

LIN-MANUEL MIRANDA

LINDA SARSOOR

LAURIE HERNANDEZ

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PADMA LAKSHMI

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RAVI V. PATEL

UZO ADUBA

DIANE GUERRERO

INSTANT *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

AMERICAN LIKE ME

REFLECTIONS ON LIFE BETWEEN CULTURES

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INTRODUCTION

America Ferrera

MY NAME IS AMERICA, and at nine years old, I hate my name. Not because I hate my country. No! In fact, at nine years old I love my country! When the national anthem plays, I cry into my Dodger Dog thinking about how lucky I am to live in the only nation in the world where someone like me will grow up to be the first girl to play for the Dodgers. I do hate the Pledge of Allegiance though, not because I don't believe in it. I believe every word of it, especially the "liberty and justice for all" part. I believe the Pledge of Allegiance to my bones. And at nine years old I feel honored, self-righteous, and quite smug that I was smart enough to be born in the one country in the whole world that stands for the things my little heart knows to be true: we are all the same and deserve an equal shot at life, liberty, and a place on the Dodgers' batting lineup. I hate the Pledge of Allegiance because for as long as I can remember there is always at least one smart-ass in class who turns to face me with his hand over his heart to recite it, you know, 'cause my name is America.

The first day of every school year is always hell. Teachers always make a big deal of my name in front of the whole class. They either think it's a typo

and want to know what my real name is, or they want to know how to pronounce it (ridiculous, I know), and they always follow up with “America? You mean, like the country?”

“Yes, like the country,” I say, with my eyes on my desk and my skin burning hot.

This is how I come to hate American History. Not because I don’t love saying “the battle of Ticonderoga” (obviously, I do). But because no teacher has ever been more excited to meet a student named America than my first American History teacher.

He has been waiting all day to meet me, and so to commemorate this moment he wheels me around the classroom on his fancy teacher’s chair, belting “God Bless America” while a small part of me dies inside.

His face reminds me of Eeyore’s when I say, “Actually, I like to go by my middle name, Georgina, so could you please make a note of it on the roster-paper-thingy? Thanks.” When he has the gall to ask me why, I say something like “It’s just easier,” instead of what I really want to say, which is “Because people like you make my name unbearably embarrassing! And another thing, I’m not actually named after the United States of America! I’m named after my mother, who was born and raised in Honduras. That’s in *Central America*, in case you’ve never heard of it, also part of the Americas. And if you must know, she was born on an obscure holiday called *Día de Las Américas*, which not even people in Honduras know that much about, but my grandfather was a librarian and knew weird shit like that. This is a holiday that celebrates *all* the Americas—South, Central, and North, not just the United States of. So, my name has nothing to do with amber waves of grain, purple mountains, the US flag, or your very narrow definition of the word. It’s my mother’s name and a word that also relates to other countries, like the one my parents come from. So please refrain from limiting the meaning of my name, erasing

my family's history, and making me the least popular kid in class all in one fell swoop. Just call me Georgina, please?" I don't say any of this, to anyone. Ever. It would be impolite, or worse, unpatriotic. And as I said before, I love my country in the most unironic and earnest way anyone can love anything.

I know just how lucky I am to be an American because every time I complain about too much homework my mother reminds me that in Honduras I'd be working to help support the family, so I'd better thank my lucky stars that she sacrificed everything she had so that my *malcriada** self and my five siblings could one day have too much homework. It's a perspective that has me embracing Little League baseball, the Fourth of July, and ABC's TGIF lineup of wholesome American family comedies with more fervor than most. I feel more American than Balki Bartokomous, the Winslows, and the Tanners combined, and I believe that one day I will grow up to look like Aunt Becky from *Full House* and then Frank Sinatra will ask me to rerecord "I've Got You Under My Skin" as a duet with him because I know all the words better than my siblings.

So I let it slide when people respond to my name with "Wow, your parents must be very patriotic. Where are they ACTUALLY from?" This is a refrain I hear often and one that will take me a couple of decades to unpack for all its implications and assumptions. I learn to go along with the casting of my parents as the poor immigrants yearning to breathe free, who made it to the promised land and decided to name their American daughter after the soil that would fulfill all their dreams. After all, it is a beautiful and endearing tale. Only later do I learn to bristle and push back against this incomplete narrative. A narrative which manages to erase my parents' history, true

*spoiled

experience, and claim to the name America long before they had a US-born child. Never mind that they'd already had a US-born child before me and named her Jennifer. Which is both a much more American name than mine and one I would kill to have on the first day of every school year.

But I am nine and I do not think too much about narratives and my parents' erased history. I think about my friends and getting to go over to their houses, where we play their brand-new Mall Madness board game and search Disney movies for the secret sex images you can see if you know where to pause the VHS. I think about how cool it would be if my mom ever let me actually sleep over at a friend's house and how that will never happen because she's convinced all sleepovers end in murder and sexual assault. I think about how cool it would be if my friend was allowed to sleep over at my house and how that will never happen because her parents, who are also immigrants, happen to agree with my mom about the murder and sexual assault thing. I think about how when I'm in junior high and look more like Aunt Becky I will have a locker and decorate it with mirrors and magazine cutouts like all the kids on *Saved By the Bell*. I think about how I will grow up to be a professional baseball player, actress, civil rights lawyer, and veterinarian who will let her kids go to sleepovers. And I think about boys. Well, I think about one boy. A lot.

Aside from having a challenging name, I feel just like all my friends. Even all the things that make my home life different from my friends' home lives seem to unify our experience. Sure, my parents speak Spanish at home, but Grace's parents speak Chinese, and Muhammad's parents speak another distinct language that I can't name, and Brienne's Filipino parents speak something that sounds a little like Spanish but isn't. My favorite part of going over to my friends' houses is hearing their parents yell at them in different languages and eating whatever their family considers an after-school snack.

Brianne and I consume an alarming amount of white rice soaked in soy sauce while we stretch in the dark, listening to her mom's Mariah Carey album.

Speaking Spanish at home, my mom's Saturday-morning-salsa-dance party in the kitchen, and eating tamales alongside apple pie at Christmas do not in any way seem at odds with my American identity. In fact, having parents with deep ties to another country and culture feels part and parcel of being an American. I am nine and I truly belong. By the time I reach ten, this all begins to change.

The first person to make me feel like a stranger in a strange land is the first boy I ever love. I am six years old when I fall in love with Sam Spencer.* And the full agony of loving him is bursting out of my tiny bones and pulsing through my tiny veins. He has very silky, soft brown hair that is almost entirely short except for the rat's tail that dangles down the nape of his neck. I sit behind Sam on the magic carpet at reading time, and I try to be sneaky about braiding his rat's tail. Whether we are making pizza bagels or building castles in the sandbox, all my little six-year-old mind can focus on during Ms. Wildestein's kindergarten class is braiding Sam's hair, talking to Sam, and sitting near Sam. With every passing year, new boys and girls are added to our class but my heart remains fully devoted to worshipping at the altar of Sam Spencer. By the time we are in third grade, I am aware that other girls also think Sam is one of the cute boys, but I am secure in the deep foundation we have built starting back in kindergarten. When I sit next to him at lunch, he does not tell me to go away, and that has to mean something. I don't need to tell him I love him or need him to declare his love for me. I just need to sit next to him on the reading carpet and stand as close to him in the lunch line as possible. I'm fulfilled with making him

*Name changed to avoid awkward Facebook interactions.

laugh from across the classroom by taking my long brown hair and turning it into a mustache and beard on my face. I think of him as mine, because my heart says he is. What more proof do I need? I never imagine that our relationship will ever need to be spoken about.

One day, we, the students of Ms. Kalicheck's third-grade class, are lined up after lunch. I am locking arms and stifling giggles with my girlfriends Jenna and Alison when Sam taps my shoulder. This is unusual. He is not often the initiator of our conversations. I turn to him very attentively and wait. He opens his mouth to say, "I like Jenna more than you. Do you want to know why?"

The masochist in me answers too quickly. "Why?"

He says, "Because she has blue eyes and lighter skin than you."

He turns around and rejoins his group of boys. I stand there frozen. Ice-cold. Learning how fast a heart beats the first time it is crushed by love, how quietly skin crawls the first time its color is mentioned, how wet eyes become when they realize for the first time that they are, in fact, not blue, like Jenna's, the color Sam likes better. I stand there wishing to return to the moment before Sam taps me on the shoulder, before I learn that it would be better to not look like me, at least if you want the first and only boy you've ever loved to love you back. Which I do.

Shortly after, I learn that it is also better not to look like me if you don't want to be singled out at school and questioned about your parents' immigration status.

It is 1994, and California just voted in favor of Proposition 187—an initiative to deny undocumented immigrants and their children public services, including access to public education for kindergarten through university. There is fear inside the immigrant community that their children will be harassed and questioned in their schools.

I am in third grade and do not know or understand any of this. Nonetheless, my mother pulls me aside one day when she is dropping me off at school and says, "You are American. You were born in this country. If anyone asks you questions, you don't need to feel ashamed or embarrassed. You've done nothing wrong."

I am so confused, but I take my mom's advice and feel the need to spread it. I mention to some of my friends that people might be asking them questions and that they shouldn't be afraid, they've done nothing wrong. They stare blankly at me and then go about their hopscotch. None of my friends seem to know what I'm talking about. I have the sneaking suspicion that their parents did not pull them aside to have the same talk. While I am grilling some more friends on the playground about whether they've been questioned about being American, a big kid I don't know interrupts me to say, "They don't care about *us*. It's just Americans like you." My mind short-circuits. Americans like me? What does that mean? I wasn't aware there were different kinds of Americans. American is American is American. All created equal. Liberty and justice for all. I manage to say something to the big kid, like, "Oh," and I never talk about it at school again. I never talk about it at home either. But I do spend some time wondering what the big kid means by "Americans like you."

Is it about my name? Is it the salsa music at home? Maybe this has something to do with my skin and my non-blue eyes again. That's ridiculous, we don't separate Americans by the color of their eyes. Do we? Are there different words for different kinds of Americans? Am I half American? Kind of American? Other American? I am nine years old, and suddenly I am wondering what do I call an American like me.

As I grew older, I got better at recognizing when someone was trying to tell me that I was not the norm and that I didn't really belong in a given place, which seemed to be just about everywhere. The Latina clique would call me "that wannabe white girl who hangs out with drama kids and does lame Shakespeare competitions" to my face because they thought I didn't understand Spanish. I let them believe that so I could keep eavesdropping. My AP English teacher would excuse my tardies because she assumed I was bused into the neighborhood like most of the other Latino kids. "Bus late again?" she would ask. I'd drop my eyes, take my seat quickly, and never really confirm or deny. The truth was I lived a few blocks from school but hated waking up early. Her assumption that a kid who looked like me didn't really belong in this neighborhood bought me a few extra hours of sleep a week, so I let that one slide.

I may have been a whitewashed gringa in Latino groups, but I was downright exotic to my white friends; especially to their parents, who were always treating me like a rare and precious zoo animal. They'd ooh and aah at my mother's courageous immigrant story, then wish out loud that my hardworking spirit would rub off on their children. They particularly loved having me around when they needed something translated to their housekeepers or gardeners. Seeing such a smart and articulate brown girl was like seeing a dog talk. They were easily impressed.

Even at home I walked a fine line between assimilating to American ways enough to make my mom proud, and adapting in ways that would disgrace and shame her. For instance, bringing home straight-A report cards was a good thing, but attending late-night coed study groups to achieve said A's was shameful and likely to turn me into a drug-addicted, pregnant high school dropout. Decoding people's expectations and then shape-shifting into the version of myself that pleased them the most became my superpower.

Shape-shifting was a useful skill to possess as an aspiring actress, but it

didn't stop people from labeling and categorizing me. In fact, when people found out that my dream was to become an actress, they made it their duty to remind me of who I was . . . and who I wasn't.

Family members would say to me bluntly, the way families are prone to do, "Actresses don't look like you. You're brown, short, and chubby." Classmates would say, "You have to know someone to catch a break, and you don't have any connections to the industry." Teachers, hoping they could steer me toward a more sensible career path, would simply ask, "What's your backup plan?" But I wasn't sensible, I was an American, damn it! An American who wholeheartedly believed what she'd been taught her entire life: that in America no dream is impossible, even if you are a short, chubby Latina girl with no money or connections! What was wrong with these people? Didn't they know that in America fortune favored the dreamer willing to work hard? I mostly felt sorry for them and their lack of imagination, and went about working to make my dream come true.

I acted wherever anyone would let me—in school, the local community college, and free community theater programs. I spent one summer riding three buses to get from the Valley to Hollywood in order to play Fagan's Boy #4 in a community theater production of *Oliver!* I babysat kids, looked after my neighbors' pet pig, and waitressed to pay for acting workshops. It was impossible to know which opportunity would open a door to my career, especially in LA, "where there are so many scams designed to take aspiring actors' money," as my mom liked to warn me. But I threw myself and my hard-earned cash at every single opportunity that came my way. And to everyone's surprise, including my own, a few doors started opening for me when I was still only sixteen years old.

To nobody's surprise, except my own, Hollywood was not as ready for me as I imagined. I thought the hard part was getting through the door, and I

was sure that as soon as Hollywood saw me in all my glory, passion, and optimism they'd roll out the red carpet and alert the press: America's new sweetheart has arrived!

Somehow the boxes I resisted being shoved into during my childhood were even tighter and more suffocating in Hollywood. The first audition I ever went on, the casting director asked me if I could "try to sound more Latina."

"Ummmm . . . do you want me to do it in Spanish?" I asked.

"No, no, do it in English, just sound like you're a Latina," she clarified.

"But I am Latina, soooo isn't this what a Latina sounds like?" I asked.

"Okay, never mind, honey. Thanks for coming in, byeeee," she said as she waved me toward the door. It took me far too long to understand she wanted me to speak in broken English. And instead of being sad that I didn't get the part, I was angry that she thought sounding Latina meant not speaking English well.

Even after I'd had some great successes with *Gotta Kick It Up!* and *Real Women Have Curves*, two movies that allowed me to play Latina characters who were not just broad stereotypes, I was constantly coming up against people who thought it was silly for me to expect to play a dynamic and complex Latina who was the main character in her own story. Even some of the people I paid to represent me did not believe in my vision for my career. When I was eighteen I told my manager that I was sick of going out for the role of Pregnant Chola #2 or the sassy Latina sidekick. I wanted him to send me out for roles that were grounded and well written. I wanted to play characters who were everyday people with relatable hopes and dreams. His response was "Someone needs to tell that girl she has unrealistic expectations of what she can accomplish in this industry." And the saddest part was that he wasn't wrong. I mean, I fired him, but he wasn't wrong.

After hustling for years to break down doors and working my hardest to prove my talent and grit, I had to admit that the stories I wanted to tell and the characters I wanted to play were virtually invisible from our cultural narrative. I have been supremely lucky to get the opportunities to play some wonderful, authentic, and deep characters, but if I look around at the vast image being painted about the American experience, I see that there are so many of us missing from the picture. Our experiences, our humor, our dramas, our hopes, our dreams, and our families are almost nonexistent in the stories that surround us. And while growing up that way might turn us into badass-Jedi-master-translators-of-culture who are able to imagine ourselves as heroes, villains, or ThunderCats, we deserve to be truly reflected in the world around us.

For seventeen years, I've had a front-row seat to the impact that representation has on people's lives. I've met people who've told me that *Real Women Have Curves* was the first time they ever saw themselves on-screen, and that my character, Ana, inspired them to pursue college, or to stop hating their bodies, or to mend broken relationships with a parent.

I've heard from countless young people who came out to their parents while watching *Ugly Betty*, and young girls who decided they could, in fact, become writers because Betty was a writer.

And, most common, I hear from all kinds of people that they gain confidence and self-esteem when they see themselves in the culture—a brown girl, a brace-face, an aspiring journalist, an underdog, an undocumented father, a gay teen accepted by his family, a gay adult rejected by his mother, a store clerk getting through the day with dignity and a sense of humor, a sisterhood of girls who love and support one another, and, yes, share magical pants—simple portrayals that say in resounding ways, you are here, you are seen, your experience matters.

I believe that culture shapes identity and defines possibility; that it teaches us who we are, what to believe, and how to dream. We should all be able to look at the world around us and see a reflection of our true lived experiences. Until then, the American story will never be complete.

This compilation of personal stories, written by people I deeply admire and fangirl out about on the regular, is my best answer to my nine-year-old self. My plan is to find a time machine and plop this book in her hands at the very moment she first thinks, *What do I call an American like me?* I'll tell her to read these stories and to know that she is not alone in her search for identity. That her feelings of being too much of this, or not enough of that, are shared by so many other creative, talented, vibrant, hardworking young people who will all grow up to transcend labels and become awesome people who do kick-ass things like win Olympic medals, and run for office, and write musicals, and make history that changes the country and the world. And it won't matter what people *called* them, because the missing pieces of the American narrative will be filled in and rewritten and redefined by Americans like her, Americans like you.

Americans like me.

PHOTO BY PUANANI CRAVALHO



Auli'i Cravalho is a singer and actress. She is of proud Hawaiian, Puerto Rican, Portuguese, Chinese, and Irish heritage.

Auli'i Cravalho

THIS IS WHAT I remember from my childhood.

I always woke with the sun in my eyes. The warmth and light seeping through the panels. I grew up in my mama and papa's plantation home in Hawai'i where its single-wall construction will do that: allow you to wake with the sun. I grew up in the same house my father did; Mama and Papa were my paternal grandparents. I slept on top of my mama's quilts, in my papa's worn shirts, and left the windows with their ripped screens wide-open. The tangerine trees outside were warm, bright orange and robust, fruit I held with two hands pinching the skin, tasting it through my nose like my papa taught me. Running across the lanai, across the front yard, across the driveway. Past the hibiscus hedge, through the macadamia nut grove, down, down, knowing every dip in the concrete, jumping over, skirting around the memories of skinned knees in the past. Barefoot and sweaty. Face flushed with warmth, cheeks in a constant blush. I ran hot those days. Hot with curiosity and love and adventure. I begged for stories of the past and barreled over the worry of rudeness or sensitivity to get them. I read until my head was full of adventure,

and listened to my papa tell me stories about Puerto Rico and the humid tropical nights until my heart ached for its waters. The floor of the living room was my stage, and I spent hours reenacting fact and fiction; kissing mirrors and dancing to seventies radio. I knew exactly who I was. *Exactly who I was*, at that early age of five.

By the time I hit double digits, I felt as though I knew everything about everything. And thirteen-year-old me? Forget about it. I've come to learn that "*who I am*" is not exact at all. That each piece of my character was spontaneously created years ago, and nurtured since. Culture, held together with glitter glue and adorned with googly eyes. Genealogy, forever branching with love from each and every family member. "Growing up" taught me that my dreams were supposed to fit in standard-size envelopes. But Five-Year-Old Me covers the page with Dora stickers and hand-delivers it instead. Sixteen-Year-Old Me types my aspirations in Times New Roman and writes in MLA format but allows Seven-Year-Old Me to go in with a pen to add hearts over the *i*'s in my name. And yes, my college essay is going to be totally dope and possibly covered in stickers. But it will only be so because I keep looking back to that bright-eyed kid and asking her, "Does this feel right?" And in the future, when I look back—even just five years from now—will I be able to see my own growth?

Take sixth grade. Ten-Year-Old Me had a show-and-tell, and I was so proud to talk about my family. I shared stories that had been told by my paternal grandparents. How my mama was full Portuguese, and my papa was all Puerto Rican. How just before Mama passed, my father told me she never wanted to stop holding me, even though her Parkinson's disease was so bad she could hardly walk. I told them how I used to dance and constantly step on my papa's tired feet because all I wanted to do was twirl whenever I heard a mariachi band play on the old cassette tapes. I shared everything I remem-

bered about them with the class: their food, their cultures, their love. I shared about my maternal grandparents too, how my mother was the seventh child of seven children, how family get-togethers meant three-day-long parties and sleepovers filled with music and an endless supply of food. I learned how to weave flowers into *hakus* (flower crowns) and how to fish like the best of them (the best I could anyway).

Each of my grandparents had passed by the time I was able to share their stories with my class. In an unselfishly selfish way I talked about them because I wanted my show-and-tell to be radically different from the rest of the class. I didn't have a hamster or a goldfish. I didn't want to share my favorite book or a favorite fictional superhero. I wanted to talk about the heroes of my life. I talked and talked, and probably took up more than my allotted time of five minutes, but no one could stop me. I had pride coursing through my veins. And I remember how I glowed with it when I sat down at my table, until my classmate said, "You're too white."

Now let me clarify—this classmate wasn't being rude. Sure it was unfiltered, but she was merely stating a fact. I was fairer than most of my classmates, though all of us were of mixed descent. Let me also clarify that I am only able to say these thoughts as Seventeen-Year-Old Me. But Sixth-Grade Me turned to this chick. Paused. And said: "What?"

My mind connecting my heart's emotion to this week's vocabulary word: *confused*. "You're too white to be Mexican," she continued. As if my ethnicity was just beyond my understanding.

"I'm not Mexican," I started. "I'm Puerto—"

"Yeah that," she interrupted. "You're definitely not that."

I paused again. "Okay . . ." I smiled tightly, trying to laugh it off.

"I'm just saying," she continued. "If you're going to say you're Port-o-Whatever you should at least look it."

She proceeded to barrel into a more in-depth explanation before I rushed to explain “I’m Puerto Rican, Portuguese, Hawaiian, Chinese, and Irish.” And suddenly her eyes lit up. *Finally*, I thought, *she gets it*.

“Oh! Well, then you just look, like, ‘super Irish.’” Shrugging her shoulders, with her two fingers dancing into an air quote. Yet another awkward pause.

“What the heck does ‘super Irish’ look like?” I asked, my eyes narrowed into slits as I aggressively quoted her and her air quotes.

“Well . . . Um. You. I guess.” She had finally stopped herself, looking around, realizing the surrounding tables were now her audience. When my stare was her only response, she made her final remark. “You just . . . don’t look like anything you said you are.”

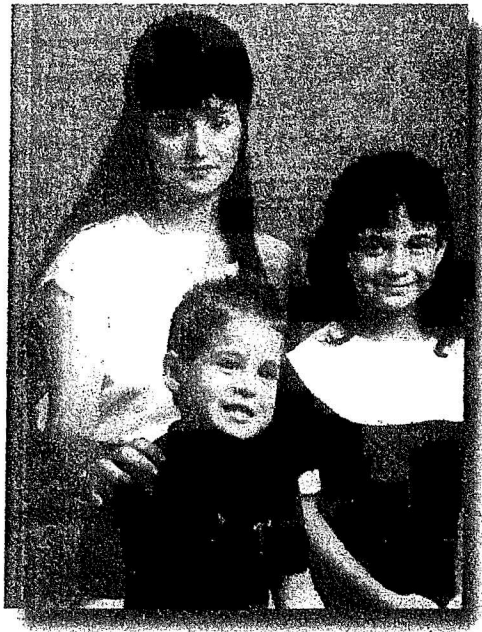
I didn’t say anything after that. I turned away from the tables of searching eyes and hid my flaming cheeks with my hair, my lips pressed tightly together to keep my eyes from revealing my hurt. My mind spinning a hundred miles an hour trying to think up a retort, something, anything, that would make her eat her words. Something about how I grew up in a Puerto Rican–Portuguese–Hawaiian household, and that I knew how to say “you’re stupid” in all three languages (*I didn’t* really). How I could stick it to her by knowing dozens of stories of Puerto Rico and that I could eat a whole bowl of poi if it was left in front of me (*Well . . . not the whole bowl*). And if she wanted to keep arguing with me, I would argue that she was mixed too! She was Hawaiian like me, Portuguese like me, simply darker-skinned in all her glory. But if all she saw was my “whiteness”? If all else failed? We could take it out at recess! And then she’d *really* see my Latin temper!! (*Now that I could do.*)

Instead, I stayed silent. My pride ripped from me. Wishing my culture would show itself. Wishing my mama and papa looked a little more like me. Or me a little more like them. My easily tanned skin, not quite as light as my

mama's, but too light when compared to my Hawaiian mother's side of the family. Soft curly hair that matched my papa's, but with baby hairs that refuse to grow, so unlike the long flowing locks of my Hawaiian cousins. It took a long time of defending myself to realize I didn't have to. Not to anybody. I am who I am. I am what I am. I grew up as a loving Hawaiian Portuguese, running around barefoot and climbing trees, eating fried plantains until I fell asleep still chewing. I grew up in the land of my Pacific ancestors and could recite their folklore before I could even think of writing it down. I celebrate Chinese New Year eating noodles for a long life, and Saint Patrick's Day cooking corned beef and cabbage, leaving our household smelling it for days. I'm mixed. And you can bet damn well I'm proud of it.

And if I could go back (because you know I would if I could) . . . If I could sit where I sat, argue the entire sixth-grade conversation again, I would finally have the perfect retort that would make my family proud, and Me-of-All-Ages proud too. She'd say, "You just . . . don't look like anything you said you are." I'd notice she was as embarrassed as I was. I'd take in her own mixed features, so different from mine, and everyone else's. I'd take a breath, look her right in the eye, smile, and say, "Well, then, I guess I just look like me." And I'd sit again in pride.

Carmen Carrera



Carmen Carrera is a mother, an actor, a model, an advocate, and one of the world's highest-profile transgender women. As an actor, she has appeared in HBO's *Outpost*, *Jane the Virgin*, *The Bold and the Beautiful*, and *Ricki and the Flash*. Carmen is a dedicated international human rights and HIV prevention advocate. She has lectured around the world and works with organizations like SUEÑOS LGBT to fight discrimination against young transgender women.

A Letter to My Ten-Year-Old Self

Dear Chris,

You are ten years old, and I thought I would write you a letter because there are some things I want you to know. First, you are beautiful. Right now, exactly the way you are. In the future you are beautiful too. In fact, you will grow up to become a strong, proud, beautiful Latinx woman. A model and an activist. Yes, you!

Right now I'm guessing you are finding this hard to believe. You want to feel comfortable in your skin, but you are surrounded by beautiful women who see you as their little boy. You hide your femininity even though femininity is everywhere—within you and constantly surrounding you. Literally radiating from these four beautiful Peruvian angels: your great-grandmother (La Mama), grandmother (Grandma Chela), mother (Mommie), and sister (Arisa). It is only a matter of time before they fully see inside your heart and soul.

You are just like them. Strong. They came to this country with just their religious beliefs and the strength to carry God and responsibility on their shoulders at all times. In your grandmother's culture, being a strong woman means being a good mom and a good wife. This seems complicated to you—to become a woman who fits that mold. But that's okay. Because, trust me, you will make your own mold. And you will do it without discarding the traditions that made you who you are.

You will never lose your love of your Peruvian culture, the

food, and the stories. You will always taste the richness of *papa a la huancaina*, smell the bright spices, see the bold yellow shades of turmeric in the sauce. You will reach for the same *alfajores* cookies when you are grown up and savor them your whole life. They remind you of family and love. You will always remember the Sundays at La Tia Delia, the Peruvian restaurant where your community would gather after church. You will never discard this part of yourself. In fact, you will reconnect with it and find some of the most important parts of yourself within it. You will always savor the stories your grandmother told you about the strong Inca warriors, the architects, the farmers, the spiritual builders of magical places you will visit one day in Peru. *You will build something one day too*, your grandmother told you.

And you will.

But in the meantime, I want you to look at your mother. She has broken the mold, and she is building something too. Right now. Take a look at what she is doing. Raising you and your sister without the help of a man. Working several jobs to make ends meet. Doing the best she can to give you your middle-class life in New Jersey. Did you know she was only a child herself when she came to America? Maybe she was trying to be the woman her religion wanted her to be when she married so young and had your sister, enduring hardship and abuse along the way. But then she divorced and found your father. He was addicted to drugs and disowned by his family since he was only thirteen years old. Living on the streets, alone and afraid. He saw an angel in your mother too. A fair-skinned, lovely Peruvian angel. They were so deeply in love and she tried so hard to save him. But she couldn't

do it. And then they had you before he slipped away, taken by an epidemic that even an angel could not erase.

And when you were born, you entered a world of women.

You have been working so hard to please them, to perform well at home as the only boy in the house, and as the child of immigrants at school. You run extra hard in gym class—the place where you are the most insecure. So unsure of your body, afraid of how others see you. You are afraid of the authority figures, the parents, the grandparents, the uncles, the godfathers, the teachers, the nuns. You are nervous of how they see you. So you pour your heart and soul into making straight A's—you'll do anything to see your exhausted mother beam. But when you are older you will realize you don't have to be the best of the best in every single class to make your mother smile. Damaging your grades will not damage her love for you. She smiles when you bring her straight A's not because of the A's. She smiles because *you* are smiling. She has so much on her mind, and she is always working so hard, but seeing you smile will always make her smile.

You keep hearing the same refrain she must have heard when she came to America. *If you work hard and follow the rules, it will all work out.* But being a transgender first-generation American like you means you are usually going against all the rules. No matter how many A's you make, you are still breaking the rules. You were born to a family who defies borders, and in a body that resists rules. When you got kicked out of Catholic school for kissing your crush Anthony on the cheek, you were not breaking *your* rules. You were breaking *their* rules. You felt shame when the teacher lectured your mother. You felt so guilty that you scrubbed

the chalkboard as you listened. As if to clean up your mess. But you have not made a mess. I am not ashamed of you.

So forget their rules. Go to that place where you can love yourself, where you see yourself as you are. Close the door in your mother's bathroom and feel safe in that mirror, wearing her makeup, wrapping your hair in your T-shirt. Turn on the boom box and blast the R & B, the Selena, the JLo. I wish you could open the door and let your mom and sister in on all the fun. I wish you didn't have to go to bed hoping and praying every single night that you would wake up the next day a girl. I wish you didn't have to ask yourself *Was I born in the wrong body? Was I born in the wrong country?*

Trust yourself, listen to yourself. I love that your beauty icons do not exist in magazines. They are right in your own family. If you were to emulate anyone, it would be Melissa, your oldest cousin, with her edgy beauty, her gorgeous tattoos, and her Peruvian face. Or your mother—her name is Carmen, a name you will borrow one day—with her smart business clothing and her lovely smiling face that seems to be made of pure light.

You have found what makes you feel beautiful. It is not the socks your grandmother gives you for Christmas every year because no one knows how to buy clothing for you. It is not even your obsession, Buffy the Vampire Slayer herself, Sarah Michelle Gellar. It is your beautiful mother, her name, her face. It is driving to the beach with her in her sports car, turning up the pop music, feeling the wind in your hair. When you grow up, you will look like her. Your uncles will say, *Oh my god, you even act like her*. All of the pieces of the puzzle will come together, and you will feel

authentic one day. And you won't have to wear makeup to be pretty. You won't have to dress sexy to be a woman. You don't have to change to be *you*.

You can hold on to where you came from. What made you, you. A line of strong Peruvian women. Always come back to the love that brought you here. Come back to it, even when you think they won't accept you. Even when you fear they are ashamed of what makes you different. If you need love, there is no one better than your family. Invest in your bond with them, and help them understand who you really are.

Sometimes it will be hard for your mother to watch you grow up and become who you are. In her eyes right now, you are your dad's only son. Your dad is gone, and she is still in love with him. So losing her son will be hard. But it's okay to hold your mother accountable. It is her job to love you. And when you need her because you miss your father so deeply, or because you feel alone—she *will* be there for you. Tell her you need her. Her mothering will kick in and she will help her child. Not her gay son. Or her trans daughter. Her *child*.

And if you are nervous about coming out when you get older, here's my advice. Be very perceptive and even more brave. Braver than you are every single time you get grouped with the boys at school and have to converse with them in their foreign language of boyness. Braver than when you have to undress near them before gym. Braver than the time they put your locker right next to the boy you are madly in love with, and the gym coach called you out for crushing on that boy. Pointing his finger at you so everyone would laugh. And everyone would know.

Here's what you must do to bravely come out: When you are older, bring home your most confident and "out" friend, the one who inspires you to be yourself. Invite him to sit next to your grandmother at dinner. Allow him to shine for everyone to see. Watch the faces of your family members as they soak him in. As they see him for who he really is—a proud, funny, loud gay man. How do they respond? Measure the amount of work you will have to do to open their hearts and minds to really see you too.

And then *do* it.

I *know* you can do it.

Be proud of who you are. You will be explaining yourself to curious or nervous people for the rest of your life. Be visible. This will change the world. Help other kids see themselves in you. There are so many more like you. You are not alone.

Find a way to walk proud. To be comfortable in your skin. Find the girl in the bathroom mirror. Celebrate her. *Build something*, just like your grandmother said.

Go to Peru for the very first time, and bring your grandmother to the party celebrating your magazine cover in her country. The cocktails, the lights, the Peruvian celebrities all around. The meet-and-greet with hundreds of your fans in a country you've never even been to. But it is *your* country too. You share it with your grandmother. It is the country where she will see you for the first time as Carmen Carrera, the Peruvian-American model and activist. You will find yourself in every breath you take there. You will feel your power when you speak to the LGBTQ kids there. You will feel the spirit, the soul, the connection to this place and to yourself.

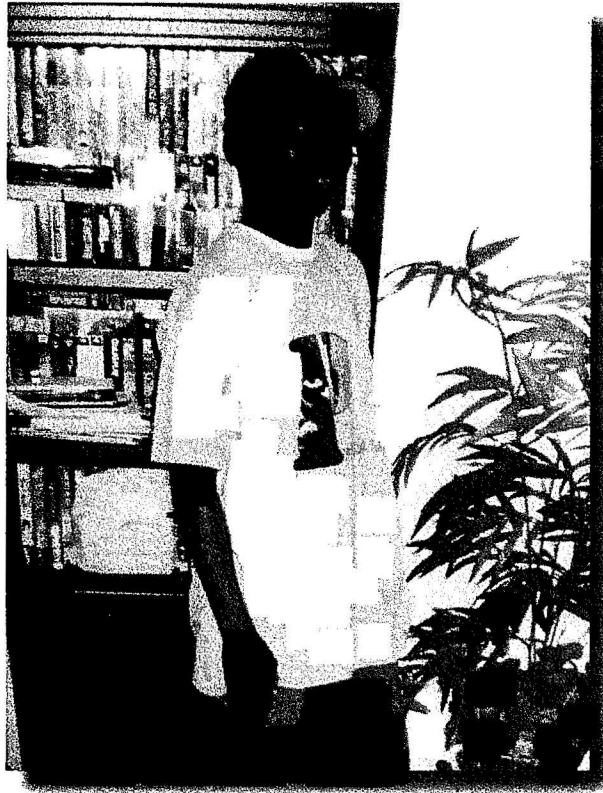
Imagine this. One day you will go to the judge, file the paperwork, jump through all their hoops, undergo all their evaluations, write the check, and wait for the paper to come in the mail. On February 21, 2017, you will open the envelope that contains your new birth certificate, your legal gender, your legal name. You will open the door to a whole new life. You will answer your own question. No, you were not born in the wrong body, you were just born to be born anew.

Welcome to the world, Gabriella Costa-Roman.

Honoring your father with the name Roman and your mother with the name Costa. Because she named you Christopher, meaning *bearer of Christ, the one who carried the Christ child across the river*. And Gabriella means *woman of God*. Congratulations, you no longer have to carry him on your back. You are finally allowed to be you.

But you're already allowed to be you. Right now. I promise. So get comfortable. Get excited. A beautiful world is waiting for you.

Love,
Gabbi xoxo



Bambadjan Bamba is an actor, filmmaker, and immigrant activist. He is the proud son of Ivorian immigrants.

Bambadjan Bamba

WHEN I WAS TEN years old, in the winter of 1992, my family moved to the South Bronx from Côte d'Ivoire in West Africa. For my family, moving to America meant falling from upper-middle class to poverty. Back then, my pops was a high-level banker and we were "balling." We lived in the best neighborhood in Abidjan, we attended posh French private schools and spent Christmas Eve at the Hotel Ivoire ice-skating rink. Yep, ice skating in Africa. Imagine that! When I landed in the cold concrete jungle that is the South Bronx, nothing could have prepared me for the brutal culture shock I was about to experience. We lived about a mile away from Yankee Stadium. Right off the 167th Street stop on the 4 train. It was the hood but a step above the projects. It was a predominantly Puerto Rican, Dominican, African-American, and African community. This was pre-Giuliani era, so you could get robbed for your sneakers and MetroCard just walking down the block. Not speaking a lick of English and having a name like Bambadjan Bamba definitely didn't help.

My first day of school at James McCune Smith P.S. 200 was probably

the worst day of my life. The only advice or warning I was given by my pops was "*Il ne faut pas te battre sinon tu va en prison.*" Translation: "Don't get into a fight or else you will go to jail." It was the first week of January in 1993, right after the winter break. I was three weeks shy of my eleventh birthday, which meant I belonged in the fifth grade, but I ended up in the fourth—probably because my parents didn't speak English either. But that one little mistake made me lie about my age throughout all of grade school. I didn't want my friends to think that I was left back a grade and therefore I was stupid. I was the biggest people pleaser in the world, but we will get to that later.

If getting left back wasn't bad enough, I was thrown in a Spanish ESL class because that was all there was for someone like me. The school was primarily African-American, Puerto Rican, and Dominican kids. The only other French-speaking person in the entire school was a kid named Alpha, who was from another African country. The teacher called him from his class and asked him to hang with me the entire day to show me the ropes. When I met him, he seemed thrown off by my excitement, but I was hyped because I wasn't the only African kid anymore. Alpha was going to help me figure this whole thing out. I started asking him mad questions. When I spoke French to him, he responded in monosyllables as if he wasn't proud of speaking French. I'd say, "Why are the kids in class coloring and not learning multiplication tables?" He just shrugged. I kept the questions coming: "Why are there police officers in the school?" And "Where the heck are all the white kids?" He just shrugged again and said, "*Je sais pas.*" Translation: "I don't know." Then I asked him how to ask the teacher to go to the bathroom. He told me to raise my hand and say, "Kiss my ass." Not only did I raise my hand, but I also stood up like we did in Côte d'Ivoire and said, with the thickest African accent you can imagine "Kiss. My. Ass." The

entire class was on the floor rolling, including Alpha, who couldn't contain himself. The teacher got a bit stern with him and the entire class and said, "Bambadjan needs everybody's help to adjust." Yeah right! Then, the bell rang and all the kids jettied out of class, just like in *Saved By the Bell*. The teacher told Alpha to escort me to the bathroom and then to the cafeteria for lunch.

Of course he tried to lead me to the girls' bathroom, but I didn't fall for that one, because I saw the pictures on the doors. He was having the time of his life misleading the FOB (fresh off the boat) African kid. What he didn't know was that I had a reputation for being a trickster in Abidjan, but since I promised my parents I wouldn't get into a fight and I didn't want to go to jail, I played it cool. As we headed to the cafeteria I was so excited to have American food. Until then, all I had in Abidjan was our version of overmarinated French-style pizzas and hamburgers. The cafeteria looked and smelled like a hospital. There was nothing appetizing about the way the food was presented either. The food looked like it had been in the freezer forever. I chose lasagna, because it looked like spaghetti. I also got the cup of mixed fruit. For drinks, the only options were small red and brown cartons. I asked Alpha which one was sweet, and he told me the red carton. When we sat down to eat, I almost puked! The food had no taste at all. The lasagna was dry as hell, and the cheese inside smelled disgusting. The mixed fruit was slimy. How can people eat this? Alpha was laughing so hard he was almost crying. The straw that broke the camel's back was the unsweetened, cold white milk. First of all, I couldn't get the carton open! After trying a few times I just ripped it. Now, mind you, in Abidjan milk has to be warmed and sweetened before you drink it. As soon as the nasty cold milk hit my tongue I spit it out. It was almost like a gag reflex. Alpha was laughing out loud by now with tears in his eyes. That was it. I grabbed the chocolate milk

off his tray, ripped it open, and tried it. It was sweet. I guzzled it down quickly. Alpha wasn't laughing anymore. He took his tray and jettied outside in a fit of anger. I was actually smiling now, because I had finally given him a taste of his own medicine.

I didn't see Alpha again until the final bell rang when school was letting out. When I got outside to the playground, kids were coming up to me telling me something about Alpha. I didn't understand anything other than the word *Alpha*. I felt kind of bad and wanted to talk to him. Before I got to the exit I saw him with a group of kids behind him. "*Alpha il y a quoi?*" Translation: "What's going on?" I tried to talk to him in French, but he pushed me back and started swinging. I was completely caught off guard, because I never imagined that he would go from zero to one hundred over chocolate milk. He kept swinging at me, and I kept backing up, trying to talk some sense into him. He wasn't hearing it. We were surrounded by a crowd egging him on. I wasn't used to boxing, because in Abidjan we would wrestle. I grabbed him and tried to hold him close, but he broke free and clocked me with a couple of good ones to the chin. My temper started to rise, but I couldn't allow myself to fight back and get arrested. An officer stopped the fight, Alpha said a few things, and they let him go home, but I ended up in the principal's office. I was upset because I couldn't express myself, and I was scared because I thought I was going to end up in jail. Plus it was guaranteed that my pops was going to tear my ass up when we got home.

When my pops showed up, he was visibly angry. I did the one and only thing he told me not to do. I tried to explain to him how I didn't fight back because he told me not to. He yelled in the most disappointed tone you could imagine. "*La ferme!*" Translation: "Shut up." "*Quand j'avais ton age, je ne laissais pas mes amis me frapper.*" Translation: "When I was your age, I

never let my friends beat me up.” That statement broke my heart. He disregarded the fact that I kept my word to him in the face of being ridiculed in front of the entire school. I guess he, too, was trying to teach me what he had to learn the hard way. In America, he didn’t have any family around, or a family village as a plan B in case it didn’t work out in the city. He went from traveling the world and making huge financial deals for the bank to driving people in a gypsy taxicab. He was alone in a new country with new rules and he was doing his best to provide for his family. He had enough on his mind and didn’t have time for any additional unnecessary nonsense. Even Alpha was probably trying to take some heat off his back too. Now that I was here, he wasn’t the only African kid anymore. They say hindsight is twenty-twenty but in my ten-year-old mind I didn’t understand any of this. All I felt was betrayal from my pops and that I needed to teach Alpha a lesson.

The next couple of weeks in school were like breaking out of jail every day. After the final bell rang I had to run as fast as I could to catch the train because a mob was after me to jump me. I had become the punk African kid who didn’t fight back. They called me African booty scratcher and Kunta Kinte. They asked me if people wore clothes in Africa and if we slept in trees with monkeys. The jokes were never ending. I kept trying to figure out why it was mostly African-American kids I had the most beef with. I finally caught up with Alpha and actually kicked his behind, but beating Alpha down didn’t help me much because I was still African. Back then, being African made you a target. We didn’t have Akon, Idris Elba, or Black Panther. All people knew of Africa in the hood was *Roots* (the TV mini-series, not the band!), African safari programs on the Discovery channel, and charity ads about starving kids. Those ridiculous stereotypes about Africa were perpetuated everywhere you turned on television and in the

movies. The way that dehumanization manifested in the minds of kids was that since Africa equals war, disease, and poverty, then being African made you an easy target for bullying.

My new MO was that if I was to survive in this new world, I had to learn English and be as American as possible. My solution was to watch a lot of television. I would not miss an episode of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Gargoyles*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Family Matters*, and *Martin*. Those television shows were instrumental in the beginning—especially for learning what was cool in America and what wasn't. For example, being smart made you a dork. I couldn't understand the logic. Dumb guys were popular and got all the girls. It was the complete opposite in Abidjan. There, it was a ranking system, and if you were last in class you were humiliated.

Within a couple of months I was fluent in English, but I was still being bullied for being African because I didn't have the fly gear and my pops was not going to buy me anything above Payless knockoffs. I had to figure out how to make money. I started bagging groceries at the corner Dominican store, and people gave me their change. I remember the day I saved enough money to buy my first pair of white-and-blue Grant Hill I shoes. The smell of brand-new sneakers was heavenly; the fly designs with the big *F* and Fila on the base that continued into a wave of white on the side of the sneakers was immaculate. The first time I stepped out in them, I didn't want to walk too fast because I didn't want to put a crease or a stain on them. Fly sneakers in the hood earned you respect! And that day, I was respected. People were blown away. How the hell was this poor African kid able to afford these dope sneakers? It all started to come together once I started wearing fly gear, but it wasn't until I discovered hip-hop that it all clicked. The Fugees, Snoop Dogg, Tupac, Jay-Z, and Wu-Tang literally raised me. I knew

side A of Ma\$e's tape *Harlem World* by heart, from beginning to end. There's cool and then there's hip-hop cool.

Fast-forward two years. I had completely lost my accent and I was down with hip-hop, doing everything possible to hide the fact that I was African. I spent most of my time hanging with a neighborhood crew. We got into a lot of trouble, but we had each other's backs. No one could mess with me anymore. No one said my real name ever—my friends called me BJ. I was finally “cool.” But deep down I was a fraud, desperately trying to be someone I wasn't, which was so obvious to everyone else except me. Eventually my boys asked: “What's up with you? We know that you're African. Why don't you ever represent where you're from?” That was a huge question for me to answer. While I was trying so hard to become American, I internalized all the pain and anger. It wasn't until that moment that I realized that I was ashamed of being African.

That realization made me do some serious soul-searching over the next couple of years. It is said, “When you submit your will to other people's opinion, a part of you dies.” Well, I was dying inside, because I was a people pleaser. I spent most of my time trying to be something I wasn't just so I could survive and fit in with my peers. I was trying to be my idea of cool. It wasn't until I started studying acting in college that I allowed myself to emotionally explore how this internalized resentment affected my life. As an actor you have to draw from your own personal emotional bank to breathe life into characters. I did not have the capacity of being my authentic self. I usually said things for the sole purpose of having a desired effect on people. I had become a master manipulator. It was hard as hell to acknowledge it and be that vulnerable with others, but it was the most important self-improvement journey of my life. I started keeping a personal “emotional bank” journal as a way of training myself to express my true feelings. Over

and over again, I would force myself to confront how I really felt about circumstances in my daily life that may have previously inspired me to default to people-pleasing or manipulating. Telling people what they wanted to hear was disempowering. Truly understanding the deep effects that this self-hatred was having on my soul was liberating.

I started doing some research to find African role models that I could look up to. I had a mirror in my room, and I put pictures of my African heroes all around its edges, so when I looked at myself, I saw them too. From Thomas Sankara, the revolutionary Burkinabe president who's considered the African Che, to Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, who started the Pan-African movement toward independence. I fell in love with the prime minister of Congo Patrice Lumumba, who was assassinated by the CIA. Marcus Garvey, Bob Marley, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X. Reading about these powerful black leaders and understanding the history and lasting effects of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism helped me understand the African struggle. I started to value the age-old traditions and saw the wisdom in them. I saw the beauty in respecting my elders. I learned to accept that my parents' way of saying "I love you" was by praying for me and blessing me. Hip-hop played a big role in my journey. Lauryn Hill's *Unplugged* album, Kanye's *The College Dropout*, and Blitz the Ambassador's *Soul Rebel* became the soundtrack to my search for authenticity.

I was curious and interested in connecting with the African community in NYC and sought to hang out with other Africans like me who grew up here but still honored their culture. It gave me a sense of purpose, belonging, and pride in being African. It was around that time that my acting career started taking off. As an artist, being authentic and having a distinct voice has been one of my greatest assets. I still have a lot of work to do, but I've made a lot of progress.

My past experiences have helped me define what it means to be American. It has nothing to do with speaking perfect English, trying to be the American version of cool, or fitting into a mold. It's about celebrating the diverse cultures and heritage that enrich this country. It's about playing your part to help make it a better one.

Becoming the best version of you is hard as hell—and it takes time. But as long as I'm doing that, I'm cool.