

Improper People

Ryan Garcia

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Ryan Garcia is a husband, father, and professor of English and literature who currently lives in southern California. He teaches writers of color with an emphasis in diaspora and how the immigrant experience seen in literature reflects the American experience as seen in everyday life. A writer of essays, non-fiction, and fiction, Ryan's work has been published in various reviews across the United States.

So, you don't speak Spanish? a student asks during lecture.

No, but this is what I mean when I say withholding language as a means of necessity, as a means of survival, I argue.

All of my students – Latino students – look to each other in disapproval.

As Baldwin stated, I continue, language is born out of brutal necessity. But it can go the other way for the exact same reason, to ensure survival; withholding to make sure one is not ostracized.

Low mumbles of Spanish spill down the rows. I exhale.

Some days, I give up altogether in trying to explain my background. Not only to my students but also to colleagues, friends, acquaintances, anyone who has asked that packed question: "What's your cultural background?" Let's sum it up: third generation-Mexican American-family from Minnesota-non bilingual-chilimac not albondigas loving-Chicano oldies speak to my heart but George Strait is my driving music-college English professor. And so happens to live in Southern California. Legit identity crisis.

Now, no one has to tell me that identity is fluid, that language dictates identity itself. I know this; I teach this. But the gap between knowing and teaching the information, and expecting others to get it, is getting larger with every passing minute. Why? It's nothing new these days. I could blame it on Mexican pride and refusal to appropriate Americanness. I could blame it on America's fear of the other. I could blame a whole lot of people for me feeling so in limbo about who I am. I could.

You take me – a 31-year-old Southern California resident who has one foot in Mexico and America's door – and you try to place me somewhere I belong. I am well acquainted with being shunned by "real Mexicans," and will forever be too dark haired and, really, too short to be truly American (y'all "real Americans" are, no joke, 6'1 and taller). And then you take the fact that I am from Southern Cali-

fornia and try to make sense of why I love chilimac, why I salivate at the sight of fried pork-chops with a little thing of wild rice steaming next to it.

Street tacos from Soto St.? many friends have asked.

Pft, it's tater-tot hot dish night.

We take all of the attributes and we try to make sense of this person. Throw in the mix a mother that'll say things like, "Oooh yah," once in a while, a dad that'll keep "Sabor A Mi" on loop until the bottom of the tequila bottle says hi again, and what do you get? A mutt? Just straight confusion? No. You get me. Undeniably, irrevocably, proud me. My experience as a Latino should not be undercut by the invisible bar that Mexico and Mexicans carry so high, nor my wife's; having told me plenty of times that she will not speak Spanish in certain parts of Mexico because these parts are more proper than the last (and her Spanish is no joke sexy in its fluidity). But really though, my wife can't even speak in the motherland because of her fear of not being Mexican enough? A legit first generation, had to learn English at age six Latina?

Anyone here familiar with proper English? I ask. Most of my students nod, some say yes.

Show of hands, I request. They all go up. Okay, I continue, someone break it down for me; what is proper English?

No cussing.

Near perfect pronunciation.

No slang or jargon.

Professional talk.

How they speak it over in England.

Wait, one student interjects, they speak English differently in England. They have accents and aren't some frowned upon? Cockney?

That's, like, a poor man's English to the south, I think, says another.

Ain't English really German? Its roots?

I read that, yeah.

So, what, we speaking German over here then?

I finally chime in. We all know what proper English is, we have an idea. Has anyone heard it themselves?

No hands.

So, I continue, when you all agreed that you code-switch when you walk in this room, that you want to speak proper English because we're at school, who, exactly, are you trying to sound like then?

Silence.

My experience as an American shouldn't be undercut because I, obviously, look Latino. Give me a break. However, the means of imbedding in me self-hatred and serious confusion surfaces in a number of ways. Any other Latino out there tell someone how *lucky* they are that their kid came out with colored eyes? Why do we envy it so? Why are we not okay with deep brown eyes and black hair? Build a wall? I remember asking my wife during the 2016 race, anger ready to steam out of my ears Looney Tunes style. But then I considered that I haven't had an ancestor immigrate to the states in nearly 100 years. Should I be so passionate about immigration? I mean, those who claim to bleed red, white, and blue will tell me that I need to

go back to where I came from, and those who rep the paisano life will tell me that I'm white-washed. Give me a place to stand, I beg. To one community, the one that shares my culture and pigmentation, I was born on the wrong side of the river, and to the other, I may as well have been born on the wrong side of the river. Tell me who I am then being that both sides demand something else. At the end of the day, I have this wonderful view of two opposing worlds, maybe three if you count son-of-a-Minnesotan, but it's not enough. All sides aim to tell me that I'm *not* enough for them.

Damage has been done, continues to be done daily to us all. Considering that my grandmother withheld Spanish from my mom because she feared that she'd develop an accent, and that some of my Latino students *correct* me saying their name out loud when I read it *with* an accent so as to appropriate it for American identity, the means of self-hatred is now a part of our struggle. What can I do here? Try to resonate. Try to find that common ground with all of my identities. Try to convey to my two sons, to all of my students, that there are so many shades of grey in a rhetoric that is already grey. Try to show the younger of my two boys that despite his colored eyes and light, curly hair that he is indeed Latino, regardless of the impending schoolyard hazing. Try to comfort the older one when he inevitably comes home crying because another kid called him white-washed.

So wait, one in the front row starts, what would you call yourself then?

Man, I'm over here trying to assert who and what I am in a world that tries daily to tell me who and what I am. I'll do me and relish in this limbo because we all have too many masks at hand to *have* to choose one when they tell you to.