

"— But I Know You, American Woman"

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I am Latina, Jewish and an immigrant (all at once). When I tell people who I am, I usually see a puzzled look on their face. I am likely to tell them, "I realize that you are a little confused by me – how I can be both Jewish and Latin American at the same time – but just take my word for it. It is possible!"

The following letter was originally written in response to a letter which appeared in a women's newspaper with national distribution. This letter reflected the blatant ignorance most Anglo-American women have of Latin cultures. My response is directed to all women of the dominant American culture.* The Anglo woman's letter represents spoken and unspoken views and feelings that I have repeatedly encountered in many Anglo-American women.

My immediate reaction to reading the letter was: don't speak about someone/something unless you can admit your ignorance on the subject. Or, "you don't know me, but I know you, American women". I believe that lack of knowledge about other cultures is one of the bases for cultural oppression. I do not hold any individual American woman responsible for the roots of this ignorance about other cultures; it is encouraged and supported by the American educational and political system, and by the American media. I do hold every woman responsible for the *transformation* of this ignorance.

In her letter, the Anglo woman seems to ask for information about Latin culture.** She wants to know what we want as Latin people, what we are struggling for, etc. First of all, it is hard for me to respond to even a simple request for more information about Latin cultures without experiencing strong and conflicting feelings. We've all heard it before: *it is not the duty of the oppressed to educate the oppressor*. And yet, I often do feel pressured to become an instructor, not merely a "resource person". I don't usually hear "Hey, what do you think of the work of such and such Latin American feminist author", but rather,

*When I say "American culture" I obviously do not include Afro-American, Native American, Asian American, Chicana, etc. I am speaking of the *Anglo* culture which dominates American society.

**When I say "Latin culture" I mean Latin American cultures which have a history of oppression different from the European Latin cultures (French, Italian, etc.)

"Teach me everything you know". Latin American women write books, music etc. A great deal of information about Latin American is readily available in most libraries and bookstores. I say: *read and listen*. We may, then, have something to share.

Second, it is very hard to respond to a request for information when it follows paragraph after paragraph that belittles and insults Latin culture. Anyone that was raised and educated in this country has a very good chance of being ignorant about other cultures, whether they be minority cultures in this country or those of other countries. It's a sort of cultural isolationism, a way of life enforced on the people in this country so as to let them have a free conscience with respect to how they deal with the rest of the world or with subcultures in America. Notice the lack of emphasis on learning other languages, and the lack of knowledge even about where other countries are located. Often, I am asked questions like, "Is Argentina in Europe or Africa?" or "Don't you speak Portuguese down there?" How can one feel guilt about screwing over someone/some country she knows nothing about?

Think of it in terms of men's and women's cultures: women live in male systems, know male rules, speak male language when around men, etc. But what do men really know about women? Only screwed up myths concocted to perpetuate the power imbalance. It is the same situation when it comes to dominant and non-dominant or colonizing and colonized cultures/countries/people. As a bilingual/bicultural woman whose native culture is not American, I live in an American system, abide by American rules of conduct, speak English when around English speakers, etc., only to be confronted with utter ignorance or concocted myths and stereotypes about my own culture.

My Latin culture means many things to me: the food I like to eat, the music I love, the books I read, the language I speak, the land and trees I remember in another country, the jokes I tell, how I am used to kissing and hugging people when I greet them, etc., etc., etc. . . . I could go on forever. It also means the things I'd like to change in Latin culture and I'm not speaking of changing men, but of changing *systems* of oppression. As a result of these changes I do not foresee a culture-less vacuum because "all cultures are bad so I don't want any of them." That culture-less vacuum proposed would actually be the American culture of French Fries and Hamburgers (or soyburgers), American music on the radio (even if it's American women's music on a feminist radio show), not kissing and hugging every time you greet someone, etc. And it would ultimately still be the culture of exploitation of other countries/cultures combined with ignorance about them.

I want to illustrate more specifically some of the un-informed statements made in the Anglo woman's letter. The fascist government of Spain which she refers to (and suggests as Latin people's sole nation of heritage) was made possible by ample economic and political support from the U.S., as are multiple other fascist governments in the world right now, particularly in the Third World. When people are not democratically represented by their government, there is a real difference between the policies of that government and the country's people/culture. If one knows about the bitter struggle of the Spanish people against fascism during the Spanish Civil War, and during Franco's regime, one would never equate Spanish with fascist. I do not equate "American" with imperialist/racist, but I *do* equate American people who do *not* transform their ignorance about "non-dominant" cultures and their relationship to these cultures, with imperialism and racism.

As to the "historical" accident that both North and South America are not dominated by Latin (i.e. non-Anglo) culture, I don't call the appropriation of Mexican land an accident, but an imperialist/expansionist move by the United States. Latin America is a mixture of Native, Black, Spanish and sometimes other European cultures, but it *dominated* by American *mass* culture as Latin American economic systems are dominated by American interests (this applies to most Latin American countries, not all). In Latin America, in addition to our own cultural expressions, we watch American T.V. shows, listen to American music on the radio, wear American jeans (if we can afford them); in other words, we do anything that is economically profitable to America. In comparison, how often do you hear songs in Spanish on the radio in the U.S. or see a Spanish show on T.V.? I'm not talking about radio or T.V. shows by and for the Latin community; I'm talking about *mainstream American* media.

No one will deny that the Spanish conquistadores did in fact conquer the native people of Latin America, and that the latter are still being oppressed there. It is important, however, to know that the Latin American people residing in the U.S. are not some vague "Spanish" conqueror race, but are a multi-racial/cultural people of Native, Black and European background. Latin American culture is quite different from Anglo culture in that each country has retained and integrated the indigenous cultures in food, music, literature, etc. For example the folk music of Argentina is largely Native Indian folk music, played on traditional and European instruments, speaking about traditional themes, using lyrics in Spanish and/or indigenous languages. In the U.S. you don't often think of Native American music as "American folk music."

I'm sick and tired of continually hearing about the destructive aspects of Latin American culture, especially from women who don't know the culture and can only repeat well-known and worn-out myths. Let Latina women tell you what's going on, the good and the bad. I've lived there and I damn well know what it's like. Listen to what I have to say about my culture, rather than believe hearsay, myths or racist stereotypes. No one ever talks about "terminally depressed Scandinavians," or the cut-throat competition instilled by American culture, or the lack of warmth and physical contact in Anglo culture. These are all destructive aspects of Anglo culture, and they cannot be ignored.

The unspoken question always seems to be: "Aren't Latin (or Black, etc.) men *more* macho and women *more* oppressed in that culture?" My answers to that are: 1) It is absurd to compare sexist oppression. Oppression is oppression in whatever form or intensity. 2) Sexist and heterosexist oppression is more or less visible depending on how communicative people in a culture are. That Anglo culture is more Puritan and less visibly expressive does not mean it is less sexist. 3) Most of Latin America is a land economically colonized by the U.S., and as such can't be compared with a colonizing culture (the U.S.). Women's condition in Latin America would be much better were they not living in colonized countries. 4) Most importantly, are we as feminists concerned with men or with women? There is always a women's culture within every culture. Why is everyone so willing to accept the very male view of Latin American culture as consisting simply of macho males and Catholic priests? There are scores of strong women living in Latin America today and our history is full of famous and lesser known strong women. Are they to be ignored as women have always been ignored?

Culture is not really something I have a choice in keeping or discarding. It is in me and of me. Without it I would be an empty shell and so would anyone else. There was a psychology experiment carried out once in which someone was hypnotized and first told they had no future; the subject became happy and careless as a child. When they were told they had no past they became catatonic.

Anglo people should realize when you say we should discard all cultures and start anew that you are speaking English with all its emotional and conceptual advantages and disadvantages.* You're not really

*Let me illustrate some differences in language. English expository writing goes in a straight line (sound familiar?) from introductory paragraph, to thesis sentence, to conclusion. Spanish composition follows a form more like a zig-zag, sometimes deviating from straight, linear thinking. I am fighting against this when I write in English so I can be understood by English readers.

about to change your taste in food, your basic style of relating to people, nor the way you talk.

I've heard many people say "Immigrants to this country should learn English, act American, and stop trying to keep their own culture. That's what I would do if I went to another country!" I say Bullshit! Being an immigrant or a bicultural/bilingual person is something which can sometimes be understood only when experienced.* Would an American woman move to another country and not hold dear her memories of childhood places and people? Would she not remember with longing some special song or food that she has no access to in her new country? And would she not feel her communication limited, no matter how well she learned her second language, because some very deep, emotional things can only be expressed in one's native tongue? Or would she speak to her parents in her newly adopted language? From my personal experience I can say the American woman would experience all these things. It is very hard to deny who you are, where you come from, and how you feel and express yourself (in the deepest possible sense) without ending up hating yourself.

In conclusion I hope this letter expresses my frustration. When Anglo-American women speak of developing a new feminist or women's culture, they are still working and thinking within an Anglo-American cultural framework. This new culture would still be just as racist and ethnocentric as patriarchal American culture. I have often confronted the attitude that anything that is "different" is male. Therefore if I hold on to my Latin culture I am holding on to hateful patriarchal constructs. Meanwhile, the Anglo woman who deals with the world in her Anglo way, with her Anglo culture, is being "perfectly feminist."

I would like us some day to get past the point of having to explain and defend our different cultures (as I am doing in this letter). For that to happen the process of learning about other cultures must be a sharing experience. An experience where American women learn on their own without wanting to be spoon-fed by Latinas, but don't become experts after one book, one conversation, or one stereotype. It is a delicate balance which can only be achieved with caring and respect for each other.

*As a Latina and an immigrant, I cannot ignore the fact that many Hispanics have been in this country for more generations than Anglos. The Hispanic cultures in the West and Southwest were established long before their land was colonized by Anglos. The Hispanic people have as much right to their cultural heritage as any Anglo (if not more so, since they were here first).

Everything I have written about here has been from my personal experience as an immigrant to this country as a teenager. I'm by no means an expert, but these are issues I constantly deal with in myself and with others. I do not speak for all Latinas, or for all non-Anglo-American women. I would like to acknowledge the support and feedback I received from my friends throughout the writing of the original letter. They were all Anglo-American women (at the time there were no Latinas around me); and they cared enough to get beyond their guilt and/or ignorance.