



WOW, YOU THINK I'M EXOTIC?

哇，你觉得我有异国情调？

VAYA, ¿CREES QUE SOY EXÓTICA?

MY RELATIONSHIP WITH MY IDENTITY IS ALREADY COMPLICATED ENOUGH — I DON'T NEED YOU SEXUALIZING IT

WRITTEN BY LAUREN ROUSSEAU

Back home, "Where are you from?" is a common question. Everyone was from somewhere; if they didn't move from another country themselves, their parents did and never let their kids forget it.

I grew up eating arepas from street carts that were parked conveniently outside Toys R Us (may she rest in peace). I grabbed servings of spicy beef and chicken feet from family-style trays in Chinese restaurants. And while sitting on a chair, cushioned by a pile of newspapers, I would gorge on oxtail stews and chicken carries in my grandma's kitchen.

I can't isolate any one of my cultures, the way I could never discard one from my diet.

My mom jokes that I'm a mutt — a half-breed Cuban and half-breed Chinese-Jamaican clusterfuck. I realize "mutt" doesn't exactly sing a beautiful tune, but these are worse words to use when describing my cultural mash.

It wasn't until I moved away to college that Miami became my "from." I'm not even sure if it ever truly did become my "from." It just became a simple answer. But still, the question always comes, with a "really" slid into the middle and some wide eyes from some white boy who's looking for some flavor.

Sometimes I like to mess with them. "Guess," I dare, partly because I want to see them squirm, partly because I really want to know what they think. Where do I look like I'm from? Because to this day, the answer always varies.

Growing up, I was always a "china," the word Latin Americans use to describe someone with Asian eyes — regardless of which country they're from. In a town where the Asian representation was less than five percent, being half-Asian was enough to saturate the rest of my DNA.

Even while working at my local Panera Bread in high school, Karena would call me china from across the room to ask about their mac and cheese bread bowls or green goddess salad dressings.

When I moved to Gainesville, there was a shift. Suddenly, my hair seemed more disheveled, my curves became more prominent. And I felt my Asian identity dwindle.

But under the flicker of fairy lights at house parties, every ethnicity was fair game.

There was the drunk Jewish boy who wanted a Jewish girl, who subsequently slurred how Jewish I appeared. The ones who were quick to label me as the "Tasty Latina" the moment a sliver of sass flickered off my tongue. (Well, jokes on you, Chad. All this sass comes from my Chinese side.) There are also the ones who mutter an "I don't fucking know" and just spill the first ethnicity that comes to mind. (These are the funny ones. The ones who slightly panic at the fear of seeming offensive make me giggle. Even better, the ones who list the absurdities like Antarctica, Mars — even the cheesy "from heaven" if I'm in a good mood — that make my inner-sarcastic swoon.)

And some don't even ask. Some just whisper Spanish sayings into my ear as if a simple "¿Cómo estás?" was my idea of foreplay. (For the record, it's not.) When I mention I don't even really speak the language, does that make me less appealing?

Regardless of what they assume, what comes next always seems to be the same.

"Oh, so you're, like, exotic then," they say. And the fireworks go off: my eyes roll to the back of my head, and their attractiveness dial ticks to the left.

Yes, there may be lust, but the curiosity in their eyes doesn't feel tied to my brain, but to my features, organized in a way that they're not used to seeing. They might say they love my hair — maybe even pet it. And I can't help but wonder whether they want to "get with me" because they're into me or if they want to check me off on some perverted list.

"Exotic" is sexualized in a way that "mutt" or "mixed" aren't. But it still adds to their ever-growing comments of "Wow, your hair is so big," "Why are your lips like that?" and "Why are your eyes shaped that way?"

Yeah, yeah. These boys may find the whole exotica thing to be complimentary but sometimes it gets exhausting to explain. It's these comments that made me straighten my hair till my icon started to smoke and why to this day I feel the need to tie my hair back in hopes of being less observed.

In a way, there's a privilege in ambiguity: my microaggressions are just that, micro. My features may be "othered," but I'm lucky to say I haven't been subjected to overtly hateful reactions. My passing is flexible to the environment.

Regardless, as the world becomes more diluted with new flicks of flavor, it's time we start to recognize that you shouldn't be attracted to a race. Yeah, you can appreciate the way my curls swirl but by fetishizing my "exoticness" all you do is make me feel more othered. And honey, that's just not it.

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TRANSCRIBED TEXT:

HEADLINE: Wow, you think I'm exotic?

SUBHEAD: My relationship with my identity is already complicated enough — I don't need you sexualizing it

By: Lauren Rousseau

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But under the flicker of fairy lights at house parties, every ethnicity was fair game.

There was the drunk Jewish boy who wanted a Jewish girl who subsequently slurred how Jewish I appeared. The ones who were quick to label me as the "feisty Latina" the moment a sliver of sass flickered off my tongue. (Well, jokes on you, Chad. All this sass comes from my Chinese side.) There are also the ones who mutter an "I don't fucking know," and just spill the first ethnicity that comes to mind. (These are the funny ones. The ones who slightly panic at the fear of seeming offensive make me giggle. Even better, the ones who list the absurdities like Antarctica, Mars — even the cheesy "from heaven" if I'm in a good mood — that make my inner-sarcastic swoon.)

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