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### The Blackness “Remover”

It’s fascinating how memory can be triggered through a smell, an experience, an action, or by simply entering a room. In this case, one experience I had didn't just bring up a memory, it surfaced my life story. In the month of February of my junior year in high school, the club Lead for Diversity and I were planning something very special for the Black history month celebration. In one late after-school session, we were brainstorming on what to do for the event in that particular year. A sketch? A poem reading? A dance from the African dance club? Many ideas circled the air around us at that moment. I reflected on what I had gone through in my life experiences of being an Afro-Latina from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. Knowing that Afro-Latinos are underrepresented in the Hispanic community, I suggested an idea to bring awareness and a different perspective of black culture. A full force of chuckles arose when I spoke the last words. One of my friends responded snarkily, saying, “You guys already have Hispanic heritage month and it’s longer than our month.” Another girl shouted, “Hispanics aren’t even Black to begin with.” I want people to accept multicultural ideologies; we’re all intertwined one way or another. Through my story many will open their eyes to the truth of their roots and they won’t deny it or single other people out.

My Blackness was taken away from me yet again when they commented, dredging up memories of how I did not embrace my race during my upbringing in my Hispanic household. I always wondered why African Americans in the United States believed this misconception,

because I looked exactly like them. According to the book *Black Behind The Ears* by Ginetta E.B Candelario, “At various moments throughout the nineteenth century... U.S government agents and North American capitalists colluded with this Dominican Elite in presenting the Dominican Republic as the most ‘Hispanic, Catholic, and White’ of (Latin) American nations against the Haiti other” (Candelario 37). This belief blindsided the colored population of the Dominican Republic because the elite made them believe that they were a different race because they were colonized by Spain, which automatically made them superior to Haitians and other Black populations in the U.S. This false image in our society caused other people of African descent to reject us Afro-Latinos because we were all ingrained with the belief that we were actually superior when in reality our ancestry proved we are just alike. How can we break these misconceptions in our society if the behavior of the Hispanic community fuels them by suppressing their Blackness? I finally understand why the beliefs of the Hispanic and Black community bind me between the bars of double standards: my Spanish roots prevent me from being Black, and my Blackness prevents me from being accepted as an Hispanic.

Being caught between worlds led me to have a routine of assimilating into white-washed values throughout my childhood because I couldn’t fix my skin, but I had the ability to “fix” my hair. I heard her voice clearly right there in that club meeting saying, “It’s time.” Mami warned me that it was time to get my hair straight again soon. She loomed over me and looked at my hair like the way in storybooks a hungry giant looks down from the sky searching for something that it's eager to destroy. Mami had a small bowl filled with a pink foul smelling creamy substance in her right hand and a comb on the other. My nose stayed at its wrinkly scrunched up state just being close to it. It was time to relax my hair again. I sighed, because even though I wanted to stand up to her at the time, I was too young of an age to do so. I touched my roots feeling the

new growth of spirals and it was an unknown feeling. I didn't know I was capable of having curls before; I just thought that my mom did a wretched smelling treatment once in a while. I squatted down sitting between her legs as she roughly combed through my tangled hair that she complained was “nappy.” I flinched and lifted my shoulders as soon as I felt that cold creamy comb slither through my hair.

I'd gotten used to the process but something felt worse then. It always tingled my scalp after applying, but at that moment, I felt that my scalp was on fire. I immediately ran to the shower to rinse it off. As I was rinsing the relaxer out, I ran my fingers through my roots again, but this time I just felt flat stringy pieces of hay-like hair. There were no spirals, coils, or curls, just the burnt remains of a chemical hair fire. I just felt a glimpse of disappointment that instant, but it all went away when the hair styling finished because I looked into the mirror with my renewed straight hair and said to myself “this is what it means to be beautiful.” In the podcast “Afro-Latinas and ‘Good’ Hair” by Latinos USA encounters the story of Carolina Contreras as she recalls that,

Growing up in the Dominican Republic, Contreras started getting her naturally curly hair relaxed every 2 months at the age of 7. She says her family saw the painful process as an important part of their personal hygiene. “I have 3 sisters and I learned how to relax hair,” says Contreras, “I inflicted so much pain on them and I feel like it’s something that I’m still healing from”(Latinos U.S.A).

Her story is so identical to mine that I wondered how many girls followed the routine of assimilation at the age of seven? I guess seven is such a perfect number that it’s the age used to “perfect” African hair. Even if I saw myself with straight hair at the age seven, I knew that my maroon complexion still made me stand out from others.

In a typical Hispanic household, it's always a no curl and no calling each other black zone, even if you had either quality. This typical custom can even be traced back to the beginning of the independence of the Dominican Republic. According to Ginetta Candelario, "Juan Pablo Duarte fashioned a liberal vision of the emergent Dominican nation-state that integrated the 'colored' masses while differentiating them from Haitians by extolling their Hispanicity" (Candelario 37). The ruling group at that time did accept Dominicans as dark colored but singled them out from Haitians by using the fact that Dominicans speak Spanish and have a connection to Spain to make it a breaking factor that they are distinctive and even better than Haitians. They even named the colored "*Indios* or Indians... that of being a colored nation ruled by a quasi-white elite that did not want to accept the reality of its color and the history of their race" (Candelario qtd Pons 38). Since the beginning of the Dominican Republic, citizens with their African roots couldn't accept their blackness or relation to Haiti. My mother's rejection of African culture created a household that perpetuated the same self-hatred that our ancestors were infused with. Generations of people were wrongfully educated because of this misguided notion.

I broke free at the age of thirteen years old because luckily my adult sister, Francheska, at that time decided to become natural. It was my turn to take care of my hair and this time it was without any damage, chemicals, heat, or the pending doom of relaxers. I decided it was time to embrace who I really was and accept that I was associated with more than one culture. One day when I was showering, the steam-filled water aired out of my body. It was time to wash my hair that morning. I grabbed my black bottled shampoo and filled the center of the wrinkly palm of my hand with a dab of it and hoped for the best. With my sudsy scalp, I felt a sense of freedom because my image of beauty couldn't be controlled anymore. To my amazement while caressing

my hair, coils formed and it was the first sign of life since the last “fire.” A big grin grew on my face. As I stepped out of the tub to get a better look, my hair shrunk to half its length, but I still saw the stringy hair pieces latched onto my newly grown hair and that’s when I knew I had to work harder. I knew I had to make a difference and cut off every piece of damaged hair that connected me to that traumatizing past. As described in the podcast *Latinos U.S.A.*, “in the Afro-Latino community, there really haven’t been that many cultural icons sporting natural hair. That’s where Carolina Contreras comes in. She created the blog *Miss Rizos* to connect with other Afro-Latinas who wanted to give their natural hair a try.” Just like Carolina Contreras inspired others to become natural, that’s what my sister and I did because our roots couldn’t be denied anymore. If African hair was the type of hair God gave me, I had to work harder to become the image he first intended me to be, my Black self, and I had to show others the same thing.

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Months passed and the new hair came with more struggles including my mother’s constant criticism. “*Y ese pajon?*”, “what’s that bush?” she cornered me while pointing at my hair. I decided that I wanted to wear a curly puff to church but it was too much for her. Apparently, curls are too messy to be worn in church, a woman always has to be sleek and presentable and there was nothing sleek about my curls.

“Ruthy, you are going to look so ridiculous with that hair out, put it in a bun please, a Christian should never be presented like that.”

“Presented like what?” I rebutted. “The hair I have now is my... NATURAL... CURLY...HAIR... that God gave me what’s the sin in that?”

“You look like those *Morenos* (Blacks) that always have their hair all over the place,” she remarked.

In that instance when she broke the atmosphere with those sharp words, all I could do was just stare at her. How can she be this racist? Can't she see she's not white herself? I've always questioned whether my mother really has looked into a mirror to see her dark complexion that is spread throughout her body, seeping in through her veins. No matter how many monthly relaxers she does on herself, it doesn't automatically make her whiter. In the book *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move: Identities on the Island and in the United States*, Jorge Duany recollects the time when he asked a group of dark-skinned Puerto Ricans what their race was. “What races do you consider yourself to belong to?” Responses to this seemingly innocuous question ranged from embarrassment and amazement to ambivalence and silence: many informants simply shrugged their shoulders and pointed to their arms, as if their skin color were so obvious that it couldn't be verbalized” (Duany 236). The subject of race that Duany encounters is something that many Hispanics don't know about, they might recognize their dark skin color but signal themselves out to a different racial group that's not black. I have experienced this exact response when discussing with my mother what her race was. She would just say “I'm Puerto Rican” and that was that. This response shows that this perplexed feeling towards race is not limited to a particular group but it's spread across the Latino community.

This is what this generation of Afro-Latinas suffer through. Constant orders on how to appear “presentable” (Not Black) taking away continuously the air we breathe along with our freedom. I just want to show how much damage words can do especially when they come from our own mothers. Can't they see that even if they don't embrace their blackness there's evidence that shows that's what they still are? Once our community realizes that being Hispanic is not a

race but our ethnicity, realizations can be made. Just as African Americans have faced injustices and still do in this country of the United States, we do as well. No matter how much you suppress your color it still glows in the eyes of others, the way that flames glow around the dark smooth embers of a fire. This is our mark, our identity, how long can one reject it? I've spent years trying to unravel the misconceptions my grandmother had embedded in my mother's mind, and there have been successes and failures. I just want to peel off the blinds that bind our mothers' eyes, but I can't do it alone. Together we can shed light on this issue and break the assimilation and white washing that has left the Hispanic community in their ignorance. Are you willing to take a step forward into the world of racial and cultural awareness?

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