

My Multiethnic Identity

By Ashley Boren • UCSB Contributor • Originally published in Her Campus

The conversation usually goes like this:

“So, what are you?”

I reply, “I’m half white and half Mexican.”

They squint at me. Tilt their head a little bit.

They either say, “Oh, I see it.” (My mom would disagree).

Or, “I always knew you were white, but I figured there was something else. I thought you might be Middle Eastern or something.”

I personally don’t mind when someone I already know asks about my ethnic background. In fact, I like talking about it. What matters much more to me is how that person reacts to my answer. One time, after I answered the “What are you?” question, someone replied, “No, that’s not it.” Confused, I added that I also have some Native American ancestry. He exclaimed, “Yes, that’s what’s different!” To him, white was the default. Any other race or ethnicity was “different” or “other.” He also shouldn’t have pushed me for more information. I’m not a walking 23andMe test. Before asking someone about their ethnic background, throw all assumptions out the window and accept whatever they tell you.

When I was younger, I never thought about what ethnicity I looked like. I figured I looked like both of my parents. Then middle school came along, and people were surprised when they found out I was part Mexican. Everyone just assumed I was white. They were right, but only about part of it. People assume other people’s races or ethnicities all the time. It’s just that for us multiethnic folks, people don’t always guess correctly. About a quarter of mixed race individuals in the U.S. feel annoyed when someone assumes their race. People always tell my mom that we look alike. But... my mom's Mexican and people don't think I look Mexican. That doesn't make sense. I look in the mirror sometimes and try to figure out what I think I look like. White? Mexican? A mix of both? Racially ambiguous? Or the number of other races people often think I am?

My friend pointed out to me that I refer to both Mexican people and white people as “they,” I never say “we.” Many of us who are multiethnic don’t know how to categorize ourselves. We do not feel “enough” of either ethnicity to identify with the rest of the group. I especially feel like I’m not Mexican enough when other Mexican people talk about traditions I’m not familiar with. “You don’t know what that is? Aren’t you Mexican?”

I’ve always felt the need for other people to define and validate my ethnic identity. When I identify myself as white and Mexican, I worry about others having mixed opinions (pun intended). Some might reject it and say, “No, you’re white.” Okay, guess I’m not Mexican then. But other people might accept that I’m Mexican and my culture is a valid part of my life. When that acceptance happens, I think, *Wow, actually belonging with my own cultural group? What a feeling.*

On top of that, I don’t know how to speak Spanish so I don’t even have that going for me. I’m still waiting for that day when I tell someone I’m Mexican and they start speaking to me in Spanish, and I’ll have to say two of the most dreaded words a Latinx person can say: “No hablo.” But, at least I have some solid “limited working proficiency” Spanish, as LinkedIn would say. I was so proud of myself when a woman in Walmart on Black Friday asked me in Spanish where the Barbies were and I was able to answer, “No sé.” That was a big moment for me.

When I took the feminist studies course Women of Color during my freshman year, I asked my professor if I count as a woman of color if I’m mixed. She told me that I have the privilege to choose for myself, which most women of color do not have because society automatically labels them. Especially with my German last name, it’s much easier for me to pass as “full” white. I recognize my white-passing privilege, and I know that how I look affects my experiences.

Since I generally pass as white, I hear comments people would not say to me if they knew I was Mexican. One time, somebody told me that it’s good to pull over “certain people” at checkpoints because we were near the U.S.-Mexican border. Little did they know, they were offending me, my family, and my entire community.

No matter what people assume about me and my background, other people’s opinions cannot change who I am. I can be proud of my cultures, and identify myself as Mexican and white, equally. Catch me out here with Uggs on my feet and an horchata in my hand.