Who Am I?

Anonymous

After I tell you who I am you may not know me. You may not recognize me. You may deny that I exist. Who am I? I’m a product of myself. I’m a product of you and of my ancestors.

Now, one half of my ancestors were the Spanish who were Western European, but who were also part African and part Middle Eastern. They came to this country and met with the other side of my family – the Indians. The Indians also were a great race – people of a great culture. There were many kinds of Indians, as there were many kinds of Spaniards. They mixed, they married, they had children. Their children were called Mestizos, and this is what I am.

We came to California long before the Pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock. We settled California and all of the southwestern part of the United States, including the states of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Texas. We built the missions, and we cultivated the ranches. We were at the Alamo in Texas, both inside and outside. You know, we owned California – that is, until gold was found here.

I think it was a mistake to let you into the southwestern states, because eventually you took away our lands. When we fought to retain what was ours, you used the vigilantes to scare us away, to hang us, and to take away our lands. We became your slaves. Now we cook your food, we build your railroads, we harvest your crops, we dig your ditches, we stand in your unemployment lines – and we receive more than 20 percent of your welfare. But we’ve done some good things, too: We won more Medals of Honor during World War II than any other ethnic group. We’ve never had a turncoat, even during the Korean War. Yes, we have had outstanding war records. But, you know, we don’t complain. By the same token, we don’t get much attention, either.

We don’t live in your neighborhoods unless we let you call us Spanish, French, or something else, but not what we are. We usually attend our own schools at the elementary or junior high level; and if we get to high school, we may go to school with you. However, even before we finish high school, more than 50 percent of us drop out, and you know we don’t go to college. We make up less than 1 percent of the college students, yet we are 12 percent of the total school population. We don’t use government agencies because our experiences with them have been rather poor; they haven’t been very friendly or helpful. The Immigration Department has never really been our friend. The land offices help to take away our lands – we couldn’t exactly call them friendly. The Farm Labor Bureau has never truly served us. The schools haven’t really lifted us educationally. The police – well, they haven’t been the most cooperative agency in the government either. You accept our Spanish words as long as we don’t speak them, because if we do, you say they’re “poor” Spanish – not Castilian; so our language can’t be very good – it’s almost like
swearing. We are usually Catholics and sometimes Protestants, but in either case we have our own churches. You say we can leave our barrios to live near you – that is, only if we stay in our own place. When we attend your parties to meet your friends, you usually introduce us as being Spanish or something else that we are not. You are ashamed of what we are, and your attitude makes us feel that we, too, should be ashamed of what we are. When we go to school, we don’t take part in your school activities; we don’t think we’re wanted. We seldom participate in sports; we don’t run for student offices; we don’t go to your school dances; we aren’t valedictorians at graduations; we are seldom given consideration in school plans; we are seldom given lead parts in school plays. The higher in education we go, the more obvious are the double standards; yet, we haven’t given up.

Who are we? Some call us the forgotten people; others call us chili snappers, tacos, spics, mекс, or greasers. Some ignore us and pretend that we don’t exist. Some just wish that we would go away. The late U.S. Senator Chavez from New Mexico once said, “At the time of war we are called ‘the great patriotic Americans,’ and during elections politicians call us ‘the great Spanish-speaking community of America.’ When we ask for jobs, we are called ‘those damn Mexicans.’”

Who am I? I’m a human being. I have the same hopes that you have, the same fears, same drives, same desires, same concerns, and same abilities. I want the same chance that you have to be an individual. Who am I? In reality, I am who you want me to be.