

## ME, COVERED IN SKIN

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My class is made up of: two white males both deeply golden from time under the sun; two white women (both pale, one's our professor); one male from northern Mexico and another who's Hispanic (both light-skinned); and me (I am female, and in the United States, am the female version of the latter group—although my skin isn't nearly as light). "Are we done with this conversation?" one of the white males asks our female professor. "I don't consider myself a racist but speaking of it as a topic is making me feel like I'm exactly that," he says. She sympathizes. I was interrupted. I do not finish my sentence. I close my mouth. I have many things to say.

Among them, I was once an English Instructor in Japan.

But first: I grew up in Texas, in an area we call the Valley, right along the Mexican border. I grew up speaking Spanish like a Mexico City *Chilanga* because my mother was born there and my siblings and I spent summers pretending we did also. "You have such clear-sounding Spanish," my friends' parents in Texas would tell me. I could even impersonate a *Fresa*. A *Fresa* is a (disgustingly) rich young person from Mexico who speaks with a high-pitched, nasal tone. "Buy me this, *papi*," a *Fresa* would say at the mall when she'd shop in the Valley, though she already held a multitude of expensive things in her manicured soft hands. Her father would smile and nod. "Of course," he'd tell her. She would get her way. It's a stereotype *Fresas* continue to perpetuate. Growing up, as a local Valley kid with no rich daddy, was I jealous?

I grew up rebelling against the deep-seated feeling that I wasn't who others thought I was. I wasn't a *Fresa* although, I admit, that

on many occasions, I feigned being a *Chilanga*. In Spain, a beautiful boy teased me, saying my Spanish was too cute, too fake, too Mexican. "Don't say 'mami,' say 'madre!'" he'd tell me when he'd overhear me speaking on the phone to my mother while she visited our family in Mexico.

The Spanish and English languages of this border, in this area we call the Valley, are different from the originals. They mix; together, they're an alloy. They yield neither English nor Spanish. Is it Spanglish? *My Spanish is superior to yours*, I'd catch myself thinking when I was around my friends in the Valley. *It's authentic.*

But also: I grew up in Texas, along the Mexican border, in the area we call the Valley—I grew up in Texas, as an American, but I also grew up Mexican. I grew up calling myself a Texan, an American, and a Mexican, but I also grew up Lebanese. It was my grandparents who were responsible for all of it. My mother's parents. They immigrated to Mexico from Lebanon, fell in love with each other, and never really left. It was my mother who did the leaving and ending up in Texas, where she married my father, who is American, but of Mexican descent. "Soy Mexicana," or "Soy Libanesa," I'll hear my mother say on different occasions. I'm Mexican, I'm Lebanese, she says of herself.

So my siblings and I grew up in Texas, along the Mexican border, and in addition to speaking Spanish as children, we spoke Arabic. English took center stage in the middle of kindergarten.

You could say that at times I had trouble with identity and feelings of isolation.



My family, both those who live in Mexico City and the immediate members who live with me here in Texas, use code words when we talk. We all code-switch. When I'm in Mexico, we use a blend of Spanish and Arabic. In Texas, we add English to the mix. "Haram," we'll say in Arabic in front a store clerk if she is inefficient. We smile while we say it. We've never gotten caught.

We are wrong for doing this. I was wrong for thinking I could pass for a *Chilanga*. I was wrong for wanting to pass for one. I was wrong for thinking I knew everything about a person because of the tone of their voice and the clues that I thought made her a *Fresa*.

In English, *fresa* means strawberry. Is being thought of as a strawberry so bad?

My rich relatives in Mexico City have always had maids. A lot of them even have permanent cooks, gardeners, handymen and chauffeurs. "Keta makes the best breakfast," we used to say. I noticed early on that the color of my skin resembled theirs more than it did my cousins'. I wondered if anyone else noticed.

Growing up in Texas, my family was poor. In Mexico, the maids, cooks, gardeners, handymen and chauffeurs were poor. Was this why our skin was similar in tone? Did darker skin make us poor?

Does the color of my skin say more about me than the labels of Texan, *Chilanga*, Mexican, American, *Fresa* or Lebanese? Am I plainly a Hispanic because America asks me to check that specific box and because I can never find the box that says "Mexican-Lebanese-American?" Does saying I am Hispanic indicate that all of my ancestors came from Spain? I know for a fact that a lot of them did, but they aren't directly related to me. My father tells me that there is Spanish bloodline in my own immediate gene pool, but it's from the sixteenth century—those genes must now be long watered down.

My family members in Mexico often distinguish between *us* and *them*. *They* are the cooks, maids, gardeners, handymen and chauffeurs. They are unrefined. Their skin color resembles mine. They are poor. They beg for money and protest in waves of thousands when they want a pay raise. They sell *tacos* and *tortas* on the streets. They use the subway. Some of them don't shower regularly. But *we* always do. We shop in America on holidays. Growing up, we vacationed in Vail and in Europe. We are Lebanese and Spanish living in Mexico. Sometimes we call ourselves Mexican, sometimes Spanish, sometimes Lebanese. They, on the other hand, have always been in Mexico. But do I fall into the *us* or the *them*? Do I shop in America only because I live here? Growing up, I never vacationed in Vail, and Europe came to me in the form of a backpacking trip I paid for myself when I was twenty. And I *am* Lebanese, but I am also Mexican because of my father. His family was born there.

Is my Mexican family Mexican, or only visitors? Does being a visitor in Mexico make you more desirable? Is it easy to distinguish between *us* and *them* by looking at the shade of our skin? Does my skin color make me *them*?

Is that a bad thing?



You could say this is my personal problem, things conjured out of my own inferiority complex. Out of my imagination. "I don't know why you think like this," I hear someone telling me. Do I feel kinship with the cooks, maids, gardeners, handymen and chauffeurs because we are similar in color? Should I work the flowerbeds, make the morning coffee, and find myself working under hot Audi engines? Should I say something when I hear my mother or my aunt call one of them "*haram*"?

During my school years, growing up in the Valley, in our area of Texas, nearly everyone looked the same. In the Valley, I had no real sense of us or them. Most of us had family members from Mexico. Most of us had a tinted skin shade. No one noticed if you didn't. I checked the box for Hispanic when I was asked to and went on to fill out my address, phone number and name. I often put off the Lebanese. Growing up, none of my friends knew where Lebanon was anyway.

Did the cooks, maids, gardeners, handymen and chauffeurs of Mexico resemble most of my friends and their parents in Texas?



Many years later, as a young woman, I told my family in Mexico of my plan to move to Japan. "Why there?" my uncle asked me. There was a trace of confusion in his face. "It's as far from here as I can go," I said, "It's also as different as I can think." Someone said something about Asia or Asians being dirty. I became frustrated and angry. I can't remember exactly what I said, but my mother felt ashamed by my outburst and hours later, I did also. "I'm sorry," my mother's sister told me another day. "You're right. You go on to Japan. You tell us how things are there," I felt embarrassed. I had made my favorite aunt's eyes water. Who was I to feel so righteous? Hadn't I, too, tried my hand at superiority? Wasn't it I who claimed the countries in my bloodline when it was convenient? Didn't I, at times, try to take on the role of visitor in my native Texas? Hadn't I worn long sleeves one summer in Mexico to cover up the deep tan on my arms? Hadn't I thrown around the word "chauffeur" when speaking with my friends one day in Texas, at recess or over a sandwich during lunch? Hadn't I meant to impress them?

I'd be separate from us and them in Asia. Us and them would be defined in ways invisible to me. For me, I imagined, Asia would seem utopian. A utopian Japan. Tokyo as Eden. As an American, I'd be looked upon fondly. Fawned over. Did I seek superiority? Or just verification that there, it'd be fine to feel different; it'd be fine to seek asylum outside us and them.

This is why I became an English instructor in Tokyo.



I was at Kokubunji Nova, one of the oldest Nova English conversation schools in the area. It was falling apart. The watered-down, grape juice-colored paint on the walls looked worn and in several places there were cracks that went on for more than four feet. If the big earthquake ever hit, the one most Japanese fear will flatten Tokyo, the building would have crumbled within seconds.

The teachers' break room smelled rank. The garbage was only taken out once a week. In keeping with Japan's stereotype of the *gaijin* or foreigner, we ate lot of fast food. And the few who were healthy ate things that also decomposed and released funky fumes.

My student that evening was usually a breeze. She'd come in, wait for the instructor. She'd pay for private lessons and they'd cost her four times the regular price. A regular class consisted of four students. She liked to be the only one. Her hair was long and thick and dark; like most middle-aged Japanese women, she was older than she looked. She always wore expensive-looking clothes and that day she wore a blue turtleneck with a cardigan over it. During most sessions, she was demure. Her English was of the highest level; we considered her to be one of the best students. She could carry on a conversation with us about anything. We spoke at regular speed and used our normal vocabulary. She didn't like to use the textbook. We didn't either. She would choose the topics and we would steer the conversation accordingly. She enjoyed her time with us. She always told us so. Our trainers warned us that some students would use the private lessons as they would a session with a doctor. We didn't mind. We often became psychiatrists and mothers, counselors or best friends—we became anything they wanted. We were chameleons. We would rather listen and daydream and answer the same questions. We preferred being doctors to being teachers. Teaching was too hard.

"How are you?" I said. I was tired. It was the end of the workday and she was my last lesson, I'd be done at nine o'clock. I liked the

cubicle where she waited for me; it was next to one of the few windows, and I could see the yellow neon lights of the noodle shop below us, just across the street. There was a queue of businessmen waiting for ramen. The hot steam rose and hid their faces. I saw a long line of suits and hands and briefcases.

"I'm fine. Just fine," she said. She was smiling. I took her cue and smiled also; I acted happy to see her, although I had forgotten her first name. Rikako? Miyuki? Yuki? I couldn't decide. There were always a lot of Yukis. I was better with my regulars at Kodaira, where we had far fewer students. I kept smiling. I was fairly positive she'd also forgotten mine.

"So, what's new?" I asked her. The neon lights helped me see the two or three strands of gray in her thick dark hair—they were thin-streaked falling stars heading southward.

"Actually, I'm angry," she said, and she wiped the smile from her face.

"How's that?" I said, but she looked confused. I tried again. "Why's that?"

"It's my daughter," she said, "she's in love with a black man."



My mother, whose Lebanese family endowed her with pale skin and light brown curls, told us long ago that she felt apprehension for her eldest child. She told us that when she saw my older sister on the day she was born and she arrived with a head full of thick, nearly black hair and caramel-colored skin, she felt afraid for the racism or prejudice her baby might experience growing up in the United States. She had heard that Americans could act upon such feelings. She didn't want her baby to feel isolated. Had we had this conversation when I was older, I would have said that these sentiments of racism and prejudice also existed in Mexico. If we had this conversation now, I would have said these sentiments exist everywhere in the world.

My father, whose skin color leaves no doubt of his roots in the indigenous of Mexico, gave us all his pigment in one derivative shade or another. My own skin isn't white; others say I'm "olive-skinned," or "bronzed". I prefer to say I'm brown. We experienced no direct racism or prejudice of any kind growing up. There existed none for us in either Texas or Mexico. Instead, I saw it happen to

others that had my same-colored skin and I saw this in Mexico. “*Haram*,” my family says of the cooks, maids, gardeners, handymen and chauffeurs.

Still, my three siblings and I grew up knowing we were minorities; our American education told us so. We checked the box that said Hispanic. We went on to fill in our address, telephone number and name. But we also grew up in the Valley, in a town where most of the population’s skin color resembled ours.

In our life in Texas, it wasn’t until my older sister reached her senior year in high school and the family took a trip around the state to find the university she’d attend that I seriously thought about what being a Hispanic or anything else meant to us in the United States. I remember visiting a dozen schools. I categorized them quietly; most of them were too black, too white or too brown. I remember being confused by the fragmentation. Why was every school such an obvious and distinctive color? We had left our mostly brown town only to find that the rest of the state was just as homogeneous, but in different shades.

In the minivan we politely said the schools were too cold or too loud, too new or too old.

It’s funny that throughout my childhood, my family was seen as world travelers among friends in the Valley even though we only spent our summers in Mexico. For us, Mexico City was commonplace; it was a place to escape the harsh Texas summer heat. It was the place where the rest of our family lived. In Mexico, there was only us and them. No one else existed.

We laugh now. We often talk about how sheltered we were, growing up in the Valley and in Mexico City; we sought to experience something else. Or someone else. We all remember how we felt when we stood on the steps leading toward the tower at the University of Texas at Austin. The school around us was endless, daunting even, but we also finally saw shades of skin color we had very little experience with. They were all there. It became the decisive factor. We collectively exhaled. My family graduated all of us there.



“Your-daughter-is-in-love-with-a-*black*-man.” I repeated to my Japanese student. I spoke deliberately. I enunciated. I fought with myself. I said nothing more.

“Yes!” she said. She seemed glad I understood. “Can you *believe* that?”

I felt uncontrollably (irrationally?) angry; I wanted to say: *Can you not see that I’m one shade off black?*



The more outspoken of my white male classmates—upon hearing me explain this part of my story—tells me I am wrong. “But you aren’t black. You’re nowhere near black,” he says. Others around him nod. They see his point. He sounds angry. Or astonished. I have trouble seeing the significance of his statement. Does it matter?

Am I one shade off black? I don’t know. It seems irrelevant. I felt that way then. I feel this way now. I am aware that I’m also one shade off white.



I dislike arguing when I am ignorant of the full background. So, I reflected. Perhaps she had misused her English.

“Tell me the story,” I said. I hoped someone was listening. The cubicles were all close together and we were always eavesdropping on each other. I’d want to be congratulated on my composure later.

She told me she had sent her twenty-year old daughter to the United States to study. She said she sent her to “Michael Jordan’s school” in the south. “Do you know that school?” she asked me. And I said I didn’t. It was true. I had no idea where Michael Jordan went to school. I thought I should have. I always felt I should know the answers to all questions about America. I felt unpatriotic if I didn’t. Usually, I said I knew what the students were talking about even if it was untrue, but at the moment I didn’t feel like lying; I was feeling moralistic.

“Why did you send her there?” I asked and she said her daughter had been interested in black American culture. The daughter had met another foreign exchange student. He hailed from South Africa and was “undoubtedly” a black man; an affluent black man, she noted, but that wasn’t going to be enough.

"Why couldn't she have found a dandy from England?" she said. "A tall white man—that would have been nice."

I winced at the word "dandy". Our Japanese students liked things British: "I'll only speak the *Queen's* English," one older gentleman told me early on. "You look smart today," the younger students would say.

My mind went blank. I could sense that soon I would start making faces, the ones my mom warned would give me premature lines.

"You know," I heard myself saying, "I'm not white either." I felt I needed to say this. Had she not noticed? It seemed wrong to be sitting here listening to her speak this way about a black man and not be allowed to properly point out my view. I could have mentioned my boyfriend. Another instructor. Also a twice-a-week Kokubunji fixture. A white Englishman. My own dandy man. But I didn't. My view was that people could fall in love with whomever. No skin color was better than any other. And I was tired of all the versions of us and them.

"No, you aren't white," she said. "But you're acceptable because your skin resembles Japanese skin."

I repeated it to myself. A little under my breath. *Acceptable*. She didn't hear me. I had nothing else to say. I felt insulted. What made some skin acceptable? Why had she "spared" me? What had she spared me? Did I too consider certain skin colors to be acceptable?

Ironically, it was then that I remembered this woman's background. She had been a professor at one of Tokyo's universities. This had given her credentials for me in the past. I had assumed she was highly intelligent and worldly. I put a premium on her PhD. I had assumed her education had given her an open mind.

"It's not the most polite thing you're telling me," I told my student. I could say nothing more. I was not allowed. I couldn't believe she felt comfortable enough to tell me her views of the black man her daughter loved and expect me to agree with her. I couldn't believe she'd said my skin color was acceptable. I realize now that we were both trying to push our views on each other. I like to think I was pushing more gently than she was. She didn't react to my comment and instead went on to tell me that in Japan white skin was revered. "The women from Hokkaido have the best skin," she

said, "it looks like butter or snow." I thought about the alabaster Japanese women I'd see walking down the crowded streets; they'd always have an umbrella over their heads and long white cotton gloves shielding their skin from the summer daylight. The women from Okinawa were the worst, apparently. "It's all that sun," she said and I nodded. My forty minutes were nearly gone.



It's difficult to pinpoint now why my student's comment about the black man her daughter loved and her labeling my skin-color as "acceptable" angered me so much. I suppose it would be true to say that I had never been confronted with such a direct and provocative situation. I had never had a stranger present a challenge to me in this way. And I suppose I can equally say that it caught me off guard to have to be silent, to have to smile and walk away.

I hadn't changed for the better because of it. Nor had she.



During my year-and-a-half in Japan, I had many surprising little incidents that caused riotous laughter when I retold them to the instructors during the ten-minute breaks in between classes.

When I first arrived in Tokyo, I lived in an apartment with two other women—one of them an Australian from Cairns, the other an American from the Midwest. The Aussie told me that all Australians were "ardent racists" but that I need not worry because she didn't think I "looked like an Aborigine." A different Aussie, this time a friend of mine, said I could pass for a "very beautiful one." I thanked her for the compliment. I looked up pictures of Aborigines on the Internet and called my mother long distance. "No," she said, "Those people are usually unattractive, right?" I hung up feeling confused.

There were about fifty white teachers at the schools in our working area—all from England, Canada, Australia, Ireland, South Africa and the United States. While in Japan, only five of my friends weren't white. Together, we laughed at the ridiculous incidents we witnessed and withstood. I remember walking into a full class once and one of the older female students suddenly became very excited. "Oh!" she said. "You're new!" I wasn't, but she and I hadn't met, and they all loved those of us who were new. Then she did a strange thing. She rubbed the skin on the top of her hand

and looked from it to me and back to it. "Your skin!" she said. "Yes, yes. I know. It isn't white," I said smiling, finding this whole scene funny. "And," she started again, she was still rubbing her hand and deciding whether to look at me or look at it. "Do you know Hadijah?" I said I did. And then I laughed. Now this was cute. *Kawaii*, as the Japanese liked to say. I had no problem with this. Hadijah, a gorgeous statuesque girl from Canada, originally from Jamaica, was the one who'd trained me when I first came to teach at the school. We resembled each other only in that neither of us was white. I told everyone during the break about this incident. Hadijah and I laughed. "Yes, yes. Us 'non-whites' stick together," we said.

Some mothers refused to let a black person teach their children. The Japanese staff always complied. "They don't want you to teach them because you're black," I heard a staff person tell someone. We hated it. "If we're supposed to teach them 'Western' values along with our 'Western' language, why can't we force all of the students to accept the instructor they're given? Regardless of color?" we'd ask our Japanese staff. But they didn't see our point. They'd tell us that some students were better than others, that some students were too conservative in their views. They'd say they were sorry. They'd scurry away.

"You're not American," another man told me once—an older Indian male. I was with a group, drinking beer in a plaza near a train station. It was an after work ritual. "You're Mexican. If your father is Mexican, you're Mexican. It doesn't matter if you or he were born in America." He disregarded that I said my mother was Lebanese. She didn't count, he said. I nodded. I didn't care at that point. Being mistaken for Indian in Japan wasn't bad as long as no one wanted to marry me. Older men discussing the authenticity of my ethnicity was fine. Who was I to argue?

"*Indo kara*," a young Japanese student of seven said to me repeatedly. It meant that she thought I was from India. "No, I'm American. I'm not from India," I would say to her, but she would only shake her head and repeat the phrase.

Indian and Pakistani men chased me on walks home and to the train stations. I later found out that a significant number of Indians, Pakistanis and Africans from all over the continent moved to Japan for long stints of trading and export. They dealt with used cars. The Japanese didn't want them, so the foreigners struck deals and sent them home. They were often lonely men. "Where are you from?" was the first thing they'd say to me.

“Do you need a ride?” I heard a man ask me from his car. Was I being solicited? Were my gray slacks and button-up shirts too revealing? Did he mistake me for a hooker?

I learned to catch the men off guard. The approach they had adopted made me nervous. It was always when I was alone. I’d move to the opposite side of the street if I saw a group of them in the distance. If an Indian or Pakistani man somehow surprised me and got closer, I would say, “I’m sorry, I’m not Indian,” as soon as I had them by my side, before they had time to say a word. “You must be at least half-Indian,” one of them told me.

My skin color reminded them of home.

To them, I was us.



Long before Japan, I had recognized that something was wrong when I realized I had thoughts of us and them while visiting my family in Mexico. I realized something was wrong when I felt unsure as to which category I belonged. Should I have been a maid, a cook, a gardener, a handyman or a chauffeur?

Am I a Texan, an American, a Mexican or a Lebanese? Am I a *Chilanga*? (And did I ever really meet a *Fresa*?) Am I Hispanic? Am I black or white? Or one shade off each? And does it matter? Did it ever matter? Does it now?

“Did the Japanese girls all have that amazingly thick black hair and impeccably white skin?” my pretty young niece asked me on a recent trip to Mexico. “Yes,” I said, “yes, they did.” Her eyes widened and she ran off, giggling, to tell her little sisters.

Are these simply issues I have with my own identity? Is it isolation I feel?

Should I pretend I have evolved much farther than I have? Should I put away the conversation because it’s bothersome to some around me and because I know that in some form or fashion, regrettably, I may also be at fault?



"I'm sorry about what I said," my classmate told me that evening, "about you and your feelings of being a shade off black." We held our keys tightly, the tiny collision of metal in our ears. I told him that in Japan, in that situation, it was how I felt. He nodded; he meant to understand me. His blue eyes softened. We smiled and slowly parted ways.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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