



Julissa Natzely Arce Raya Wants You to Reclaim Your Identity

As a kid growing up in Texas, she thought that fitting in would keep her safe. Then, as she rose through the Wall Street ranks while harboring a big secret, a life-changing loss made her question everything. In her new book, *You Sound Like a White Girl: The Case for Rejecting Assimilation*, Julissa shares her personal journey, explores the veiled history of U.S. Latinos, and makes a powerful case for reimagining what it means to belong.

Alicia Menendez: I have admired Julissa Natzely Arce Raya since she first began sharing her story of rising through Wall Street's ranks while being undocumented. Her newest book has the most double take stop scrolling, walk backwards in the bookshop title, *You Sound Like a White Girl: The Case for Rejecting Assimilation*. It weaves Julissa's personal experience of pursuing the American dream, was gained and lost in that pursuit with the undervalued history of Latinos in this country. Julissa makes a powerful case that belonging, true belonging, does not come from chasing a white ideal or a moving finish line, but rather from embracing our culture, our history, and reclaiming it all for ourselves. Julissa, perhaps an obvious question, but I think a necessary question to get us started, can you tell me about the first time that someone said to you you sound like a white girl?

Julissa Natzely Arce Raya: I don't know that I remember the first time someone said that to me, but I do remember the most impactful time someone said that to me and that was when I was in high school. And this boy I had a crush on, we were on the phone and he said to me, "You sound like a white girl." And he didn't mean it as a compliment, but I took it as a compliment. I distinctly remember feeling happy that he said that because I had spent such a long time practicing how I enunciated words so that my accent wouldn't be so obvious that when he said that, I thought all those times of standing in front of the mirror have paid off because I finally sound like a white girl, and I was excited about it.

Menendez: Talk me through your family's story of coming to the United States, and talk me through what the lessons they were sharing with you were around assimilation.

Arce Raya: My parents came to the US when I was three, and then I joined them when I was 11 from Mexico. And of course my parents' view of America definitely impacted the way that I saw the United States, which was this like land of opportunity where everything was possible and you just have to work hard, and that certainly was true for my parents for a long time until it wasn't. Then when I turned 14, my visa expired and I became undocumented, and that's when it became even more important to sound like a white girl because I thought that if I sounded like I was from here, then no one would question whether or not I should actually be here. And so I sort of started to find security behind assimilation without realizing then and for a long time after that assimilation doesn't ever offer true, real belonging in this country.

Arce Raya: It didn't matter that I had this eventually landed a very prestigious job at Goldman Sachs and became a vice president. Some of that time, I was still undocumented. At the end of

the day, there were still people who, had they known that I didn't have papers, would have turned me in and maybe I would've gotten deported. And there's certainly a lot of people who, since I started sharing my story publicly, write me all the time and tell me that I don't belong here, that I should go back to where I came from. And so over time, all of these things that I thought would get me belonging in this country revealed not to be true, and that's why I wrote this book, "You Sound Like a White Girl: The Case for Rejecting Assimilation" because I do think that we need to reject it.

Menendez: I promise that we will get to that. But first, I want to talk a little bit about that time at Goldman. I mean, you're buying your Ralph Lauren suits and your Chanel bags, at least you referenced that in the book.

Arce Raya: I sold that bag. I sold it, got my money back.

Menendez: There are ways in which you can buy the trappings of belonging, but there are also then ways in which you'll always be reminded that you don't actually belong. How did that show up at that time?

Arce Raya: I remember going out to dinner, it was like a group outing, and we're at this fancy restaurant in Tribeca, New York and I was wearing all black, which is standard New York. And I go to the bathroom, I go to the ladies room, and on my way back, this table of mostly white people, one of the women at the table stopped me and asked me for water because she thought I was the server and I honestly just... I was so stunned that I didn't know how to respond. I didn't share it when I got back to my table because it's a table full of other white people that will never understand what that feels like. Even though I was wearing this very expensive black blouse and expensive black slacks, that still happened to me. I remember a client once when I came into the conference room that we were having this meeting asked me to bring him coffee because he thought I was the assistant, not the vice president there to talk to him about his investment portfolio.

Menendez: Given how bought in you initially were to this idea of the American dream of assimilation, what happens in your life that you begin to question the value of assimilating?

Arce Raya: The biggest turning point was when my dad passed away. I was in New York at my desk and I got a phone call from my sister and she said my dad was really sick. I still didn't have papers, and so getting on a plane to go see my dad was not an easy decision to make because if I did that, I might never be able to come back into the US. The first time I came in, I came with a visa on a plane. This time, I would have to be smuggled in. I would have to cross the border illegally, which has a lot of consequences, including a very real inability to ever fix your immigration status even when you marry US citizen, unless there's some sort of immigration reform. I mean, first of all, I'm thinking about my dad, but I'm also thinking like, "Do I go? Do I stay? He'd been sick and in the hospital before, what do I do?" I bought a plane ticket and was on my way to the airport and I was like, "No, I can't go," and then went back to my apartment.

Arce Raya: And in all of this indecisiveness about what to do, my dad passed away and I never got to hug him or see his face again, and I just felt so disillusioned because I had everything that my parents brought me to this country for. I had a lot of money, I had a prestigious job, I lived in this beautiful high-rise apartment in New York city, and yet what was all that money good for if I still couldn't be with my family when it was really needed? Who cares how American I had become when I still could not leave to be with my father and be welcomed back into the place that I had made my home? And that's really when I started questioning

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whether the American dream was real or whether it was just a lie, bait that we use so that people want to come here, so that people continue seeking and spending time trying to attain things that ultimately turned out to be lies.

Menendez: Do you think your dad would've felt the same way?

Arce Raya: I don't know. I didn't have very many conversations about those types of things with my dad, so I don't know of how he would've felt. I do know that when I quit my job at Goldman and when I eventually left Wall Street altogether, my mom thought I was crazy. She was very worried that I was throwing all of my sacrifice. She never said this, but I think her sacrifice too. I think that for my parents and for a lot of immigrant parents, financial stability and security is nothing that makes everything worth it. Listen, I don't ever shy away from saying that I don't think money makes you happy, but it absolutely, definitely helps. But I think that the way I look at things now has shifted a lot because I'm not doing these things to gain belonging, I'm doing these things because I want to, because they're good for me, because I enjoy them. Not because I'm trying to get some sort of acceptance from other people and from this country.

Menendez: There is a beautiful moment in the book, highly relatable, where your husband, who is US born, is I think you buy your first house and his mom gifts the two of you sort of a card with a check or some cash and it's just like, "This is for you." And you have such a visceral reaction to that act of generosity. Why?

Arce Raya: It makes me want to cry all over again. I think that a lot of immigrant families, a lot of Latino families, will know both the beauty and the burden of being the one in your family who "made it", who now becomes the financial stability for the rest of the family. It's this push and pull because it's like, "Well, that's why I'm working so hard is to be able to take care of my family." And then at the same time, feeling like this cement block on my back, and then I see my husband's family that is so different. And frankly, I've only ever seen white people's families operate this way, which is like the parents are the ones taking care of the adult children. The parents are the ones who give money for the wedding and who pay for the study abroad trip. And when my mother-in-law gave us this check to buy furniture for our first home, I lost it because I have not had that kind of relationship with my parents and with my family, and that's not to say that it's because they didn't try. I mean, that's a whole point of why they came here and things didn't work out that way.

Menendez: If we are not striving for the American dream, if we're not striving for assimilation, what do you imagine that we then would be striving for?

Arce Raya: So the first half of the book is all about the lies, everything I just talked about, which I know sounds really heavy.

Menendez: But I want to say it doesn't read heavy. It reads like... I enjoyed it. I flew through it.

Arce Raya: Okay, good.

Menendez: Because you approach it very much like a person who's still in process yourself. It is not declarative as though you have ended up...

Arce Raya: I don't have all the answers. It's about really the journey that I went through to what I call dismantling the lies, showing through not just personal stories, but historically. And I did tons of research and read tons of history books to really show the connection between our history and our present and what our future might look like, which is what the second half of the book is about, which is that instead of assimilating, we should be trying to reclaim, we should be trying to create spaces for ourselves and for us and by us. And so it's about

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spending time reclaiming our history, learning the history that we were never taught in school. It's about reclaiming our identity and defining what the Latino identity is for ourselves because there's, of course, so much controversy about even the words that we use to describe our community. And while there are a lot of things we need to address within the Latino community, I freaking love our community. I absolutely love being Latina, being surrounded by Latinos. I love the Latino community with the flaws that we have, but it is in the presence of Latinos where I have found the best, most authentic version of myself, because I see how other people are finding happiness, and success, and belonging, and friendship within the community. It's about not letting other people define what success, what happiness, what belonging looks like.

Menendez: As you referenced, there is a conversation about Latinidad, about canceling Latinidad. And one of the things that I really appreciate about the thinking and the writing and the work that you did in *You Sound Like a White Girl* is there are many points at which you hold multiple truths to be valid at the same time. So you are both able to say that you recognize the pain and the purpose of Black Latinos who feel that Latinidad erases Blackism, does not do enough to grapple with our history of colonialism, and at the same time, you make a very powerful argument for reclaiming Latinidad. Talk me through how you can both say, "I get that this doesn't work for some people. I see that. Here's though the value that I see in re-imagining what this could look like."

Arce Raya: Thinking back about my writing process, that is the chapter, that is the section that gave me the most trouble, that scared me the most to write. I'm still a little scared because I think that some of the things I say could be taken out of context, and without sort of that larger context, they can be viewed in a way that is not true. What I talk about in that section is that I understand that Latinidad, the Latino identity, has been constructed in a way that follows all the same patterns of white supremacy. I learned the importance of whiteness when I was a child's living in Mexico. I came to the United States and that continued, and it was hard, it was more pressed upon me. But at the same time for me, I am not a Black Latina and therefore I can't sort of find belonging in Blackness because it doesn't belong to me.

Arce Raya: I'm also not a white Latina, so I can't say like... I don't pass as white. I am not white in any way shape or form. And many times thinking about sort of the broader race conversation in the United States, we have those conversations in a binary. You're either white or you're Black, and that's the sphere in which these conversations exist. I think that we need to make room for more variables to be part of that conversation. Someone like me who... I am mestiza, I am Indigenous, but I didn't grow up in an Indigenous community, so I think it would be false for me to say and to claim that Indigenous identity as a parallel to Native Americans in the United States, as a parallel to Indigenous communities that still very much live in an Indigenous culture. I feel like for me, the Latina identity is my identity and I don't want it to be canceled because guess what? In 39 years... I'm almost 39. In 38 years, in 38 years of my life, it is that word where I feel most seen and most heard.

Menendez: Part of re-imagining Latina, part of grappling with and rejecting white supremacy, it is very clear the responsibility that someone like me who is Latina and who is white bears in that. You also have broadened out to say any Latino needs to reject white supremacy. This is a bigger conversation.

Arce Raya: Whiteness is not the same thing as white people because I think that there are Latinos and there are bBack people, and there are Asian people, and there are people of every race and ethnicity who perpetrate white supremacy. And I think if we look at historically, specifically talking about the Mexican American community, we have done that because we wanted to belong. We have done that for protection because there are very real, dangerous and threats for things like speaking Spanish. But I think we have also done it because we have this false belief that if we uphold white supremacy enough, that will fold into it, that will hold the privileges that white people do. And that's never worked out for us ever, ever, ever, ever, and it never will.

Menendez: Can you give me examples of how applying this idea of rejecting assimilation and instead beginning to really invest in the parts of our stories that are here or have been here or have been undervalued? How have you lived this? One of the things I love about you, Julissa, you're still on your Peloton. You're still like...

Arce Raya: Hell yeah.

Menendez: You still buy a cute house. You still got pizza nights. It's not like, throw attainment to the wind.

Arce Raya: Yeah. And you know what's funny is so some of these things, like my husband and I love wine tasting and we have memberships everywhere and we go to vineyards and sip on our little wine. And it's funny because he was making fun of me the other day about me still doing all these white things and I was like, "You know what? No. Why do they have to be white things? Why do they have to be viewed as white people's things? Who made them the owner of those things? You know who tends to the grape vines and picks the grapes and makes the wine? We do. Hiking, most of that land of beautiful parks was land that was Indigenous land, that was Mexican land. How did it become a white thing? Why isn't it my thing too?" So I think the shift is I no longer view these things as white people's things as quote unquote... I even hesitate to call them American things because if they're American things, then they're also my things because I'm American too.

Menendez: I love that so much. Julissa, thank you so much for doing this.

Arce Raya: Thank you for having me.

Menendez: Thank you as always for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and, me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Manuela Bedoya is our marketing lead. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer and mix this episode. We love hearing from you. It makes our day. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram. Tweet us at Latina to Latina. Check out our merchandise that is on our website, latinatolatina.com/shop. And remember, please subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcast, Google Podcast, Goodpods, wherever you are listening right now. Every time you share this podcast, every time you share an episode, every time you leave a review, it helps us to grow as a community.

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