

Cheese Steak Childhood

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I'm reading these articles on being bi-cultural and bi-racial in the United States and my mind is whirling. Whirling, of course, in my own experience. Why have I avoided dating white men? Why don't I pronounce my name with a Spanish accent? I am half Mexican, the other half Polish, Irish and German, in that order.

I think about my friend Estela, she too is Mexican and raised in the U.S. Only she seems more Mexican than I am. She grew up in San Diego and her mom speaks to her in Spanish. The Spanish jumps easily in and out of her conversations.

I grew up with my mother, red hair green eyes. Born and raised in a Bridesburg, a Polish neighborhood in Philadelphia. My mother raised me by herself in Mt. Airy, a crunchy (read hip-pies that eat granola) integrated neighborhood. My father, the Mexican, spends more time probably being black than Mexican. It's unclear, or perhaps undefinable. All I know is that he doesn't speak Spanish very well.

This leaves a dark-haired, dark-eyed girl who learned Spanish in school, played double dutch and whose butt stuck out of her Catholic school uniform. It's scary writing about this in a

cultural context. Scary what my mother will say. She's intimated that I have overdone the Latin thing since I have lived the last 11 years in Washington, D.C. That the men I have dated, whether from Puerto Rico, Argentina or Colombia have exposed me to more of Hispanic culture than normal and that is what has made me more sensitive to these issues. She argues that if I had stayed in Philadelphia, people just would have thought I was Italian.

My mother and I have begun to discuss this on a more open level. I have said, "It seems like you don't like it when I call myself Latina." I tell her that I am not giving my father more credit, that she's the one that raised me, that I am Philly, I am Polish too. But what I am drawn to is the Latin. It's natural, I guess, it's half on me. It was ironic that shortly after my mother and I talked, she blasted her Gypsy Kings CD while doing the dishes. We started dancing and singing in the dining room and she turned to me and said, "What have I been saying? You're looking at a woman who married the only Mexican in Philadelphia." And we laugh.

Only my laugh is half relief and half anxiety. I know that the subject is only brushed aside for a short while. I know that the next time I participate in a Latino poetry reading, I might not

mention the ethnic slant when telling her about it.

I have anxiety about this now. Like anyone, I struggle with identity. Wanting to belong. I always had friends mostly blacks and whites. But growing up, the only time I had beans and rice was at my grandmother's house. And there I encountered a whole other set of rules because she was from the Mexican aristocracy. There were certain words I shouldn't use, like, "*mande*" because that's what the *indios* said. [*Mande* is used informally to mean "pardon me/say again" but literally translates to "Command/Order me."]

Last year, my friend and the author, Meri Nana-Ama Danquah, who wrote one of the bicultural, biracial articles I was just reading, recommended me for an anthology. She pitched my bicultural experience, my "relationship" with established writers such as Julia Alvarez. The anthology featured women writing to their mentors and the mentors writing back. I was excited about this opportunity, but afraid that I wasn't intimate enough with Julia to write about the issues I knew the editor wanted; What's it like growing up Latina without positive role models in the media and literature?

I don't know. I didn't grow up Latina. I grew up Cheese-steak-double-dutch-wall-ball-Sugarhill-Gang-Sergio-Valente.

I tried to write the letter. Three solid attempts. Three different approaches. Meri gave me pointers about making the opening punchier. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't do anything but worry about missing my big opportunity to be in a book. Mind you, I had already done a magnificent job of pitching myself to the editor after Meri talked to her. I had explained the cheese steak childhood and that was a bonus for me. But what would Julia say? Would she even remember me?

Finally, one day as I ranted to my friend, Amheric, about how stressed I was because of this letter, he asked me, "Do you want to do it?"

I hesitated for a second then blurted out, "No I don't."

"Then don't do it."

I hugged and thanked him and told him that he just gave me the greatest gift in the world.

"I didn't do it," he said, "You did."

What a novel concept. I don't have to do anything I don't want to do. (Unless it affects paying my bills.)

As I write this, another thought comes to mind: I don't have to call myself Latina. I can if I want. I don't have to roll my "r's" when I say my last name. But I can if I want.