammar. Taking classes related to racial and ethnic minorities is a choice a student can make, but the whiteness of academia bleeds through, oftentimes seen with a white professor teaching about people of color. As much as I love being an English major, it is clear that dead white men are prioritized over everyone else, and therefore I must adapt to this whiteness or wither away.

Secondly, perception affects how I behave. In Torres’s novel, Paps clearly identifies the way I feel about myself: “You ain’t white and you ain’t Puerto Rican” (10). Although I have

visited Puerto Rico several times, I was not born there nor have I lived there. However, due to the fact that I have light brown skin and my last name is López, “in America, I am a person of color, obviously a Latina” (Cofer 1898). This becomes apparent when strangers approach me and speak to me in Spanish, either comforted by the fact that I am one of them or attempting to flex their four years of Spanish education. Being perceived as a minority can be scary, and microaggressions are seemingly everywhere. Cofer puts this experience perfectly: “in the human world [skin] color triggers many more complex and often deadly reactions” (1898). The need to blend in with white people is seen clearly in this country as hate crimes and racism have thrived under the presidency of Donald Trump. Pretending cannot, however, make perception go away, and thus acting white can never be fully beneficial to those with observably brown skin and who tick off specific boxes on governmental papers.

Thirdly (and finally), my Puerto Rican identity determines how I present myself and play pretend. When asked “Where are you from?” I used to contrive a long-winded explanation along the lines of: “Well, I was born here, but I’ve lived here and here, plus my parents are...” Oftentimes, I know this question (and especially the question “What are you?”) are really seeking to find out “Why are you brown?” Now I just say I’m of Puerto Rican descent, because I am, and that satisfies the curiosity of the questioner. Although I am perceived as Latina, there is a lingering doubt regarding my descendance, whether I truly am part of the Puerto Rican community. I know that this community is diverse and encompasses all races. I know that “Puerto Ricans have language” (Torres 104), a language that connects them to each other, one that I understand. Regardless of my conflicted feelings, I am sure that “Puerto Rico is a beautiful place / Puertorriquenos are a beautiful race” (Pietri 272-3). I cannot pretend that I am not

intertwined with Puerto Rican culture every time I am spoken to in Spanish or served arroz con habichuelas.

To conclude, three concepts from Latino/a literature speak out to me: performing “whiteness” in order to be successful, being perceived as one or the other (ignoring the option of neither or both), and being part of a niche community, a race of people proud of their heritage and language. Although being non-white opens up the dangers of racism and prejudice, this is no reason to keep on playing pretend. Sometimes this process of pretending is subconscious, making it difficult to snap out of the routine of acting a certain way to be accepted. Now, regardless of the consequences, I am proud to be una belleza Boricua. I will be perceived as I am because that is the only person I can be. Playing pretend ends once the curtain closes and I am alone with the Othered, those that understand me. However, even with people that are not Othered, I will work towards being understood, because there is no reason to misunderstand me when I can speak their language and speak it well.

My Privilege / Closing Thoughts

I have had the privilege of living in Latin America in my early childhood and in South Florida for the majority of my life. Even now in Orlando, I am surrounded by a predominantly Latino community that makes me feel as though I belong. I'm sure moving somewhere else would be a cultural shock, but for now, I'm in a bubble where microaggressions persist but severe harassment is rare. I am more likely to be spoken to in Spanish than called a slur. Moreover, although I do not pass as white, I do not experience the colorism and antiBlackness Afro-Latinas face. With this privilege in mind, I understand that my experiences are not universal and other Latinas have their own stories to tell.

I am grateful I have had the opportunity and resources to pursue higher education at the University of Central Florida. At this university, I had the pleasure of meeting and working with a Cuban American professor through various diverse literature courses (including Hispanic Women Writers and Latino/Latina Literature), who now happens to be my thesis chair. The opportunity to be a majority minority in each of those classes made me feel a sense of belonging. I am grateful to have a space to share my prose and my voice, as well as the voices of the Latina women surrounding me, the Others that I do life with. By writing this thesis, I feel encouraged to dabble in different genres, expressing myself in experimental and authentic ways. "The Spicy Girls" is just the beginning of the story, one that will continue as I pursue careers, graduate school education, and publishing opportunities.

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