



"My Aunts" by Mel MaSal

Cover Image: *My Aunts* by Melissa Maldonado-Salcedo 2021.

Melissa Maldonado-Salcedo//

I am always “in my feelings.” I say this unapologetically, and knowing that some Latina women are rendered in popular culture as lacking control of their emotions and impulses. The overlap between these representations and my ethnographic life does not escape me. Empathy, “my gut,” memories, and emotions are all my critical tools of the trade in this field because they are invaluable to telling stories (Ortner, Stoller). I am a story doctor, and these are my undisciplined methods. I seek to evoke emotions with my stories while also conveying my own.

Professionally, I am trained as a medical anthropologist, but I am also an artist, and stories are my medium. I share them to ground the elusive theories that underscore our field, which in my view, remains a delicate task. Stories must be handled with care. They also depend on intuition, a point emphasized by Csordas in the context of the “blurred borders” between the professional and personal lives we inhabit (Csordas). I am my own informant. I believe (my) stories should provoke, activate, and yes, they should even disturb because such is

life. Yet, stories are powerful because they are transformative. They reimagine, repurpose, and realign the anthropologist within and beyond the field. I often ask myself, am I handicapped in seeing a social world outside of my own?

Do my emotions have an autobiography that makes distance and detachment from my stories impossible? Does my condition shape my emotions? Multiple Sclerosis makes me anxious (literally but more so metaphorically.) I believe this has to do with the narrow interpretations of disability, which frame it either as tragic, unpredictable, or simply limiting. For instance, Pseudobulbar Affect (PBA). It is a medical condition that causes sudden, frequent, uncontrollable crying and laughing that doesn't match how you feel. It can happen in people with brain injury or certain neurological conditions such as Multiple sclerosis. In 2018, the acclaimed actor Danny Glover released a TV commercial entitled "Learn More," which featured him acting out the condition.

Actor portrayals of any type of mental illness or embodied conditions are especially problematic because they tend to exaggerate symptoms to the point of appearing like a parody. This particular condition made me a bit paranoid because I have a propensity for inappropriate responses to stress. I daydream about smoking cigarettes anytime I have a deadline. I smile right before throwing out a zinger. I cry through most commercials that involve puppies. I do not know how to take compliments, so I revert to self-deprecating humor instead of just saying "thank you." I am painfully self-aware, neurotic, if you will. My body craves most things that go against my better judgment. This all presents yet another nature or nurture dilemma given my upbringing too.

Family Matters of the Heart: An Ethnographic Case Study

When my paternal aunt Tonia passed away, I could not stop laughing during her wake. I had to pinch myself to refrain from laughing out loud. She lived a bus ride away from us most of my childhood in Chelsea, and we were in the Lower East Side, settling in these neighborhoods before gentrification. I don't remember clearly what led up to her death, except she had diabetes, an awful husband, and "heart problems." Both sides of my family were rarely together. My mother only has one sister in America, Hortense, and she lives in the Bronx. Due to their age difference, which I suspect is upward of fifteen years, Hortense is more like a grandmother. I did not have a real relationship with my own beyond knowing that she remains the source of so much drama in my family even after her death. However, funerals are the rare occasions we have a family crossover with my paternal and maternal side. It is when my Colombian and Puerto Rican sides collide.

I arrived at Tonia's funeral to find Hortense kneeling and sobbing beside her casket. I was surprised and confused since she barely knew her. Why was she so inconsolable? Also, it was not sudden death. It was slow and painful, to the point that I could not help but feel relief that she no longer was suffering. I asked myself, why would Hortense be so affected by Tonia's death? Granted, Hortense is also the same aunt who can start speaking in tongues on command,

voted for Trump, and would take an hour bus ride just to bring me mangoes when I was sick. I am not suggesting that I expect her actions to make sense (to you or me.)

The “technicalities” that confirm age, like a birthdate, are unreliable sources for most women in my family born in Colombia. This gives my mother and Hortense leeway in calling into question if they’re really “as old” as their birth certificates state. Yet, Hortense has a piece of tape covering the portion of her driver’s license that lists her date of birth. This coupled with extreme dieting, plastic surgery, and strained relationships with truth and reality, the Salcedo women tend to be comedically suspended in time. Death for them is not part of life; it is the ultimate signifier of age. I find this incredibly ironic given that they are also very obsessed with the afterlife (as evangelicals). They patiently wait for the rapture while staying forever young. Knowing all of this while seeing Hortense sob at the casket was a lot for me to take in. I know it is wildly “inappropriate” to laugh at these events. At the same time, given the context of my family, it is also a legitimate response to moments of grief and mourning (Benedict 1934).

When my paternal grandfather was being lowered into the ground at his burial, one of my cousins was so drunk that he started chanting, “*Que lo bajen! Que lo bajen! Que lo bajen!*”(Take him down!) So even during the saddest moment of my father’s life, he too burst into laughter. I reason that since my father is blind, he is not limited in the same way as people who can read facial cues and body language are. At the funeral, I kept thinking that Hortense was probably crying because she thought, “she had to be next.” After all, it would be the logical conclusion in terms of age and common sense (barring unexpected tragedies, which is also a common occurrence in my family). I have one uncle who died from a snakebite. He was out farming and was bitten. My grandmother was tasked with bringing his dead body wrapped in a hammock and carried by his brothers. She led the way as he left a trail of blood all the way home. This was our Via Dolorosa. I always wondered if my family would have converted to pentecostalism had they known the history of snake charming; that (crucial) detail was never exported to Colombia. They say this was the last time my grandmother ever laughed. My other uncle was electrocuted, fixing the antenna of his television during a rainstorm. It doesn’t get more “unexpected” than that despite its predictability. The only photo I have of him is published in the papers announcing his death by electrocution.

As we sat in the funeral parlor, I could hear my father arguing with my cousin Orlando in the lobby (Tonia’s only son.) He did not want to give the eulogy because he had gotten into an argument with his only remaining sister about who would inherit my aunt’s apartment. His other sister had died just a few years before from a long battle with diabetes, heart problems, and complications from a terrible marriage. I remember my dad repeating, “after all she did for you.” Tonia practically raised her three children on her own. My father had brought them all from Puerto Rico after her husband had beat her so bad that my dad negotiated with him to let them come to New York, offering to bring him too as soon as he could. My father is a man of his word and eventually reunited them. My father, with his radio voice, is incapable of whispering. He progressively got louder but in a non-festive way.

Twenty minutes later, Orlando rushed to the altar with an excessive amount of energy and sniffles (and not the type you get from crying). He paid his mother tribute with his broken Spanish, making his verb conjugations and the misgendering of critical words extra funny because it changed the entire meaning of everything he said. It was like he was reading the subtitles to an entirely different movie. He then transitioned into a full-blown sermon preaching about the need for repentance and forgiveness. My sister, not to be outdone or overlooked, then broke into a solo rendition of Amazing Grace. She was unusually off-key that day. My cousin Orlando died suddenly a year after burying his mother from a widow-maker heart attack.

Bittersweet Immortality: The Stories We Know

One thing I know for sure about the Salcedo women is that they fear growing “old.” This is different from the “fear of aging.” While extending individuals’ life spans has long been a central engrossment of biomedicine and global health, it remains my mother and aunt’s sole preoccupation. My grandmother passed at one hundred and two years old. Her mother died at “approximately” one hundred and fifteen years old. I am not sure how old my mother is and, much less, my aunt. Society tends to associate aging or the appearance of age as a disadvantage, a hindrance to happiness. I am not immune to this; it is deeply embedded in my mind. No more remarkable testament to this exists than when I had a panic attack the first time I saw my grey hairs in the mirror. Soon thereafter, I outgrew most things like Electronic Dance Music and boozy brunches. The only hangovers I tolerate now are emotional.

It is rather childish to think about the (extreme) measures Hortense takes to maintain the illusion (or mystery) of youth. According to my mother, because her father was often “impaired” by alcohol when he would register his children, and he had a dozen, he got the birth dates confused. Three are registered a few months apart. Their birth certificates state that they were born in the same year, from the same mother *and* father (despite the biological impossibility of this occurrence). Why would someone who works in a registry office for the State not question if he was competent or, in the least, sober? Can he provide coherent responses to basic questions like date of birth? Seems like a simple enough sobriety test given the circumstances. I have no doubt my mother’s siblings are all my grandmother’s children. She is very much alive in them. What does not make sense to me is why the two siblings with the darkest complexion have a different last name. This is a real-life telenovela trope, but this is also my family history. Growing up, my mother bragged that her father did not have “another family” or “kids on the street” (*hijos realengos*) like it was a badge of honor. Side-hustles and side-families were the norms in her world, so the fact that she claims my grandfather was the exception raises more questions for me than it answers.

I share these stories inside the classroom. In doing so, I learned that many first-generation Latinos like me don’t know their family history beyond their great grandparents (if that). Also, in the motherland, the archives, like all other official accounts, are rarely precise. It is a strange paradox, having such a hyper sense of where one is from while also not knowing precisely from whom one descends. For this reason, I particularly disliked the [ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) advertisements

where individuals genetically “traced” their family origins. Some of us can only speculate. This past year, I caved in and took the test. The results were somewhat surprising. I have a lot of family in England and Ireland. I have a cousin Abul who lives in France. Also, I know from where my ancestors were taken from in Africa: Nigeria. I then sent away to take the tests that provide insight into what diseases and illnesses I am genetically predisposed for; this seems more pertinent especially given my dubious medical family history. I learned I have a high likelihood of developing late-onset dementia.

Many of us, whose histories are filled with silences, erasures, and illegalities, have also learned that biological relationships can be devoid of family bonds. We are connected in more meaningful ways that evade scientific reasoning. Hence, in these contexts, the unequal distribution of reproductive labor in gender, race, nationality, and class intensifies social inequalities across time and space (Cohen, Glenn). Interestingly, the process of stratified reproduction in which only certain people are encouraged to reproduce both biologically and socially has been studied about the beginning of life, but how is this reconciled in our storytelling? (Ginsburg & Rapp). Arguably, families can challenge the limits of our capacity to tell our stories because of the fear of stigma or the feeling that somehow, we can be judged, exposed, and left vulnerable. Hence, we continue to wash our dirty laundry at home. However, they are some stains I believe that not even the blood of Jesus can wash away. We wear them. They are visible to everyone.

Citing a 2018 study published in the *Journal of Dementia and Neuropsychologia*, Vijaya Iyer shares in the Multiple Sclerosis Society newsletter that a significant number of multiple sclerosis patients show signs not only of “depression and anxiety” but also of alexithymia. This is an “inability to describe or process emotional responses.” Alexithymia is characterized as an “affective agnosia,” where emotions are “pushed away.” It can be characterized by difficulties identifying and describing feelings (Taylor G.J & RM Bagby). My life’s work is trying to understand my emotions through my stories. While this may not feel productive for some, it makes storytelling imperative so I can live forever.

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