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## 7 Questions for Stephanie Elizondo Griest

The journalist, traveler and author of *Mexican Enough* opens up about traveling to Mexico with little more than a laptop, her curiosity and a quest for a new understanding of herself.

**GROWING** up biracial in the U.S. wasn't always easy for Stephanie Elizondo Griest. Although the journalist and author benefited from her Anglo roots (her father's family hails from Kansas) as a child,

she wondered if she had the qualities that would make her Latina enough, and if she didn't, she wondered just what those would be. Her name and background were enough to land her race-based scholarships as a col-

lege bound teenager, but the concern was persistent. After spending time in Russia and China and chronicling her travels and experiences, she decided to do the same in Mexico, where she encounters strikes, poverty, violence and communities fighting for the basic rights Americans enjoy without a second thought. In the process, her voyage dispelled long-held myths and opened her eyes to Mexicans' reality and parts of herself.

**Hispanic Magazine:** What motivated you to seek your Mexican side?

**Stephanie Elizondo Griest:** I spent much of my 20s traveling around the Communist Bloc, mingling with the Russian Mafiya, polishing Chinese propaganda and belly dancing with Cuban rumba queens. (These adventures inspired my first memoir: *Around the Bloc: My Life in Moscow, Beijing, and Havana.*) During that time, I was struck by how fervently Stalin, Mao and Castro tried to vanquish centuries of religion, tradition and ritual by forcing social culture upon their citizens. Yet hundreds of thousands of people boldly defied these rulings.

This made me reflect on how, in the United States, those of us who haven't needed to fight for our culture have often deserted it. Though I called myself a Chicana, I hadn't invested much energy into learning about my Mexican heritage. I couldn't even speak Spanish, despite growing up 150 miles from the border! When I returned from the bloc, I vowed to get reacquainted with my own neighborhood block. So on New Year's Eve of 2005, I moved to Mexico.

**HM:** What was the distinction for you between feeling like a foreigner in Russia or China as compared to Mexico?

**SEG:** In Moscow, I once asked for carrots instead of envelopes at the post office, and the clerk laughed so hard, she nearly fell off her chair. But I didn't mind. I'm a Chicana from South Texas: How should I know the difference? In Mexico, however, linguistic mistakes like that mortified me, like I was betraying my ancestry or something. I also took personal interactions much more seriously. The slightest rebuff felt like total rejection—not just by a person, but a people. My people. Fortunately,

COURTESY STEPHANIE ELIZONDO GRIEST

**EVERYONE SHOULD TRAVEL TO THEIR MOTHERLAND AT SOME POINT IN LIFE, TO LEARN FROM THE ROOTS THAT GROW WITHIN.**

Mexicans are incredibly kind.

**HM:** Regardless of your intent, do you think you represented “El Norte” to the Mexicans you encountered? If so, what did that feel like?

**SEG:** The year I traveled across Mexico, I was 30, single, childless, jobless and essentially homeless. Nothing screams “El Norte” louder than that. Mexican women just live an entirely different reality. In an effort to better connect with people, I tried introducing myself as a Chicana. But that just made them laugh. We’re as foreign as any other gringo. Still, people seemed to appreciate that I didn’t come to Mexico to sip tequila on a beach. They are extremely proud of their culture and eager to share it. At the same time, being perceived as a “wealthy foreigner” granted me passage into places completely inaccessible to most Mexicans. I harbored a lot of guilt about this, especially considering how badly Mexicans can be treated when they visit the United States. I often found myself trying to fight a system that benefited me.

**HM:** Many believe that merely documenting a situation changes it. Do you believe your presence made an impact on the political situations, strikes, murder investigations, presidential election backlash, etc. you witnessed? How so?

**SEG:** I deeply believe in the power of stories—not only as a healing force but as an agent of social change. That is why I conducted so many interview sessions with Mexico’s marginalized populations: strikers, migrant workers, indigenous resistance fighters, prisoners, gays and lesbians, etc. Certainly,

nothing concrete may come from the inclusion of their stories in my book. But hopefully, the act of being interviewed helped legitimize their experiences, and made them feel a little less alone in the world.

**HM:** What was your biggest misconception about Mexico?

**SEG:** I was secretly hoping that my time there would somehow Mexify me. I’ve always been insecure about my cultural identity, worrying that I am not Mexican enough to accept race-based scholarships and the like. But after eight months in Mexico, I finally accepted that I will never be truly Mexican, not even if I moved there for the rest of my life and acquired the requisite customs and traditions. Because what binds a people are their bedtime stories. The songs they sing on road trips. Political and historical events. Fads and crazes. Shared memories. Not skills that can be acquired, like language. Which isn’t to suggest that my pursuit was a worthless endeavor. I am deeply proud that I can finally speak the language of my ancestors, and that I intimately know the lay of their land. Yet there is no point striving for an unobtainable state of being.

Identity crisis is actually endemic to the U. S. Latino community. I am constantly meeting caramel-skinned women who speak Spanish fluently, cook arroz con pollo, and salsa dance on weekends, yet still don’t feel “Latina enough.” This is especially ironic considering that white society created what it means to be Latino in the first place. Colonists diluted indigenous blood through conquest

and rape; the U. S. government drew up categories like “Hispanic,” “White,” “Black,” and “Other” and made us choose. Hollywood created the cholo while MTV gave us JLo. For generations, we’ve felt pressured to emulate these role models because they were our only ones.

But *poco a poco*, we are coming into our own as a people. We’re making strides in film, literature, non-profits, politics, science, music. Creating our own definitions of who we are and who we can aspire to be. Fulfilling the dreams of ancestors who struggled to root (or keep) us here.

**HM:** What, if anything, surprised you to learn about yourself during your travels?

**SEG:** Mother Road changes each of us in profound ways. I found that as I traveled, all of the identities I had spent a lifetime cultivating began to peel off one by one. My vegetarianism drowned in a bowl of yak penis soup in China; in Russia, I compromised my feminism by being with men who treated me badly. I never felt less Chicana than I did in Mexico. Yet, traveling has built within me a foundation that allows me to stroll the world’s passageways with confidence. It has taught me the difference between being alone and being lonely, and made me ever selective of my company. I have become such a self-sustained, self-contained unit, I’m expecting to self-pollinate any day now.

**HM:** Do you feel you will rediscover your Kansas roots now that you have had such an awakening in Mexico?

**SEG:** I have always felt strongly connected to Kansas, perhaps because my family used to pack up the van every summer and drive up for a visit. Countless things lured me back: the crisp, sweet smell of the hay, the enormity of the sky, the tartness of my aunt’s cherry pie, and especially my grandmother’s stories. She spun tales of retreating into dugouts after spying tornadoes on the horizon; of battling dust storms and brush fires; of sleigh rides at Christmas. Kansas is the landscape of my childhood, and it is always a pleasure to revisit.

Everyone should travel to their motherland at some point in life, to learn from the roots that grow within. You can make rubbings of tombstones engraved with your family name at the local cemetery; talk with the old-timers; fill a jar with earth. It is deeply satisfying to know you have witnessed the same sunset as your ancestors. That your boots have collected the same dust. **H**

