

## ***We are Not a Monolith***



### **A Hispanic Heritage Month Reflection**

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For most of my formative years, I felt a little bit like an outsider. When my parents returned to make the United States as their permanent home in the early 1970s, we settled into a little railroad apartment in Union City, New Jersey. At the time, Union City had the largest settlement of Cubans in the United States outside of Miami. Virtually everyone I knew was Cuban. Our neighbors were Cuban. My classmates were Cuban. The restaurants, cafes and bodegas in town were all Cuban with names that expressed longing for home like “La Havanita” and “Sol Caribeño.” Our Cuban friends longed for the warm sun of the Caribbean. They longed for the homes and family members they left behind for largely political reasons. Many of our Cuban neighbors did not plan to make the United States their permanent home. They were simply waiting for Fidel Castro to go – then returning to their beloved island, reuniting with their loved ones in the homes they left behind.

While growing up in Union City, I was known as “La Chilena,” or the Chilean girl. Yes, I spoke Spanish, but it was different than the way Cubans spoke; a different cadence, different words, entirely different foods. I was introduced to *pastelitos* by my friend Maria Danger (maybe the greatest name ever). Their music was different than what I listened to at home. Celia Cruz, the big band sounds of Beny Moré and romantic boleros played in the Danger home, while the soundtrack of my home was the Beatles, Fleetwood Mac (mom’s favorite way to master English) with a sprinkling of Chilean artists like Violeta Parra and Fernando Ubierno for good measure. Chile is a long skinny country in South America that hugs the Pacific Ocean. Chile is beautiful. The people are warm and inviting. The influences of the Spanish, English and Germans abound in its architecture, foods, traditions and even the language. Cake to me has always been “kuchen” (German term) and the traditional 4pm “onces” (teatime) comes directly from the English tradition of Elevens.

In the 1970s and 1980s, my family travelled to Chile every couple of years to visit our grandparents, extended family and friends. Somehow, we got away with missing three entire weeks of school in January (the seasons are flipped, and so it was summer) without consequence. My brother Frank and I were novelties to the other kids we met in Chile. There,

we were called “Gringos.” We were American in their eyes - *North American* actually, as they are American too - *South American*. Of course, we were fluent in Spanish because it was the language we spoke at home. But something in the *way* we spoke easily revealed that we were from another place. We did not know the slang commonly used, our clothes were different, etc. I remember being embraced by everyone we met and kids constantly asking us “How do you say *this* in English? How do you say *that* in English?” Those trips were magical, and some of the best memories of my youth. I also remember how hard those goodbyes were...every time.

Hispanics in the US are often portrayed as a monolith, but we are so much more. The 60 million Americans of Latino/Hispanic origin represent over 20 Latin American countries, each with their unique heritage and cultural backgrounds. For generations, we have come to the United States for different reasons; some political, some professional, and some to escape poverty and violence in their homeland. We come from different socio-economic and educational backgrounds, and we represent a multitude of races and ethnicities. From my Dominican friends I learned to dance *Bachata* and was introduced to the writings of Junot Diaz. I’ve never had a better steak than in an Argentinian “Asado.” I was introduced to the extraordinary works of Colombian writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez (*Love in the Time of Cholera* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*) in a Latin American Literature course I took in college. My Puerto Rican friends have tried to teach me to dance *Salsa* over the years, though I have decided it is a lost cause. In my 40’s, I read *The Prince of Los Cocuyos* by Cuban-American author and Inaugural Poet Richard Blanco - a beautiful memoir that helped me more deeply understand the longing felt by my Cuban friends and neighbors from Union City.

Yes, being a bit of an outsider has been a theme throughout my life. In Union City, I was not Cuban. In Chile, was not considered Chilean. At home in the United States, I am often identified as Hispanic first, American second. I have grown comfortable with being an outsider, because it has afforded me countless opportunities to both learn *from* and share *with* others – a little ambassador of sorts, from a very young age, embracing the combination of my identities - La Chilena, La Gringa, and the Hispanic-American.