

At Home in the Corona
Memoirs and Essays

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*Magic Tricks, Invisibility Cloaks, and
Funhouse Mirrors*

Memories of my elementary school days are filled with long hours on the playground and a revolving door of friends whose names now escape me. But prominent in my mind rests Nicolette, a thin short black girl who was my first ever best friend. Our favorite pastimes were playing hopscotch and one-upping each other on the monkey bars with new tricks. I can also remember Pureh, a gentle soul with an ever-present smile. Pureh was a refugee who had just arrived from Asia when I met him, but our language barrier didn't stop us from becoming close friends.

There were also people like Sasha, who I made cry after she called my parents "illegal aliens" in the fifth grade. (Get this: my teacher ended up making me apologize to *her*). And who could forget my fourth-grade teacher Mrs. Adkinson, who on the first day of school told our (mostly Latinx) class that we had to throw our toilet paper in the toilet and not on the floor, because we were "not in Mexico." At that age, I understood the fact that I was different than my friends, in the same way that some of my classmates clearly understood that I was different than them – but the vocabulary escaped my childhood mind to be able to fully explain the deep-rooted dynamics at play here.

Growing up in a household with immigrant parents you quickly learn how to react to certain situations. Police cars trigger panic, and always conjure up images of ICE vans with your parents sitting in the back should the police officer be in the mood to make the call. You learn to speak Spanish in public with caution after your mom is nearly physically attacked for doing so. And, at an early age you become exposed to an immigration system you will later learn is broken, and that by fate or by chance your parents are stuck in it.

But truth be told, I've always known that I am different. And I don't mean different when compared to the demographics of this country, but different than people within my own community. From an early age my white skin and reddish-brown hair earned me the nickname *güerito*, which means "light skinned boy." It was a term of endearment, a name I wore with pride. After all, it declared me the special recipient of the coveted light skin, which we all know now as colorism.

My whiteness started becoming more apparent to me in middle school, which at that time I found harmless. When people found out that I was actually Mexican, the first words out of their mouth were "Prove it. Say something in Spanish." This was actually some fun at first. In some weird twisted way, it was as if fate had granted me through my Spanish ancestry an invisibility cloak with which I could perform the coolest magic trick. Watch the white boy speak Spanish. But after performing the same magic trick for many years, it has gotten quite old. Actually, it has become the bane of my existence.

The nickname has stuck, though it has undergone a magic trick of its own. What once was a welcome epithet transformed into heavy, heavy baggage that I can't seem to shake off my shoulders. Ta-da.

Almost consequentially, my arrival at college turned out to be quite the funhouse mirror experience. At the opening ceremony for orientation week I was sat in a sea of unfamiliar faces, most of which I visually blended right in with. Vice Chancellor Lili Rodriguez opened her speech with some remarks about the federal attacks on DACA students that had taken place just days prior. Her comments were met with giggles and mumbled judgement by the students sitting directly next to me. I felt small. I felt like I had been suddenly zapped into the size of a roly poly, my only defense mechanism contorting into myself to wait for the storm to pass.

My academic environment thus far had been drastically different than the situation I found myself in in that auditorium. My high school's diversity was reflected in our annual "Culture Fest" in which students from the dozens of countries represented in the student body would perform traditional dances or songs. Despite my deep discomfort in college, though, to most other people I continue to be just another DU student who fits in with the masses – white for all intents and purposes. My dissonance is merely internal, my Spanish cloak of invisibility tightly wrapped around my body.

In class, I have the choice, the luxury, of "outing" myself in discussions that are relevant to my experiences – a choice that not everyone has. Despite the vow I made to myself to always speak up when necessary I sometimes still find myself retreating into darkness, my courage melting back into the scenery. Take for instance the time that I overheard two classmates having a passionate discussion on why "affirmative action" students should not be admitted into universities. My body sat in the classroom, but my soul was

elsewhere. It was somewhere in the ether, stumbling in a disorienting haze alternating between states of sadness, anger, and pity. When my soul finally returned, I had nothing. My classmates had no idea that the affirmative action student they were ripping into was sitting before them. My cloak might have deflected attention, but statistically I was still the minority student “taking” a spot from more qualified candidates.

But even after some friends knew of my background, the dominance of perception remained clear when after hearing me speak Spanish to my parents over the phone, would say “oh wow, I didn’t know you were *that* Mexican.” Since when does mastery of a language equate identity?

Harlem Renaissance author Nella Larsen was all too familiar with this phenomenon of “passing.” The daughter of a Danish mother and Black father, Larsen was light enough to enter “white-only” spaces during segregation without being questioned but could also just as easily mingle in black spaces. Her two novels *Passing* and *Quicksand* chronicle this fine line of perception; a balancing act in fictitious categories.

The Spanish cloak of invisibility which I grew to resent is faulty though, as evidenced by the confusion I’ve caused countless Uber drivers. “So, what kind of Asian are you? Filipino? Vietnamese?” they’d say. “Where is your accent from?” “You’re white mixed with what?” Or, as a woman with a concerned look once asked me in Michaels, “do you speak English?”

Most of the time it feels like my identity is not my own. It is at the hands of the perceiving party, subject to their own interpretation. The watchful eyes of others become my mirror, and staring into that reflection every morning becomes increasingly confusing. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t care, because I do. I *really* do. I don’t feel like I belong anywhere, because my visual self does not congeal with my cultural self – a constant tug of war always faintly whirring in the background. I long to embrace my identity with no follow up questions, tests, or inspections of authenticity.

The longer I am in college the more apparent the man behind the curtain becomes, and the less I am willing to believe in the illusion of the wizard. My distaste for the illusion has become so intense, in fact, that it has nearly led me to abandon school, and abandon the civilized world I have come to fear and resent. But the more alluring my dreams of living in the woods become, the more I realize that to flee, to remove myself from the action, is part of the problem.

The post-storm clarity I currently lack inhibits me from declaring grand conclusions on my time as a magician with a faulty cloak of invisibility. But if my or Larsen’s experiences prove anything, it is just how unreliable and ultimately contrived our ideas of race and ethnicity are. There are no real foundations to the seemingly rigid categories that we as a society have clung to. This is not to say that race and ethnicity don’t matter in society, because they absolutely do. A key distinction between Larsen’s life and mine is that

for her, a shift in perception could mean life or death. Conceptions of race still permeate day to day life and shape the ideas that Sasha, Mrs. Adkinson, and some of my classmates hold. I face a different reality to the one that Larsen held. I face one in which I can stay silent and benefit from the privileges of my light skin (at least until I cause confusion), or use my experiences to call out the constructed categories that invade our lives.

