

The White-Hispanic Experience

By Arianna Cammacho

My parents used to joke that my light hair and blue eyes were gifts from the mailman. Of course, they were just jokes. Jokes that sounded like “how could we have possibly birthed such a white baby.” My father was born in Brooklyn, New York. He spent his childhood traveling back and forth from Puerto Rico. His skin is tinted mocha from his days out in the island sun. My mom is white though, a second generation Irish immigrant. She ignores that part of her. It should be no mystery where my whiteness comes from, and yet they joke nonetheless.

It’s ironic, how my mom spends hours in cancerous tanning beds to darken her skin. She even has the Puerto Rican flag tattooed on her upper thigh. As if my people haven’t experienced torture at the hands of white people. As if she knows the struggle of coming from a broken country, that isn’t even a country.

But I don’t blame her for wanting to adopt my culture. My dad’s culture? Whose culture? I don’t identify as Irish, I feel like I have no reason to. I grew up with my Spanish speaking cousins, rice and beans, chancletas hurled in my direction when I talked back to my grandmother. Being Puerto Rican is something that I take much pride in. We are a beautiful people, from a beautiful island. I have felt the corrupt politics under the destroyed coastal roads, but I have also heard the coqui sing. In my heart, I feel the Taino blood run through me.

But many other things run through me as well. Manipulation. Distrust. My conflicting heritage and skin color mock the line of social injustice. It mocks my identity and my privilege. Am I so selfish, for using our unrighteous system to my advantage?

I don’t identify as Irish, except for when it benefits me. When I talk to police officers, I am not scared. I communicate with my English speaking classmates and teachers with no

problem. I live in a suburban neighborhood with green grass and pools. No one looks at me and sees a Hispanic girl. They see a well off, quiet, and educated white girl.

My father has been pulled over for playing his music too loud. He has been told to speak English when on the phone in grocery stores. I have never experienced the discrimination of my people. Every day they are harassed for where they come from, and yet I can not relate. How could I call myself one of them when I am missing out on such a critical part of the experience? I am white, when it is comfortable for me to be white. When my friends laughed about Trump throwing toilet paper to the people of the island, I mindlessly giggled along. I let the thought of my great-grandmother sitting in her tin roofed house, weeks without power, fade distant from my mind.

I identify as Puerto Rican, but only when it benefits me. I put Hispanic on my Common App and on my SAT forms. If I get into a school as a diversity point, then so be it. I apply to scholarships that are exclusive to Hispanic students, and I have participated in resume-building Hispanic workshops. I'd be lying if I said that having the last name "Camacho" didn't come with some advantages. One time, all my classmates got in trouble for using Google Translate on a Spanish quiz. I used it too, but the teacher assumed I knew the word. I bit my white-hispanic tongue when all of their grades plummeted and mine remained the same.

In October, a Multicultural Scholar Award arrived in my mailbox. An award, simply because I have a Hispanic last name. Sure, I have good grades. Sure, I am involved in my school and with my community. But how much of that is just my whiteness? I have a Hispanic last name, but oftentimes I feel like that is the only "real" Hispanic thing about me. Forget my time on the island, any tourist can do that. Forget my appreciation for the music, it plays on the radio now. No matter how much of the culture I try to express, it will always be overlooked by the fact

that I can't roll my R's. The truth is, I experience every privilege that the white girl sitting next to me does. The certificate for the award is hanging up on my wall, but I decided to skip the reception dinner.

I tell people that I am Puerto Rican, but the easy to digest kind. I am the kind that is accepted by society— the one that breaks away from the stereotypes of loud curly hair and aggressive thick accents. I exist in limbo— stuck between two communities of people, who are ready to reject me in a second's notice. That is the true white-hispanic experience.