I grew up in Inwood as an involuntary embodiment of gentrification

and at Amistad Dual-Language School all my friends were Dominican,

I was invited to their homes to dance, do homework, play and eat and

their families would ask me where I was from and be disappointed with the answer,

“No, no tu eres Dominicana”

They denied my whiteness to convince themselves they could trust me.

But their attempts to claim me didn’t change my ancestry, heritage, or skin

So they commenced an education.

Told me why I was often asked to marry people’s sons “para mejorar la raza”

the roots of “colorismo y racismo,”

Explained how when I was called “gringa,” “güera,” o “blanquita”

That it wasn’t the same, no era lo mismo

They too taught me, how to close my legs and shut my mouth,

The supposéd tools I needed to defend myself

And those paired with my perceived femininity protected me from homophobic slurs,

Until I dared to kiss my girlfriend outside

Then the slurs came, the harrassment, the voyeurism and the shame

Our homes weren’t viable so we resorted to the public

we still tried to hide but quickly realized that no darkness of a movie theater

Or thick shade under trees would protect us

Someone always sees,

Feels entitled to the view

To whip out their dicks,

Or their cameras,

No, you can’t take a picture,

This is not for you.

While long hair and makeup prevented against being called a dyke while I was on my own,

It brought on the,

“Hey blue dress, come sit on my lap”s

The incessant requests for my phone number, the stalking, chasing, shouting

I used to point to the shield on my uniform,

Looked to it for safety

Signaling that I was underage and uninterested

But none of my pleas stopped the licking of their lips

Or the grabbing of my hips

Or the slapping of my ass

Or the guilt I felt for walking out at night

Then questions of origin and belonging began to confuse me,

Because the place I was supposed to call home didn’t feel like home after 13

And those I was closest to no longer were those with whom I shared blood

So when you ask me where I live,

And the compulsive tics I’ve tried so hard to conceal begin to show

Do I tell you where my mail is sent?

To the house in the Bronx with no electricity

where my mother lives on food stamps, alcohol, and cocaine withdrawal?

Do I tell you where my aunt lives?

The place where I was offered safety in return for the promise to abandon my mother after she was arrested while driving me...and my best friend?

Do I explain to you how I rationalize my betrayal?

Or why I still tell her I love her every day?

Do I give you the addresses of all of my friends’ houses whose families were kind enough to welcome me in? To love me?

Or do I locate all the homes where portions of my father’s ashes settle in urns beside Torahs because no one felt they could live without a piece of him? Because it was not only I who lost a piece of myself with his death.

Sometimes labels are just as encapsulating as they are liberating,

As are fantasies, as are realities.

When you tell me I am not acting like myself I do not understand,

I am always me, so when I act like me.

When you tell me I am not acting like myself it is not because my personality is too expansive,

but because you have defined me too limitedly.