

i'm  
lucy  
home  
lucy, i'm home  
jill corral

*MHF seeks . . . er, BiWF seeks companions of any gender for friendship, salsa dancing, clubbing and forays to the borderlands . . .*

I love personal ads for their frankness. Gender, race and orientations of all sorts are stripped down to the basics for optimal scanning. Everything is black or white, so to speak, and there's not much room for nuance or elaboration.

I've placed a few personals in my day and wrestled with the available descriptors. I'm married and bisexual. I'm Cuban, and my skin is white. *But, but, but . . . how many of the code letters can I use?* Very few matters in life can be answered with a pure "yes" or "no," or with the diligent circle-filling of a number two pencil. The choices are confining, inadequate.

Instead, I've always been drawn to what author Gloria Anzaldúa

calls *la frontera*. Anzaldúa, a Chicana lesbian, describes "the borderlands," where one inhabits two places, but is never entirely in either. *La frontera* is both a no-woman's land and a fertile middle ground on which to create something new. The lines in the sand can be literal, geographical, like those between countries. Or the boundaries can be fuzzier, like the personal politics of identity and community. I'm variously accounted for as Latina or Hispanic. I've been with women, and I've been with men; I could be described as bisexual, though I hate the word for myriad reasons. Body and identity politics are a bitch, mired in a morass of labels, line-drawing and in-fighting over authenticity. It's enough to make a girl strike out into a new frontier.

So I have.

My parents are Cuban-born U.S. citizens. As the daughter of immigrants, my self often feels split, part old country and part new. Spanish is my first language, but I speak English better and French just as well. I've never been to Cuba, though I've seen it once from a plane and another time from a cruise ship. It's illegal for Americans to go there as tourists. In the purest biological sense, the blood pumping through my heart is from Cuba. I am nostalgic for something I never lived. I am the first person in both my family lines born in this country, and the last to speak Spanish.

I was raised in the Midwest, near Detroit. For twenty years I didn't really know or interact with any Hispanic folk beyond my immediate family. I recently moved to San Francisco and am reeling from the Spanish radio, TV shows, billboards and neighborhoods with real live Hispanophones. I go down to the city's Mission District and load up on exotic "comfort" goodies—*malta*, *materva*, guava paste and huge green plantains for frying. This strange, far-away place was oddly homey to me from the moment I arrived. The ninety-mile distance between Cuba and Miami (the worlds-away migration my family made to the United States), though, still seems a much greater

leap the 2,500 miles I traveled here from Michigan. My mom likes to say her grandchildren will probably live on the moon.

My "Cubanity" is portable, not fixed to a geographical place, because for me there has been no dirt-or-sand homeland. It has been my family, their stories, my own off-center experiences and tropical imaginings that are the rocks and shells collected from my physical and spiritual lives—My Own Private Havana. I own this virtual nation, and its presence in me will always provide a vantage view from the edges of American culture. I have a bit of a traveler's gaze on the country in which I was born. My favorite video game as a child was "Atlantis," named for the mythical island civilization that sunk to the floor of the Atlantic. To say I feel I inhabit a ghost island wouldn't be inaccurate.

In the United States, I am Hispanic, but the technical boundaries blur with the winds of politics, when from one year to the next Cuban-American falls from the dean's list of Hispanicity in terms of affirmative action, college admissions, the census or immigration laws. Mexicans "make a run for the border," and Cubans wash up on South Beach. Who's more "real," a brown or a beige Latino? Seeking hard-and-fast, outward "proof" of my inner landscape is futile. It is my soul, in fact, which often feels like the most definite clue to my Latinness. I often joke that my blood is imported, that I have a special kind of dancing gene, a Cuban spirit that comes through in the way I move, talk, gesture. It's the way I need to live near water, the way my eyes tear up at seeing U.S. and Cuban flags waving together. It's the way I laugh "too loud" and the way my ears understand Spanish guitar better than any other sound on earth. It's the way my Spanish voice sounds truest to me. The soul is not so easily hidden.

Growing up, the word *Castro* meant one thing only—Fidel, whose image my grandmother would burn out of newspapers with a cigarette. The cigar-chomping dictator was Satan on Earth, the man

who had robbed my family of its homes and homeland in the 1960s Cuban Revolution. In the '70s in the United States, another sort of revolution took place, the "sexual" one, one that included gay liberation and the construct of what now stands as the gayest place in San Francisco and likely the world—a neighborhood called The Castro. I still have a visceral, negative reaction to the name—but in another way it also now means home.

I've inhabited three places in my life, all of them peninsulas—Florida, Michigan, San Francisco. The last of these lies on the edge of the continent, *in extremis*. From having a reputation as a fringe culture to being as far as you can go without falling into the ocean, California is where people have always come to reinvent themselves. It's *el Norte* to Mexicans, the far East to Asians and the far West Mecca to the gay world. More than any place, it's a near-borderless middle ground. At land's end. I could scarcely have imagined a more perfect outpost for someone like me.

In my favorite *Seinfeld* episode, the Elaine character can't figure out if the man she's dating is black or white, and spends most of the show testing him for clues—finally rejoicing when he refers to them as an interracial couple. In the end, however, it turns out that he thought she was Hispanic. Both are sorely disappointed to find themselves in an unexotic, plain white pairing. Then they go to The Gap.

I laughed my head off at the perfect similarity to my life. In 1993, I married my best friend, who is a Caucasian man. Technically, we constitute an interracial relationship. However, not everyone who sees us together notices that. My skin is pale, and with my black hair and small stature, I'm often taken for a Mediterranean import—variously interpreted as Italian, Arabic, Jewish or just Hispanic. My last name, Corral, is Spanish, but again not quite as obviously so as Garcia or Rodriguez. (*Hispanos* always know, though. Takes one to know one?) People tell me I don't look Cuban or Latina.

I've had other more-Latina-than-thou types snub me for "passing," as if I had somehow chosen a deceptive skin color. Chalk it up to ignorance or insecurity. The truth is, it's interesting to travel *incognita*, to not be easily classifiable. And to emerge from obscurity when those around me think it's "safe" to make ethnic or homophobic slurs.

On paper, I'm legally straight. Although I'm married, I haven't stopped identifying as queer. I straddle the boundary delineating hetero- and homosexuality. The path of self-disclosure varies with the situation, if it is taken at all. On my resume, I list myself as a "native speaker of Spanish." Occasionally, it comes up in a job interview, and I will be interrogated on my ethnicity, although it's technically illegal to ask about it in that context. I once contributed to a magazine article on queer issues and found out later a manager had told my coworkers by way of introduction (prior to my arrival) that I worked on a bisexual magazine. Although her oversimplification could have caused me some undue problems on the job, I half wanted to thank her for saving me some work.

Mostly, I was bothered because I'm a very private person by nature. A very private person who nonetheless marched for miles waving a makeshift Bi Pride sign in San Francisco's annual parade and chanted *Hay maricones, en los balcones* ("there are fags in the balconies") with the marching throngs in the streets of Madrid. In the most literal way, those manifestations are a way to take up real space in the world, to let it know I exist. To make myself a nation. While hollering to the sky in public would seem to be a most visible way of identifying oneself, the mass of bodies and the nature of such gatherings make it one of the most anonymous, too.

With my long hair and generally feminine grooming, I'm not visibly queer. I'm no one's bite-size butch or androgyne (though I

prefer the latter, myself). A lot of people, mainly straights, wonder out loud why lesbians "insist" on looking manly. Well, they don't, but those who don't fit an expectation tend to fly under people's "gaydar." And everyone is pretty much assumed hetero unless proven otherwise. The context of a queer bar, rally, bookstore, whatever, provides a way for queers to be able to make reasonable assumptions about those around them. Certain grooming styles or other physical clues can create this context or space in a more portable sense. Some are meant to be declarations to the world at large, like wearing an "I'm not lesbian, but my girlfriend is" T-shirt. Others are insider nods to peers, such as tiny black triangle earrings or a bandanna tied a certain way around the thigh. Mutual recognition of any of these traits creates a zone of familiarity, normality—it's a midpoint between living on the margins of society and living at one's center, a borderland.

So why do I hate the term bisexual? The words bisects, halves, divides. It describes a two-face, suggests a mathematical split. Are you 50/50, 60/40, 90/10? It denies the possibility of being wholly two "opposites" at once. Some people—straight and gay—interpret bisexuality to mean indecision, cowardice or an anything-that-moves-style hypersexuality. Some bis like to draw a line between themselves and monosexuals—whether het or homo. What is bisexual space? It's the fluid middle ground. Dual citizenship is great, but you're also always a foreigner. The Lesbian Nation can cast out your pariah ass for sleeping with the enemy, but you're still a national of what's largely a homophobic world. It's a revolving closet door.

The scientific jury is still out on whether sexual orientation is biologically hard-wired into people or purely a social behavior. Regardless, it makes an undeniable claim to its existence in one's mind and one's bones. As the cliché goes, you just *know*. My skin covers a

body that feels especially flexible and free. This instinct is as physical and certain a part of me as my wavy black hair.

In my teens I compared myself to the luscious blond lovelies in *Seventeen* magazine. I am no more one of those than a strutting bull dyke. What can be painful about living in the margins is not harassment or even misrepresentation—it's the feeling of being nothing at all, invisible. You compare yourself to what you see and can come up wanting. Among my acquaintances, I'm often the most multicultural of the group. "You must feel really ethnic," a workmate recently commented. Get me in a group of Miami Cubans or recent arrivals, though, and I'm a sunny-side-up middle American. Context is everything. I adopt the dress of different territories and travel though them to see if and where I could live in them. In the end, though, it's usually a nice visit and a "thanks, just *passing* through."

I'm always on the hunt for other border dwellers, because it can get lonely in the borderlands. Never having lived in a Cuban community, I create a makeshift one from the occasional Puerto Rican, pinko Latin jazz musicians, and flamenco-loving Spanish fetishists. Some say, and I believe, that there is such a thing as a "gay gaze" of recognition. Well, according to my mother, you can also tell a Cuban by their eyes—the sad, deep eyes of an old soul. So I look for these in the crowds that pass me by.

It's important to me that I gather my flock, my tribe. To bring others who are like me, toward me—to be able to stake my claim to a share of the earth I can define and make my own. This seizing of personal territory, whether on the margins of a community or in the dead center of a nation, is political.

Why is it important to make something new, to think about this at all? Why not just go with the flow and land where you will? Because for me not to actively justify the elements of my being is to feel dead. When I was younger I had a lot of shame about my

ethnicness. I'd call my mother "Mom" (rather than *Mami*) when friends were over. Around age seven I began to flat-out refuse to speak Spanish, unwavering by parental bribes to do so—I wanted to purge my difference. I lost a lot of the language in the many years that followed, which is a painful loss now. It's hard for me to remember when I tried to hide being, well, a spic. My father legally changed his name from a long, melodious one to a short, blunt one; my parents also made good and sure that my brother and I had English names, too. The older I get, the more I feel like everything—the history, the still-living first-generation folk, the language—is escaping me. And the older I get, the more I want to claim and own my birth culture and homeland—*Mi Tierra*, as Gloria Estefan would sing it. I cry when I hear that song. So I try very, very hard to rebuild it for myself.

The *frontera* can be in your imagination, but sometimes it can come alive before your eyes. I recently went to a USA versus Cuba soccer game, the first one played in forty-nine years. There were my inner demons, battling on the field. Like the Lesbian National Team and the United Straights of America duking it out, going for blood right there on the muddy grass. I was, predictably, cheering for both teams.

Weddings are much like sporting events, with their respective cheering sections, the promise of scoring. It's also a private space opened for public view and as such, a physical place of your own quite personal in making. I wrote a poem after mine called "Wedding Fiesta" that included the following:

*I should've made a sign with Magic Markers that  
read*

*Please note:*

*The egalitarian nature of our deconstructed ceremony.*

*That no humans are being given away to other humans.*

*And the lack of "binding" terminology.*

*Thank You.*

We made every effort to create from the weighty institution a mini-world constructed from our beliefs. The minister was Unitarian Universalist, a denomination that honors same-sex commitments. We wrote vows exalting friendship, partnership, the joy we found in each other. We each entered the room on the arms of both our parents. It was our active public claim to a borderland. Construct your spiritual institution in the physical world. Build it and, well, they *will* come.

Marriage is a pretty conservative gesture. The way I can live with it, and this is partly why I chose it, is by helping to change the face and the nature of it—in many ways more powerful than ignoring it altogether. I try to live as an example, an example I wish I'd had. I can't own a cultural tradition. But I can take a crazy axe to its fences and make more room for me and others to sit.

There's irony in my wanting to be so out when, traditionally, as immigrants to a new country (or as gays in a straight world), people have tried to hide their differences for reasons of safety, security and social survival. In late '90s North America, while the straight, white blond is still queen, there's a lot of currency, amid the attention paid to multiculturalism, in being exotic. While I think the more colorful face of public America is here to stay, at the time I write this the country's in a sort of hyperfocused phase, which brings identity issues to the forefront in private and public arenas, or at least gives people the vocabulary with which to discuss them.

We all size each other up based on appearance, placing people at some definite point on the sexual, cultural or political spectrum. People like me, who don't fit neatly, are often unfairly assumed to be

weaker, watered-down versions of the real thing. Not Republican or Democrat? You're wishy-washy or soft middle. Not black enough for some or white enough for others? You're an Oreo. Bi-anything? You're undecided, confused, half of each and not enough of either.

But this fluidity is my strength. This middle I inhabit is richer than any extreme. I thrive in its duality and possibility. While I find some joy in subverting the paradigm, I don't live my life for the mere sake of subversion. I take Plato's observation to heart: "The unexamined life is not worth living." No one knows that more than those of us who build our castles in the borderlands.