

LEGAL ALIEN

by Pat Mora

BACKGROUND

Pat Mora was born on the border of El Paso, Texas and Mexico. Raised in a Mexican American household, she grew up speaking and reading both English and Spanish. Her poetry blends Hispanic culture into American society. This poem is from her first book of poetry. A legal alien is an immigrant who enters a country legally.

A LANGUAGE COACH

The prefix *bi-* means “two.” Mora hyphenates bi-lingual and bi-cultural to emphasize the feeling of living in two worlds. As you read, circle the other prefixes that Mora hyphenates.

B LITERARY FOCUS

What do you know about the speaker so far?

“Legal Alien” and “Extranjera legal” from *Chants* by Pat Mora. Copyright © 1984 by Pat Mora. Published by Arte Público Press—University of Houston, Houston, TX, 1985, 2000. Reproduced by permission of the publisher.

Bi-lingual, Bi-cultural, **A**
able to slip from “How’s life?”
to “*Me’stan volviendo loca*,”¹ **B**
able to sit in a paneled office
5 drafting memos in smooth English,

1. *Me’stan . . . loca* (MEH STAHN VOHL VEE EHN DOH LOH KAH): Spanish for “They’re driving me crazy.”



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able to order in fluent Spanish
at a Mexican restaurant,
American but hyphenated,
viewed by Anglos as perhaps exotic,
5 perhaps inferior, definitely different,
viewed by Mexicans as alien
(their eyes say, “You may speak
Spanish but you’re not like me”),
an American to Mexicans
10 a Mexican to Americans
a handy token
sliding back and forth
between the fringes of both worlds **C**
by smiling
15 by masking the discomfort
of being pre-judged
Bi-laterally.² **D**

C VOCABULARY

Word Study

Fringes means “the outer edges.” What synonym (word with a similar meaning) for *fringes* could Mora have used here?

D READING FOCUS

Re-read this poem to **analyze details**. What did you learn in the second reading that you didn’t learn in the first?

2. **Bi-laterally** (BY LAT UHR UHL LEE): by both sides. (Mora has added a hyphen to this word.)

EXTRANJERA LEGAL

by Pat Mora

A LITERARY ANALYSIS

Compare the Spanish version of this poem to the English version. What English words are also in the Spanish version? Underline them. Then, circle any Spanish words that are very similar to English words.

Bi-lingüe, bi-cultural,
capaz de deslizarse de “*How’s life?*”
a “*Me’stan volviendo loca,*”
capaz de ocupar un despacho bien apuntado,
5 redactando memorandums en inglés liso,
capaz de ordenar la cena en español fluido
en restaurante mexicano,
americana pero con guión,
vista por los anglos como exótica,
10 quizás inferior, obviamente distinta,
vista por mexicanos como extranjera
(sus ojos dicen “*Hablas español*
pero no eres como yo”),
americana para mexicanos
15 mexicana para americanos
una ficha servible
pasando de un lado al otro
de los márgenes de dos mundos
sonriéndome
20 disfrazando la incomodidad
del pre-juicio
bi-lateralmente. A