Beyond “Labels”

Meztly Carreola

Instructor: Professor Hammer

Pull Quote: Our identity does not only fit one stereotype, but it is shaped by a variety of appearances, backgrounds, and cultures.

Labels are common in my Mexican-Salvadoran household. Everyone has an identity. Some were born with it, some figured out something new about themselves, and some were given a forced identity by others or an event they experienced. Today, identity conflicts related to gender and race are still occurring. In Rodriguez's story “Complexion,” he writes about his identity conflict growing up as a dark-skinned Mexican-American who struggled with his appearance, feeling ashamed of the person he was because of the critical nicknames his family had given him. He then realizes his appearance isn’t what completely identifies the person he is and wants to be, as he states, “That is only to say that my complexion assumes its significance from the context of my life. My skin, in itself, means nothing. I stress the point because I know some people would label me ‘disadvantaged’ because of my color” (464). In making this comment, Rodriguez urges us to look beyond the labels we are given and to think about how our appearance doesn't define who we are just because our people and society state it does. Like Rodriguez, I’ve also grown insecurities from the labels created by my family due to my appearance, their criticism, the urge to be accepted as a “Hispanic” and as an “American,” the

norms of "proper" behaviors as a woman, and the hidden identities I was forced upon through events in my life. Why should labels identify us as only one thing? We are more than just a label.

Since I was a little girl, my family has always called me and my siblings by a nickname created after our appearance, usually our biggest insecurity, rather than our name, making it a big part of my identity. They would call me *flaquita* (skinny) and *huesuda* (bony). Rodriguez also expresses nicknames given to him by his family when he wrote, "My mother would see me come up the front steps. You look like a *negrito*, she'd say. You won't be satisfied till you end up looking like los *pobres* who work in the fields, los *braceros*" (465). Rodriguez introduces three nicknames he will carry on and feel ashamed of as he grows. I too, as an innocent child, didn't think much of my body until I was older. These nicknames became my biggest insecurities as someone who struggled to gain weight. I was so young, and looking back now, no young child should have been disappointed with their body because of the comments I was told by my aunts. Instead of growing to love my body, I grew to hide it, which caused my insecurities to grow even more. I would wear baggy and oversized clothes to cover my "skinny legs" and "skinny arms" that my family would point out. Usually, when entering a family dinner, you would be greeted with a "Hello" or "How are you?" Instead, I received questionable comments about the way I looked. At every family event, I came out wondering something different about my body after hearing comments like "You look sick" or "You gained weight." I also wondered if they were positive or negative comments. I didn't know how to take them, which led me to question my appearance even more. Even though the comments were so judgmental, they always ended it off by saying "*de cariño*" (it's out of love). But isn't love supposed to make you feel good and not bad about yourself?

There are “proper” behaviors in which different genders should behave in Mexican culture. Rodriguez writes, “*Machismo* was a word never exactly defined by the person who used it,” it was described in the “proper” behavior of men. Women at home, nevertheless, would repeat the old Mexican dictum that a man should be “*feo, fuerte, y formal*”(457). As the oldest daughter of my family, we also have “proper” behaviors we must obey like the ones Rodriguez introduced for men. When my father left our household, he left my mom emotionally absent, which quickly pushed me to become a “woman” and second mother at such a young age. Therefore, as a young girl, I learned to cook to make sure my younger twin siblings were fed, to wash our clothes, and to leave the house spotless. In my Latin American culture, *Quinceañeras* are traditions in which a girl transitions from girlhood to womanhood, therefore identifying girls as women at such a young age. My Mexican relatives believe that women must be “quiet,” learn domestic roles, and obey men. Luckily, my father and mother were raised by single mothers, so I was taught about *machismo* at a young age. I was called an “embarrassment” by my family members when I refused to let my *Abuelita* cook, serve, and clean for her 40-year-old son every day. Some may think it's disrespectful, but I’ve learned to not be quiet and to politely speak up during situations when I feel or see someone being disrespected by the adults in my family. I simply don't put up with the different types of toxic behaviors in my family like the colorism and sexist comments they make. Because I refuse to be treated and behave like a “proper” woman, I’m called names like “*enojona*” (irritable) and “sensitive.” Why should women only act under these toxic and sexist norms?

Even though I identify as Hispanic-American, I don't feel “Hispanic” or “American”

enough because of my appearance and use of language. When I visit family in Mexico and El Salvador, I'm the outsider from the way I speak Spanish. I don't have the same "*Chilango*" accent as my *primos,* and I wear American fashion. But when I step foot into my American University, I don't have blonde hair, blue eyes, or a wide vocabulary in English like the White Americans. However, I realized and remembered how one identity doesn't have only one appearance. For example, in Rodriguez's view, "Regarding my family, I see faces that do not closely resemble my own. Gathered around a table, we appear to be from separate continents"(448). In making this comment, Rodriguez urges us to remember that there isn't only one standard of community. The beautiful part is realizing that we come in different colors, shapes, and sizes. Instead of trying to feel accepted in both communities, I have embraced both of the cultures. I'm proud to carry my family roots, while I'm able to communicate with others by embracing my bilingualism. Our identity does not only fit one stereotype, but it is shaped by a variety of appearances, backgrounds, and cultures. As a woman in my Hispanic culture, we are expected to deal with something and not speak up. If we don't "brush it off," we are labeled as "difficult." I like to keep my boundaries respected, but I experienced an event where I was forced to let someone cross it.

In Kirk and Okazawa-Rey's chapter "Identities and Social Locations: Who Am I? Who Are My People," they expand on the critical life events that may have forced new identities upon people. Kirk and Okazawa-Rey write, "Critical life events, such as entering kindergarten, losing a parent through death, separation, or divorce, or the onset of puberty, may all serve as catalysts for a shift in how we think about ourselves. Such experiences shape each person's ongoing formulation of self, whether or not the process is conscious, deliberate, reflective, or

even voluntary"(10). Their point is that some may think differently of themselves due to an unexpected event. For myself, this statement is still true today from the night I was sexually assaulted by my uncle. That day I felt unhuman, ashamed, and embarrassed. We have the following saying: "*Calladita se ve mas Bonita*" (the quieter a woman is the more attractive she is). I didn't feel attractive; I felt weak. While others may identify me as a "victim" today, I asked myself if I'm also still labeled as "holy" or "a virgin." At the end of the day, I thought staying quiet would make me "tough," but I've realized my silence has made me weaker. Hearing other's SA stories reminds me that our experiences and labels don't define who we are. While I think it's important to speak up about topics like these to spread awareness, I also believe it's important to prioritize our boundaries and know it's okay to not speak, as some of us feel unready or uneasy about the topic.

Others may argue by saying that identity conflicts like stereotypical and critical labels based on appearances are not relevant today; however, I'd argue that they are relevant because of similar situations that were introduced in Rodriguez's writing when speaking about the given labels from his appearance and the stereotypical "social standards" that still occur today. The events are also situations I still see today in my day-to-day life, especially in my Hispanic family and society. Rodriguez presents these conflicts when he says, "An aunt regularly called her dark child *mi feito* (my little ugly one)" (450). Even though we have the freedom to speak up and challenge these critical labels and comments, it's a complex situation when it's not just your family creating these conflicts but rather society as a whole and the normalization of it.

Overall, identity conflict related to gender and race caused by the labels we receive from our appearance, the urge to fit under many labels, challenging the norms of a label, and

being introduced to new labels through experiences will continue to be relevant in today's society as long as we challenge ourselves to ignore what society's standards think of particular labels.

Works Cited

Rodriguez, Richard. "*Complexion"* Writing 1 ACE, ed. Hammer, 2024, pp. 18-27

Kirk and Okazawa-Rey, "*Chapter 1, "Identities and Social Locations: Who Am I? Who Are My People*" pp. 8-16

Author Profile: