



Latinidad & Imagination

by Emma Otheguy

I've been mistaken for Dora the Explorer. More than once. The first time it happened, I was sitting on a bench near a playground when I noticed a toddler clutching a Dora-the-Explorer-shaped balloon and staring at me. Babies and toddlers sometimes stare intently, so I went back to my phone, until a few minutes later the toddler and balloon were released from their stroller and came running up to me. The child held up the balloon so that Dora's metallic balloon-face was nearly touching mine, and looked back and forth between us. "Look!" the child announced proudly, to the general public. I wasn't quite sure what was so exciting, until weeks and weeks later, when I was eating at a casual family restaurant and a little girl ran up to me and asked me directly if I was Dora the Explorer.

There are a few ways to interpret New York City children thinking the resemblance between me and a bilingual Latina cartoon character is striking. I could assume that the children had heard me speaking a mix of Spanish and English to a relative and connected me to Dora because there are lamentably few bilingual cartoon characters. I could worry that since I bobbed my hair my face appears so round as to be hardly believable as a real-life person. Or, I could be immensely proud, comforted by these interactions because of what they confirm: that I really am what I am, that children in this city see me and instinctively identify me as Latina. I find in these interactions an acceptance of the truth and honesty of my identity that I have trouble giving myself.

Instead, I worry that I've imagined it all and that I am not Latina enough, that I can never fully belong to my immigrant parents because I am too much of this world, and too little of theirs. I am a Latina, and I've been trying to figure out what it means to be a Latina all my life. The different parts of my career—a dissertation about race-thinking in Spain and colonial Latin America, writing and publishing children's books that grapple with the Latinx experience—to me, they are only one thing: an attempt to understand 'Latinidad', to pin down the ineffable.

During author visits to schools, I pretend to be confident, and to know what it means to be Latinx. I tell the kids about the history of Latin America, and about the millions of people in the United States today who come from those regions, and how we all add up to one Latinx community. I tell them the things I love about being a Latina: the emphasis on family, the connections to people from different countries of



origin, the syncretic cultures of the Caribbean and all of the doors it opens to friendship and imagination. But there's always a seed of doubt inside me. Because maybe, despite what I tell the kids I visit, I don't really know what it is to be Latina, don't really understand at all. Our community of millions, of so many cultures and histories and experiences that we call Latinx, is too varied to be taught by one individual, but I do my best to tell students the little I do know about being a Latina in the United States.

There's a list I like to run through in my head when it seems as if yes, I maybe did imagine it. I tell myself that I can't have imagined my two parents and my four grandparents and my many great and *tatarabuelos* who come from Latin America. Then I pause, and I worry that Cuba is really the Caribbean, and think about all of the places where you see the words Latin America and the Caribbean, and how it sometimes makes me wonder, as if the Caribbean didn't really count. I like to think Latin America and the Caribbean is an acknowledgement of the unique position of the Caribbean, but there's always the gnawing fear that it's an invalidation. To calm that fear, I tell myself that I didn't imagine my family in Mexico or our time in Uruguay, the connections between Cuba and the places that seem more "officially" Latin American. I meet friends who wonder if they imagined being Latinx because of not speaking Spanish, because of being too light or too dark. I wonder what color, exactly, is a Latinx color? It's like asking what color is an American color—in any former colonial society, in any society shaped by enormous waves of forced and voluntary migration, it seems hopeless to settle your confidence on one particular soma, one particular look. But I know people do, and so I breathe a temporary sigh of relief when kids mix me up with Dora the Explorer because maybe I somehow managed to happen to look exactly like I was supposed to look. The sigh is temporary, and only lasts until the next person is surprised to hear me speak Spanish with my family, or I remember how many different looks exist among Latinx and how it's too bad there's not a cartoon character for all of us.

I have to keep talking about Dora because if I weren't, I'd be telling you about the hard stuff, about the questions I get asked in the hair product aisle, about the doubts cast upon me when I present myself as a native bilingual, because there's always someone who thinks that there's no way a US Latina's Spanish can live up to Anglo standards of Spanish learnedness. I love being mixed up with Dora because she's a child, and innocent, and when I was a child no one equated innocence with 'Latinidad'. I'd have to tell about the suspicions white parents had about me as I developed as a teen and I learned that to so many people, Latinx is a synonym for sexy. There are people out there confident in their definition of Latinx, of what we look like despite overwhelming evidence of our diversity.

When I set out to publish my first non-fiction children's book, I chose the topic of José Martí, the Cuban poet and national hero. He was, to me, the most obvious figure possible, the great hero of Cubans and a man who spent many years of his long political exile in New York City. I expected that Martí's New Yorker status would make his writing accepted, respected even though as a Latino historical figure. I was surprised when some editors replied that they couldn't possibly publish a book about a figure who was so little known, that they preferred books about more famous figures. José Martí not famous enough? There is a statue of José Martí at the southern entrance to Central Park. How many heroes, I wondered, could be immortalized in



bronze, put on a pedestal in Central Park, and yet be unknown, not famous enough to merit acknowledgement in a children's book.

In the five years since I first set out to write a picture book about José Martí, reactions to diverse figures in New York City history have become more welcoming. For example, in this year, 2018, José Martí was inducted into the New York State Writers Hall of Fame. He has found his champions, and we have found each other. A few weeks ago, at a reading in New York City attended by several members of a Cuban cultural club, a woman approached me and asked if, by chance, I was a relative of Ricardo Rivón. I looked up in surprise. Ricardo Rivón was the name of my great-grandfather, a man I never met, though my father and his siblings talked about him often enough. I told the woman that Ricardo Rivón was my great-grandfather's name.

The woman smiled and said to me, "I thought that must be it." She had known my great-grandfather in Havana, and she told me that when she'd walked into the event that morning, she had seen me across the room and thought to herself, *Esa tiene cara de Rivón*—she has the face of a Rivón—but she couldn't place my name, Otheguy. Except, she told me, all day long she couldn't brush off the conviction that I must be somehow related to the Rivón clan. Finally, it had occurred to her that Ricardo Rivón's daughter had married a man with an unusual name. That daughter was my grandmother. All my life, I've been told that I have her face, that we look exactly alike.

Respect for literatures disrespected brings acceptance, a broadening of horizons, and for me, a reminder that I look like I'm supposed to look, not like a cartoon character or a narrow conception of a Latina, but like the family I belong to. This is an uncanny resemblance, and it stretches across Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States.

Emma Otheguy is the author of the bilingual picture book *Martí's Song for Freedom* (Lee & Low, 2017) about Cuban poet and national hero José Martí, as well as her newly-published middle-grade novel *Silver Meadows Summer* (Knopf, 2019). Emma attended Swarthmore College, where she studied children's literature with Donna Jo Napoli and graduated with Honors. Later, she worked in farm-based education, at a children's bookstore, and as a Spanish teacher. She holds a Ph.D. in History from New York University, where she focused on Spain and colonial Latin America.

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