

Substitute Geographies

By Lorna Pérez

Substitute Geographies

When we go into Mexican restaurants, my father orders in Spanish, the language I suspect he still dreams in. No one notices the accent is different. This dusty, central valley town is far enough past everywhere he began that it's close enough, anyway, to replace this ocean for that sea, these dusty vineyards for that cane, and those distant mountains for that softer range settled in green. Past these suburban strip malls, on some indistinguishable, 70-degree, childhood afternoon, he smiles and says, yet again, that this is God's country.

About West Side Story

It doesn't seem to matter if I want to be in America or not; this is only a technical distinction after this industrialized, liquid century of foreign in a domestic sense. Such a violence in believing this is about choice. To be one thing or the other. To stick to one's own kind. As though the transgression really happened on some Sondheim-strained night in a Spanish Harlem street and not some other night in 1898 or 1901 or 1907 or 1917. These colonial fantasies linger the way that music and loss do, smarting like that rupturing wound because we've always been more than someone else's fictions of us.

The Oakies

In a schoolyard smack in the middle of the San Joaquin Valley, full of dust and damp fog cold, we all had cool-kid names that sounded round like poetry. The Chicano and Filipino and Italian kids I grew up with, whose names all ended in -os or -as or -zs, ran rough and tumble and sure with our flipped-up, mile-high bangs, our satin Raiders and Niners jackets, and hair that crunched full of LA Looks. When we really wanted to insult each other, we yelled out Oakie, those people outta Steinbeck that lived off highway 99 in Oakieville, Oakie-rigging together their cars and clothes, working at the factories we hardly knew anything of. We would say things like "Her shoes are hella Oakie" for the out-of-date hightops I once wore, or "hell no I don't like him, the damn Oakie" for the quiet kid no one had a crush on. We were a bunch of brown kids enjoying the relief of not being other.

Humboldt and Division Street

The first time I saw Puerto Ricans I wasn't related to was in a cold Chicago spring, huddled in the foreign grit of winter almost passed on the Northwest side. Listened to our percussive Spanish beat against my Californian ears in a rhythm I couldn't quite find past memory. There, under our street-spanning, steel-sculpted identity, the blare of car stereos met the over-stimulated, café con leche pulse of three in the afternoon, and I stared at the island-shaped café tables, pony-bead flags in rearview mirrors, and that too-gaudy Puerto Rican nostalgic knick-knack stuff that winds up in everyone's kitchen somehow. Discovered myself, not an island after all, among these people with my face and crinkley-eyed smile, the smell of my grandmother's cooking on their clothes, my

father's easy laugh at the corners of their mouths, but part of a turbulent unexpected flow, redefining the city-scapes of Our America.

In Omaha

For the first time in my life, people asked me what I "was." At first I was confused; didn't understand the question having grown up in a place, where, even if I was misidentified, it was still some kind of recognition. So I replied sarcastically that I was a girl, and they would clarify "you know, are you Jewish or Italian or something?" Responding that I was Puerto Rican did not really help, though once in a while, someone would sing West Side Story to me, smiling that they understood. Then they asked if I liked enchiladas.

Are You Really Sisters?

When we went out together, people would often ask if we were "really" sisters, you know, of the biological sort. The one's dark hair, dark skin and dark eyes, the other's light hair, tan skin and blue eyes, and my own, dark curly hair, almost-olive skin and green eyes; too varied to belong with each other. We would tell them we liked to pretend to confuse strangers. They politely said we had the same nose. We learned to laugh these things off. And later, in certain restaurants when my sister and I were ignored for being too light and she had to order in Spanish (because I can't) to get us served, we laughed less. And even later when people would confuse my light-skinned nephew for my child and my sister, his dark skinned mother, for the nanny, we laughed even less having grown tired of the joke.

The Same but Not Quite.

When my oldest brother and his buddies from the first Gulf War all got tattoos on their backs—skull in front of the Mexican flag with the Marine Corps insignia transposed and the Spanish words for brotherhood—my brother called our sister so she could describe the Puerto Rican flag to him when he realized he didn't know it off the top of his head. We had grown comfortable with our pan-Latino identities—loving Mexican food, the lilt of Mexican Spanish, the secret pride in the cholo Raiders' fans, marching with Cesar Chavez and the familiar beat of mariachi and rancho music—those sites of love not our own. One year for Christmas, for my second oldest brother, who had grown tired of explaining that Puerto Rico was an island in the Caribbean and no, it wasn't like Mexico only different, I sent a large Puerto Rican flag, a Puerto Rico monopoly game, small Puerto Rican flags for the kids and coconut and guava candies. A small defiance for those of us thrown so far afield.

Buffalo's West Side

From Richmond Avenue running west to Niagara Street along the river, from Downtown north to Forest Avenue. Streets run loopy, in strange geometric forms not resembling a grid because Niagara shifts with the river. This used to be an Italian neighborhood, and even now, when former West Side Italians mention it, they speak of the "neighborhood changing" and the "demographic shifts." What they mean is that the Puerto Ricans moved in and they moved out, into North Buffalo.

There, in the right combination of company, they say what they really mean, and because I can pass, I am assumed part of their whole. In this context, I enjoy using my full name. And title, if I can work it in. Because I like the “gaudy” pink and purple houses, don’t mind the “noise” of those (my) people, and don’t find offense in gorgeous caramel colored babies, even if their mamas seem too young. And when they tell me I am not really like “those” people, I’ve learned to reply, simply, that I am precisely like them.

6th Grade Social Studies Textbooks

By then, all the kids in my small, Catholic school knew I was Puerto Rican. The same 25 of us had been stuck together since Kindergarten, and I had made it a point of telling everyone, whenever I could, that I was not Mexican when they slipped up. So in 6th grade, in Social Studies, when we got to the social unrest of the 60s and 70s, they all looked at me when they read about the Puerto Rican culture of poverty and crime and violence in those inner-city neighborhoods in the East. And we all learned that my people were underachievers with low academic attainment, unstable families, and tendencies towards violent crime. These same books made the Missions in California seem like pretty schools, and Manifest Destiny a glorious achievement. To their credit, they did mention and condemn slavery. So selective the way we articulate our violences.