

Living In Dark Skin

El peor enemigo de un mexicano es otro mexicano.

A Mexican's worst enemy is another Mexican.

Curiosita, funny looking.

Prietita, dark complected.

Oaxacita, from Oaxacan decent.

I remember the first time I opened my Social Studies textbook in the fourth grade and my classmates compared me to the Indigenous people on our pages.

"Jenises that's you!", as they laughed and pointed at the page.

That was the first time I saw someone that looked like me on a page. Brown skin, dark hair, and brown eyes stared right at me and I immediately felt discomfort. I closed the book and rejected the image I saw. I remember questioning why my classmates would do that. I did not think I could possibly look like those people on my page when in reality that is exactly what I saw in the mirror. Although at the moment I should have been proud of my roots and heritage I could not get past how embarrassing it was to be a dark-skinned girl in the fourth grade. My classmates had convinced me that my skin was a curse.

Back then, I had long dark brown hair that my mom put into two thick braids, I had hairy arms, and two squinty brown eyes. My skin was brown and by society's standards, I was not the prettiest girl in the classroom. By the age of 10, I knew this. I understood that I would never compare to the beautiful white women I watched on TV. I was dark-skinned and my complexion brought me so much shame. I wanted to be a light-complected, blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl

more than anything in the world. After this moment it was no longer okay for my mom to braid my hair, I was terrified to be compared to *La India Maria* or to Pocahontas. This moment changed me and the way I looked at myself in the mirror, I was taught to hate myself.

My complexion brought so many insecurities and the need to hide my culture. Instead of embracing my Mexican heritage, I pretended to know nothing about it. I pretended to not know Spanish because Americans do not speak Spanish. I refused to participate in my school's *Cinco de Mayo* celebration and I refused to continue dancing Flocoriko. I pretended that I did not keep up with the telenovelas my grandmother put on every night. Even in these telenovelas that I watched with my grandmother, the dark-skinned woman was always the maid. I dreamed of the day my mom would let me dye my hair blonde or shave off the hair from my arms. I desperately searched to see someone beautiful who looked like me in movies, magazines, and music videos but, I was constantly served with rejection. I despised the melanin that clothed my skin.

Growing up my family accentuated the color of my skin by calling me names such as *negrita, preitita, y oxacaíta* (we are not Oaxacan.) And at the time these nicknames were endearing and sweet until I realized that I was only called these names because I was the darkest in our family. When I wanted to be Cinderella or Hannah Montana for Halloween they immediately replied,

“Why don't you dress up as Princess Jasmine or Pocahontas?”

These suggestions fed into my low self-esteem and hatred toward my complexion. *Was I not pretty enough? Why couldn't be born blonde and white?* I was constantly reminded to not play in the sun for too long because I would get darker. The color of my skin determined my beauty, I was constantly compared to my lighter cousins. Family members pointed out that I did not have

my mother's fair skin. Though my family did not mean to intentionally hurt me these are words that I later identified with colorism.

The first time my mother realized I was ashamed of who I was, was when I was in fifth grade. On Mexican Independence day it was our tradition to wear embroidered shirts that my Abuelita made us. That year I refused to put mine on. When she asked why I did not know how to respond. *How do I explain to my mother that I hate my skin? That I hate where we come from? That I do not want to be associated with this culture?*

I simply said, "*Because it is embarrassing.*", as tears ran down my face.

I could see the hurt on my mother's face, her eyes filled with tears. As a white-passing woman, she did not know how to comfort me. No words she said could convince me that I was beautiful in my own skin.

After desperately wanting to fit society's beauty standards in high school and rejecting my culture, I went to visit my dad's home in Mexico the summer before I started college. I was overwhelmed with all the melanin and beautiful women that looked just like me. This bright little town, full of tiny brick homes and dirt roads was the place that made me feel beautiful. Fourth-grade me would have never thought that Mexico would be the place where I found beauty within myself. This was the first time since that day in fourth grade that I felt reconnected to my culture. The first time in forever that I was proud to be a dark-skinned girl. Being in Mexico empowered me to embrace my Mexican heritage, traditions, and most importantly my dark complexion. I learned that my dark skin holds the oppression of my ancestors and that it should not be anything to be ashamed of.

After my trip to Mexico, I decided that it was time to start my journey into self-love. This was a transition that I thought would never come. I started by taking care of myself and investing

in things that made me feel good about myself. I researched a lot about Latinx women and found a safe place in Ana Castillo and Sandra Cisneros who are writers just like myself. For the first time in my life, I read something that I related to and made my culture sound beautiful.

As I am growing into the woman I am today, I see all the colorism and racism that makes my culture ugly. It was never my skin that was ugly, it was all the ideologies that were embedded into my thinking. All the comments and backhanded compliments are now so evident of colorism. I have learned that colorism is an issue not only in my culture but an issue within the black community, Asian, and Middle Eastern communities. To this day I am learning to unlearn all the hate that I was taught.

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