





A mixed-media portrait highlighting the relationship between my genes and reflection. An homage to the all the women who hold me up.

“The Past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

-William Faulkner, Requiem for a Nun.

Facing down the barrel at the end of my reproductive year, the advent of menopause amplified my embodied differences. I did not prepare for this natural but highly medialized phase of my life. I already was an insomniac, have trouble regulating my internal temperature, and can be temperamental. Women of color enter menopause earlier and experience more severe symptoms. The doctor confirmed my age caught up with my ovaries and, as such, was expected to feel sad and ashamed, given that these are my default settings. I did what any self-respecting scholar would and googled, “what to do about menopause?” Vitamins? Yoga? Wine? I found a gazillion products

promising to alleviate the inevitable circle of life. If evolution is about “reproduction and survival,” why do we outlive our reproductive capability? What is the point?

In the 1960s, researchers came up with “the grandmother hypothesis” to theorize on the evolutionary “purpose” of menopause. NPR ran a story on the benefits of living near your grandmother in 2019. Jonathan Lambert notes that while studying the Hadza people, a group of hunter-gatherers in northern Tanzania, the anthropologist Kristen Hawkes was amazed at “how productive these old ladies were.” She documented the work and support of the grandmothers and how it allowed the mothers to have more children. The subsequent studies on this hypothesis have also reported that living near your grandmother can help “curb child mortality too.” Perhaps living across the street from my mother for so many years when my son was small will pay off for generations to come.

Currently, my seventy-two-year-old mother gets up every morning and takes the train to New Jersey, where she cares for my sister’s three children. They are all under the age of twelve. She ensures they stay well-fed, clothed, and cared for in my sister’s absence. Being a grandmother allows her to apply all the lessons learned from parenting to rectify mistakes. This is the only reason it makes sense to me that my mother defies the limitations of her own body to care for her grandchildren. Call it atonement or redemption. However, if my son needed me to make that daily pilgrimage, I would, with milk and cookies, like mother, like daughter.

The right to be healthy is fair and just but remains impossible for many women. Moreso, if you are black or brown. You are deeply disadvantaged by the sick business of health. This is a scientific fact. Studies suggest that these gendered disparities result from systemic problems and unjust practices. They harm and further disconnect communities from each other and themselves. Police brutality, reproductive rights, and environmental justice are interconnected issues shaping our bodies and how safe we feel in them as afro-latine birthing people. The Pew Research Center released findings in March 2022, which estimated 6 million adults in the United States identified as afro-Latinx. I bet not one has been exempt from the casual colorism of their families. The holidays are stressful because it is when you are reminded that your hair and desires can never prove “straight” enough.

It is worth noting that the origins of these disparities are insidious because they involve the consumption of toxic products and ideas. These predetermine unequal health outcomes that require nuanced public health interventions. Tobacco is a leading cause of preventable (black) death, making it a racial justice issue. The Centers for Disease Control identify tobacco as a significant contributor to the three leading causes of death among African-Americans: heart disease, cancer, and stroke. Notwithstanding, tobacco companies continue to disproportionately target black and brown communities, who already lack access and resources to make healthy choices. A glaring point that puts the relationship between individual and community health into

focus is that black and brown folk have higher levels of cotinine (a chemical that indicates tobacco exposure) even when they do not smoke.

It is remarkable that, even after COVID-19, you have individuals who culturally reject the narrative that one person's lifestyle choice can impact another's health outcomes, much less their genetic line. However, there are no coincidences in the evolutionary game. The strategic infiltration of menthol tobacco into disenfranchised communities shows how the predatory practices aimed to push this deadly product have been problematic. Call it American exceptionalism or racism; this "truth" about tobacco has not incentivized an industry driven by profit to change its business model or ban these products far deadlier than cannabis and more lethal than alcohol. Communities that have been led to believe that their suffering is not only inevitable but also purifying and necessary are suffocating because this misguided belief fueled by a lack of purchasing power justifies this mass murder called "business," and it is mine.

Inhale. Exhale. Breathe in. Breathe out. Cough. It isn't yoga or meditation that calms my everyday angst; it is my body mimicking that first drag of a cigarette I struggled to light after a decadent meal. Few things feel as good to me, despite knowing they could kill me. I do not accurately process information. I require unlearning that what hurts me can feel good. Immediate gratification can be bad for your health. Consequences are preventable. If not, they catch up with you in this life or (in) the next (of kin.) I used to wonder if self-destruction was in my DNA. No amount of theory or secrets whitewashed these tendencies from my medical history. Everything I enjoy can potentially kill me. Everything I like can cost me (even my life.) It is not easy to thrive as an afro-Latina mom because the guilt will kill you if you do. This is what addiction does to your brain.

Don't Sleep

"*Duerme Negrito*" (sleep my black child) is a famous lullaby sung by the late Argentine Mercedes Sosa, often referred to as the "voice of Latin America." She made the song famous and soothing for many of us growing up. It centers on a young boy sung to sleep during the siesta, presumably by his grandmother, while his mother works the fields. My husband grew up in Argentina and is called "El Negro" by his family. This is a common but problematic term of endearment. My mom also calls my dad "*negro*." However, I grit my teeth a little when she does because he is black, no matter how endearing she claims it is. Pablo is the "darkest" of his three brothers. Aside from being more melanated, arguably, according to them, he is black also "inside" because of his "attitude and imagination." You can be called "*negro*," even when you have blonde hair and blue eyes in Argentina. In that way, "black" is more a behavior, and less, a rigid classification based on superficial attributes, like skin color.

Pablo believed the song was about him (and only him) as a child and was devastated to learn they were other “negritos.” Bell Hook writes, “It is no accident that when we first learn about justice and fair play as children, it is usually in a context where the issue is one of telling the truth.” I own my blackness and the drops of my grandmother that defined me as such in the United States. In Argentina, however, my brand of blackness is complicated and elusive, which I explained ad nauseam in my dissertation. So when my sister-in-law, in her limited wisdom, reacted in shock at seeing my father’s photo, exclaiming, he’s “black.....really, really black!” I thought, what better way to explain how the personal is not only political? It can bring smoke.

I sobbed during the 2022 NFL halftime show. After seasons of so much black pain, seeing our resilience, creativity, and excellence on display for the world felt like a necessary release. Latinx folk like myself associate blackness with confusion because it is rejected as innate. Any form of black issues discussed around dinner tables can get dramatic and are subject to Freud’s “repetition compulsion.” I say this because besides speaking English, Spanish, and French, I am fluent in petty. I can make things awkward fast. I do not excuse microaggressions as “tradition” or “culture,” but clap-backing can be exhausting. I often hear microaggressions called “compliments.” Proclaiming “color blindness” is equally offensive because it attempts to gloss over and ignore the very part of me that I work to center and celebrate.

Growing up, my mother owned a beauty salon. Her professional training reinforced many ideas about blackness that treated it as “ugly.” As a “beautician,” she made others appear and feel “beautiful.” She learned to apply hair relaxers that were toxic not only to the scalp. She often described my curls (and tongue) as “untameable.” She believed I needed relaxers that would burn through my natural curls with chemicals. So when preparing to visit her family in Colombia, I had to stay out of the sun to protect myself from her family’s “shade” if I arrived darker than expected. I was sent then to the town plaza to get “some sun” on my legs because my cousins made fun of my pale legs. I found their farmer’s tan (and life) amusing.

On one of these trips, given the era, my mother gave herself a perm to “activate” the very thing she worked tirelessly to conceal in me...curls. My mother feared that the kink in my hair would reveal who had been in her bed, so my mother took a lot of creative licenses describing my father. She feared her family would suggest her motives to marry my “black” father had something to do with her undocumented “status” in the United States. After all, he was blind and black. However, my aunts and cousins were all fed from his labor. Yet, they treat his blackness like a “disability” and talk about him like it was a secret to be kept or a sin to confess.

In Colombian culture, to call someone “*india*” is a pejorative, a slur, and suggests barbarism. My mother’s hair is called “*pelo indio*” (Indigenous hair.) If you have visible traits that allude to this

genetic lineage, it is imperative to mask it to appear “successful” and “modern.” Perms were “American,” and so my mother put tremendous pressure on herself (and us) to “blend.” My mother wanted us to “be as Colombian” as possible, but she confused this with being “white-passing.” My sister rebelled the most against this imposition. I became versatile in adapting and, eventually, an anthropologist.

On my mother’s hair, a curl was unnatural to her and comically impossible to sustain in the humidity of the Caribbean coast. Yet, curls were aspirational for reasons related to Miami Vice’s fashion trends and the excess of the eighties. My hair had edges that reminded her of my black roots. Nothing could keep them down. We endure even the most heated circumstances and survive (literal and metaphorical) burns from our families. I vowed never to try to flatten, straighten, or “fix” what made me who I am so that I can raise my son to be confident, proud, and knowing he is worthy of everything glorious this life has to offer. I am the proud mother of a King.

Black Like Her

“Negra” (black) is a dynamic category with complicated implications for women and centuries of stigma attached to it. Growing up, my family whispered it whenever evoking it as an accusation. My eyes rolled instinctually whenever they did. To be black and Latina means to be introduced to racial hierarchies that mimic society at a very young age. When I was a child, all dolls were white, and Disney princesses were too. This lack of diversity ensured our (reproductive) aspirations were white (very Lamarquian) and, therefore, right. In families with wild (“diverse”) trees like mine, dinner tables can be triggering for this very reason. In the same family, some members pass as “white” because their skin is lighter or they pledge allegiance to the Republican party. They then see curvy, curly, and other black girls like me as a problem.

To say I am the “black” sheep is poetic but accurate. I will not atone for my family, though. While the pandemic forced many families to distance themselves socially, I always felt worlds apart from mine. Colonialism infected us with self-hate, and patriarchy ensured we passed this trait for generations. So whenever forced to celebrate a holiday together, we are reminded of how crippling it can feel to be related. Racism is dysfunctional. When family members casually expressed disdain for Obama and professed their love for Trump in the same breath, I was not surprised or even disappointed. I expected them to idealize one to distinguish themselves from me. Even those that did not live in the United States had a lot to say about what made America (and the rest of the world) less than great these days. Reggaeton. Political Protests. Unions. Abortions. Satan. Fun. Not even a pandemic can transform the leftover resentments from these unspoken experiences around the dinner table into anything more than a reason to smoke.

My paternal grandmother’s epigenetic expressions are on my brain during the holidays. I crave

cigarettes the most during this time. Every superficial interaction after thanksgiving is unsavory, and insufferable to the point that it weighs heavy on my heart. Despite how drained and emptied these yearly events were, I ate my feelings through them. Latinas like myself have a penchant for the fantastic (this literal Encanto) that permeates our culture. Yet, self-love has always been complicated and foreign to me. We pay the highest price for every failed policy yet remain the backbone of all forms of reproduction and survival. Especially as an Afro-Latina, I am in a constant state of recovery and rediscovery from growing up with racial blindspots that weathered my self-worth. Whether it was the clothes pins on my nose or the hot spoons put on my bare budding breasts to slow down my puberty, my body became the source of all my troubles.

My grandmother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's after a short stay at Bellevue public hospital in the early eighties. It accelerated her cognitive decline. When she returned, she was incomplete and unable to communicate. I have no medical records to corroborate what happened to her, only vivid memories. I cannot let her fade. How I remember her has more to do with who and what she represents in my story. My grandfather affectionately called her Conrada. However, her first name on her legal papers appears as "Librada." This discrepancy between identity and documentation is widespread in a culture that depends more on oral histories than all other forms of evidence (archives.). While my grandmother has no death certificate to document her existence on this earth, she has me. She lives in my genes.

Revisions and Fate

Can genes be unreliable? Her name was never "just a name." She connects me to a past I was denied. Anti-blackness acculturates immigrants into an American life filled with contradictions. We even uphold our own Jim Crow beliefs. We are juntos pero no revueltos (together but not mixed.) What I know about her life is loosely based on the obvious. She was my father's mother, black, tall, smoked cigarettes, and a single mother when she met my grandfather. I also know she was instrumental in my grandfather's recovery from alcoholism. Her arroz con pollo (rice with chicken) was famous on the island of Puerto Rico. She was a queen with no crown, ruling a valley of thorns.

When I started teaching Puerto Rican studies in my thirties, I finally found a window into my history that focused on my beautiful blackness in the context of latinidad and all its white supremacist ways. It prompted me to take a DNA test that promised a more exact provenance but only served to widen gaps within my muddled genealogy. I know that not all genes express themselves, but I gave new scrutiny to the ones that did and how they marked my life. This is a story about how I discovered I was "afro-Latina" and what this means in the context of history and culture that teaches us to hate ourselves. We have to be pro-black. As the great late Whitney sang, "Learning to love yourself is the greatest love of all."

Librada translates into "the freed one." This name was intentional. My grandmother was the first one born free in her family. Her mother, my great-grandmother, whose name I do not know,

wanted to put this truth on the record. Conrada owned her body, dreams, and fate. This ownership took her from the sugar cane fields of Puerto Rico to the vertical kingdoms owned by New York City's Housing Authority on the Lower East Side. I am telling her story in one generation because it is inextricable from me becoming the first in my family to reap the benefits of her sacrifices. I am because she was. This herstory offers a path forward to heal from the racial traumas inflicted by colonialism, slavery, imperialism, immigration, assimilation, and the holidays.

Despite the elasticity of memory, a topic that has been a focus of my teaching and research interests, forgetting can be violent and harmful too. In this age of reboots and comebacks, some truths are better left unrevised. For example, the state of Texas sought to replace "slavery" in American history textbooks with the term "forced migration." This institutional attempt to draw out a false equivalency between these experiences was a not-so-gentle reminder that America remains anti-black and uneducated. This willful ignorance is dangerous and criminal. Within the Latinx community, being racist was one more way to assimilate into the dominant culture upon migrating up North. This exacerbated the existing bias and discrimination that continue to chip away at your self-esteem when you are coronated "la Negrita" (the black one.)

When pregnant with my son, I wrapped around my belly headphones that blared Bob Marley into my womb. Aside from the fact that I knew he came from very anxious parents, we wanted his first sounds to be empowering, soothing, and authentic to his roots. He needed to learn about himself, even that part he could not see or that we think is dormant. Our son needed to know about 'son,' the African-folkloric beat that structures the popular montuno. This rhythmic pattern is present in our music from Tango, Salsa, Cumbia, and Reggaeton. If music were our genetic sequence, we would not exist without this beat. Though we struggled to stay in sync with our hearts, we got rhythm. We got soul. We march. We dance. We groove. We resist and live to the beat of these drums. As the son of an Anthropologist, I needed my son to know and remember that even when you cannot see "us," you will hear us...and we will move you (and the world) to its knees if necessary. This is just another way to reframe how we exist in everything good. Black was, is, and will always be beautiful...even when our family can "act" ugly about it.