

Universally, one of the most recurrent problems Latinx people face appears on applications, forms, or documents. These forms are lined with boxes that we must not only fill out, but also live in. Oftentimes these boxes do not encapsulate the diverse and complex racial history of Latinx individuals. Within one family, various skin tones, hair textures, or racial features can present themselves. The Latinx community is composed of mestizos, afro-latinos, mulattos, euro-latinos, etc., however most applications do not offer alternative checkboxes for one's racial identity besides "other."

As a Colombian-American, it is an ongoing struggle within my own life to understand the box that I fit into. Every surgery intake questionnaire, financial aid form, and every job application I've ever filled out has asked me about my racial identity. In the midst of my struggles in filling out a checkbox, I realized that I was being asked a question that I may never know the answer to.

Occasionally, I'll look back to when I was only twelve years old, still unaware of how racial checkboxes would affect me. One afternoon, my family and I were heading home on the subway after enjoying a wonderful dinner. We were sharing stories in our preferred language of Spanish when suddenly a drunk man stumbled towards us. The man leaned in close to our faces, close enough for me to smell the alcohol. He took a long, hard look at us, shaking his head with absolute disgust. He yelled at us to stop speaking Spanish because "in America we only speak English." He urged us to "go back to Mexico where you belong." When he saw the tears streaming down my face, he rolled his eyes, turned his back to me, and got off at the next train stop. No one spoke another word during the remainder of the ride home.

That evening has stuck with me because it was the first time I experienced a racial encounter of that magnitude. I realized that I had been internalizing others' expectations and racial prejudices about what I'm meant to look like and who I'm meant to be as a first-generation Colombian-American. This memory has reminded me of the duality of my racial identity, the countless instances where I felt I had to prove to others and to myself that I am "Colombian enough." I was reminded that society doesn't always see me, a Latina, standing before them, and it has taken me a while to see her too. Strangers, and even my own peers have said to me "you don't look Latina" or "but I thought all Latinos were from Mexico." Even after I tell them that I have no relation to Pablo Escobar just because I am Colombian, my Latinidad is still constantly questioned.

Since then, I began to recognize the differences in my experience with race compared to others within the Latinx community. I discovered that the reason I have struggled with which box I fit into is because identity is not overtly identifiable or particularly definable. The duality in my appearance and racial identity is the power that I hold in my community.

I no longer frown upon the expectations people make based on my racial identity but rather I am embraced by my Latinx community no matter which box I check. Our ancestral roots, the color of our skin, and the different racial boxes we check, these differences do not divide us, rather it is our love for our culture that brings us together. I have learned that as a white-passing Latina that I must use my privilege for my Latinx community members with darker skin tones. I have the chance to use the assumptions and privileges associated with Whiteness to create a bridge between my community and the justice and equity we have been fighting for. As the Latina standing before you, that is exactly what I plan on doing.