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I Believe

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Belk: I Believe



I BELIEVE

BY STEPHANIE BELK

ARTWORK BY PETER GOLLANDS
(KIDPARAGON.COM)

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KIDPARAGON

Being pretty much the palest Puerto Rican in existence, I've always resided somewhere between the middle of the white/minority paradigm. Even my name resonates European lineage, given by a great-great-grandfather of how-ever back of an Anglo-Saxon heritage. But being Puerto Rican means having a composite reality, a multiplicity in your identity. It's about more than meets the eye: a mixture of languages, cultures, and races. I wouldn't change it for the world.

We are, by definition, the product of a three-part fusion, where even within some immediate families no one knows which features of our Taíno, Spanish, and African-American descent will assert themselves between siblings. But even with Puerto Ricans, I find myself having to defend my 'authenticity', my 'jinchera' or paleness just an affirmation or evidence for the conclusion they reached, more because of my lack of a thick accent and 'Americanized' tastes than my skin. There have been countless times when I have done something that, in my culture, is completely accepted, even expected, and because I don't look like I belong to that group, people think I am mimicking or caricaturing "stereotypical Latina" behavior. Because of my outward appearance, it comes across like I'm satirizing Puerto Ricans instead of simply being Puerto Rican.

I think my place in the social sphere can best be summed up by a conversation I stumbled into one day with my very politically incorrect friend Glenn. In a theoretical 'race war' (if all the races teamed up and fought against each other), as he so delicately put it, I could be the secret spy, "moving between the Latinos and the Whites 'cause no one will be able to tell which side you'd be on."

My transition from one 'side' to the other is far from seamless. Switching language, culture, and customs sometimes ends up creating awkward social faux pas. In Puerto Rico, we kiss on the cheek to say hello, regardless of who it is or if you're just being introduced, denying this can be as rude as

refusing someone's handshake. This, however, does not carry over so well in the US, as it inevitably happens after being back home for extended periods of time, much to the confusion of strangers and friends—and jealous girlfriends—alike. Then I can come off as the flirtatious Latina, when in fact I have noticed that we tend to be more physically expressive and affectionate than other cultures, but here is another point where my appearance becomes a 2-headed sword either way. Another challenge presents itself with some words and concepts that are simply not exchangeable between the two languages. For example, there isn't a difference between "watch" and "clock" in Spanish, it is simply "reloj"; nor is there a word in English for "empalagao", when you are overwhelmed by a taste (like when you eat chocolate cake that is too rich). This also happens when I make a literal translation from Spanish to English, such as when I urged my friend David to "eat the light" instead of "run the red light", only to be received with a confused and inquisitive look.

Sometimes I do feel like a permanent outsider, not "Boricua" enough for the Puerto Ricans because of internal factors and a lack of notable accent; and too exotic for my American friends because of my mannerisms, tastes, and slip-ups in language and translation.

I have never been ashamed of who I am or where I'm from. On the contrary, I've worn it with complete pride; but for me, my race/culture/heritage is something that I have to declare, not something explicit. Because I can, as Glenn so insightfully put it, be the "spy", I can work from the inside to change negative perceptions about us. Maybe that is why it means so much to me, because I have to own it. I have to celebrate it, not just live with it, and toast to it with some Coquito.

COURSE: WRT 255,
Advanced Argumentative
Writing

INSTRUCTOR: Dr. Stephen Parks

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I wanted to write about my family and the different, seemingly contradictory or competing things that make up who I am and how I ended up where I am today.

EDITORS' NOTE: Stephanie uses humorous examples to show her double identity. Much of her audience can relate to her social faux pas and