



## How Danyeli Rodriguez Del Orbe Learned She Was Not Meant to be a Martyr

The formerly undocumented Afro-Dominican poet, spoken word artist and cultural expression activist shares her decision to forgo law school in favor of a different form of advocacy, the importance of uplifting Black immigrant narratives, and the necessity of developing an identity independent of one's family.

---

**Alicia Menendez:** Danyeli Rodriguez Del Orbe defies category. Yes, she is a poet, an accomplished spoken word artist, a cultural expression activist. But beyond that, she's a free thinker who has a truly incredible ability to describe experiences that we talk about a lot, the pain points of migration, the limits of familial responsibility in ways that feel raw, and honest, and new. We talk about the importance of Black immigrant narratives, both to immigrants themselves and to our political discourse, and the life-changing power of refusing to be a martyr.

Danyeli, thank you for doing this.

**Danyeli Rodriguez Del Orbe:**

Thank you for having me.

**Menendez:** One of the themes you return to over and over in your work is this idea of being better in your homeland, of having left parts of yourself in your homeland, the yearning to return to something that some would argue or would argue is impossible to return to. Can you describe to me, Danyeli, your first experience of that? What do yo/u remember the first time you remember thinking, there is a part of me that is missing?

**Rodriguez Del Orbe:** I think I realized that parts of me were missing when I returned. I migrated when I was eight years old and I wasn't able to go back to the DR until I was 21. And when I returned and I was on that plane and I journaled and I waited for my uncle to pick me up at the airport, it felt like something was returning to me that I didn't know was missing. Obviously, being undocumented, you miss home. You miss the friends that you left behind. You miss family members.

But there is something particular that happens in the body when you go back to the place where people still remember the nickname that your grandma used to call you when you were five. The place where the neighbors look at you in the face and say, wait, I remember that face. Is that so-and-so's daughter, there are certain words that are just simply don't exist for the feeling of walking in your neighborhood as a grown woman and knowing that there was a big chunk of who you could have been missing because you were ripped at the roots and replanted somewhere else when you were only eight.

**Menendez:** I've done a lot of these Latina to Latina interviews and there was a pattern that emerges over and over again, which is a mother who is brilliant but doesn't have

the means to pursue her dreams. A child who is, then, either brought to the US or born in the US and given a range of opportunities that her mother never had, which make her feel, in turn, as though she has to become a doctor or lawyer, accountant, et cetera. You seem to have freed yourself of that narrative, and I am very curious that it wasn't, I have a lot of Latinas I talk to who they did one of those paths and then they decided it wasn't for them, and then they dedicated themselves to a life of creativity or the arts. You seem to have gotten there much quicker, and I wonder either what happened or what it is about who you are that allowed you to skip that part of the common path.

Rodriguez Del Orbe: Wow. No one has asked me that before. Immigration shaped pretty much my entire experience in the US and most of my life. And wait,

Menendez: Would you just unpack that for me? When you say it shaped your whole life, how did that show up?

Rodriguez Del Orbe: My immigration status was so central to everything.

Menendez: And you knew, always, that you were undocumented?

Rodriguez Del Orbe: I always knew that I was undocumented, yes. The way that I migrated with someone else's papers, there was just no way for me not to know. And even though, as a child, I didn't really know what it meant for me and my future, I understood that there was a secret that was meant to be kept, that I didn't come with a visa or "the right way". So there was a certain level of secrecy that I needed to keep, to keep myself and my family safe. Since I was a kid, immigration was so central to everything I did because the reminder to me was excel in school, do the best that you can, and maybe someday you'll get papers. Maybe someday a law will change and you need to be prepared for the day that a law can change and you're the best possible "immigrant" that you could be, or potential US citizen. So there was a lot of pressure and understanding that succeeding was the only path that will ever lead to a green card. So I spent most of my life thinking that I needed to earn my place in this country, and that led me to try the hardest in school, that led me to excel, but at the same time, it created this pressure for me to follow the path that my mom had laid out for me because the sacrifice that she made to bring me here was so huge.

But by the time that I got to college, I think what really saved me was women. Women that I surrounded myself with that really taught me that my identity was not dependent on someone else's, and that I was not meant to be a martyr for the movement, for my mom, for my family, and that the only person that could be central to who I was needed to be me. There came a point where I applied to law school because I wanted to be the first attorney in my family. I applied to law school. I had been pre-law for years.

Menendez: Okay, good. So you did not skip this entirely?

Rodriguez Del Orbe: No, not entirely. So I was on the path. I graduated from college early, I was 20. By the time that I was 22, I was on a pretty secure path to law school. I got in, I got a huge scholarship, and then as I kept getting these acceptance letters and these law schools kept begging for me to go, I just felt in my soul, if I went, my entire life would be laid out in front of me and I would never really be able to explore who I could be outside of my immigration status, outside of my immigrant story,

And I wanted to be more than that. So after a very hard decision, I sat my mom down and I told her that I rejected every single law school acceptance. I told her that I was moving to LA, and obviously she was upset. Obviously, she said, "You did all that just to say no." And I said, "Ma, I am 23, I have no children, no partner, no debt, and no responsibility to anyone else. If you found yourself at 23 in the position that I am, would you go?" And she said, "Yes." There was just nothing else for her to say. She said, "I would go." And that's all it took. And within a month, I found a job in LA, and in the following month, I left. And I haven't been back to move back to my mom's house since.

So there was this level of understanding myself, not as an extension of my mom, but as my own person who could still honor my mom by deciding to be happy and do the things that, within my power, would make me happy and that she couldn't have possibly done because by the time that she was 23, she already had me. And I think now that my mom sees me and she sees all the things that I have done, it's still a little bit of like, okay, but you're still not a lawyer, but you're still not an engineer or a doctor, all these things. But she sees, now, how I am received by people, the confidence that I have. And I know that even if she's unable to vocalize it, I know that she's proud of that. And I know that in some way, my mom sees herself in me.

Menendez: And this is all happening in tandem with your advocacy work with UndocuBlack, right?

Rodriguez Del Orbe: Yes.

Menendez: I feel very often when I talk to Black immigrants that they feel as though they're not included in the popular imagination of what it means to be an immigrant or an undocumented immigrant in this country. And I wonder if you remember a personal experience of that where you just didn't fit what it was that people thought an immigrant or an undocumented person was supposed to be?

Rodriguez Del Orbe: There was not a specific time. I will say that I always felt some kind of representation because the immigrant narrative is dominated by Latinos, and living in New York and in the bubble of Dominican [inaudible 00:08:58] that I was, I felt as though I was part of the conversation. But later on when I actually joined the Black Immigrant Rights Movement, I realized that there had always been something missing. The first time that I showed up to a convening for Black immigrants, where everybody got together to discuss their immigration status, is when I realized that the reason why it took me so long to become involved in the immigrant rights movement and become comfortable in being vocal about who I was, was because I didn't really see people like me out and speaking up. And Caribbean immigrant stories were so, they were not spoken about.

A lot of people don't know that Dominicans migrate via Jolas, that Dominicans take a very small boat to Puerto Rico, and it's one of the most dangerous journeys that you can take. Thousands have died. I have distant family friends who took Jolas and were never heard of again, does ocean swallow them? And those are the kind of stories that I grew up listening to. That was my migration story, but none of that was spoken about in the mainstream immigrant rights movement. And I realized that part of that had to do with the fact that those stories were Black, and predominantly stories that tie back to a very dark history of Black people on boats being crossed across the ocean. So my work now and my work

for the past few years has just been about uplifting Black immigrant narratives that are not usually even spoken about within immigrant rights movement.

Menendez: It's also particularly interesting, as you know as someone who is in the work, because there are forces that have always tried to use immigration as a wedge issue between the African-American community and the Latino community, politically. And so it is also politically relevant for Black voices to be in this conversation.

Rodriguez Del Orbe: Yes, specifically because Black immigrants are at the intersection of police, law enforcement, criminal law enforcement, and immigration enforcement. So before you're stopped by a police officer, you're going to ask where you're from. When a police officer sees a Black person, they're not worried about where the Black person came from, they're worried about the fact that they're Black and that, perhaps, they look suspicious and all those stigmas come back. All that racial bias exists just by looking at someone who presents as Black to everyone else.

So there's a very particular experience that Black immigrants survive and face that is very tied to Black Americans in this country and the history of civil rights in this country, and we see that in the data. We see how Black immigrants are disproportionately targeted by police, they're disproportionately targeted by ICE, disproportionately deported because of their interactions with police, and there's no way to really separate civil rights and racial bias and racism in this country from a Black immigrant. There just isn't.

Speaker 3: Danyeli, would you read me one of your poems?

Rodriguez Del Orbe: I can definitely do that. I wrote this poem because I grew up with white Mormons missionaries coming to my house in the DR, and we really looked up to those missionaries because they were gringos, right? They were white men who we considered to be the standard of beauty, and they were there to not only save us, but teach us about God. I wrote this poem because I remember them always asking me, "Hey, do you want to pray?" And I wrote this poem in response to that and in response to the pain that, now, it brings me to see how people use religion as means to justify the hurt that they cause. It goes like this:

Once I pray for anything, I know that I am lost at sea, anywhere vast and almost infinite. I don't fold my knees, but I do clasp my hands. The truth is, I've long forgotten how to pray, how to speak to God, and I feel silly when I get to it. I think of all the ways I've prayed before, and I find myself in a labyrinth of questions. I know no Bible verses and the dream I have. Scriptures are written in a language I can understand, and I witnessed a revelation of God that is absolutely undeniable. There is nothing more heartbreaking than having no home to come back to. Like I've traveled and left and left again, but never truly reached anywhere. My people survived those Christians who killed and raped and stole without mercy. I'm not sure how to command my tongue to preach in their congregation when I only know God through their eyes.

The truth is, I have to learn who else God can be, who else I can talk to that does not remind me of them and what they've done to the people I would have loved in an earlier lifetime. The people who still look like me no matter how much time has passed, that you know that someone is mourning while others pray for God to keep the ongoing mystery that sometimes God turns away from his children. Am I allowed to remind you how God slept on us through slavery? And I try not to think

about this. I just want to pray. I just want to pray the way other people do. They do not think about death. They clasp their hands and think about all the way that they are still alive and God is alive within them. One day, I will tell you about the time I begged for ease for papers, begged for the heartbreak not to break me, begged for my father, begged for my mother, begged for a mother I was not afraid of, begged for mercy, beg for forgiveness about things that were not my fault.

The truth is, I'm still trying to forgive God. I'm still suffering because of him, because of his children. So maybe instead, I find his wife and she'll be kinder than he has been. Maybe she'll convince me to forgive him and only because she is asking, I will actually do so. I've only learned forgiveness from entities that they never reassemble the God they praise. The white men. Them. You, the one who taught me about God in the first place.

Menendez: That, like so many of your poems, is about borders, both physical and metaphysical and moving between worlds and spaces and being haunted by one when you are in the other. Where is it, Danyeli, that you feel most at home?

Rodriguez Del Orbe: I would say I feel the most at home in my country, in the Dominican Republic by the beach with my grandma sitting next to me, eating a [foreign language 00:16:08] in a room full of my family speaking the most Dominican Spanish they know. Anywhere in my country, I think, it's a privilege. I couldn't return for so long that I think every single time I go back is a homecoming, not just to my country, but to myself.

Menendez: Danyeli, as part of your film on Dominican migration, you received a defined American immigrant artist fellowship and grant, which is very meaningful to me because I co-founded Define American with Jammu Green and Jake Brewer and Jose Antonio Vargas, and so it's like you were our dream. This was the manifestation of our dream, which is that there are just so many stories that are yet to be told that need to be told in order for us to reckon with what it means to be an immigrant in this country and what it means to be American itself. Why did that form, that format, feel like the next step in your telling of this story? Why film?

Rodriguez Del Orbe: My goal for my film was to show the layers and the nuances of who our parents are before we come to be, and the way that we are all not just one role in our lives. My mom is not just my mom. Before there was me, my mom was a woman who loved a man, and my dad was a boy who had dreams to be this rich, rich, big person when he came to the US and migrated only to find that this country was not as easy as the other boys made a scene when they were migrating in the eighties and the nineties.

So my decision to transition into film was really a way to add nuance to the Dominican experience by allowing people who usually don't speak about their experience, to speak on their own, to share their own story, and be allowed to give their own stories the dignity that they deserved, whatever that meant to them. And that's what I did with Mamí and Papí.

Alicia Menendez: I love it. Danyeli, thank you so much for taking the time to do this.

Rodriguez Del Orbe: Thank you so much for having me, Alicia.

Alicia Menendez: Thanks for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Kojin Tashiro

is our lead producer. Tren Lightburn mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. Email us at [ola@latinatolatina.com](mailto:ola@latinatolatina.com). Slide into our DMs on Instagram or tweet us @LatinatoLatina. Check out our merchandise [latinatolatina.com/shop](http://latinatolatina.com/shop). And remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, GoodPods, wherever you're listening right now. Every time you share the podcast, every time you leave a review, you help us to grow as a community.

**CITATION:**

Menendez, Alicia, host. "How Danyeli Rodriguez Del Orbe Learned She Was Not Meant to be a Martyr." *Latina to Latina*, LWC Studios, October 23, 2023. [LatinaToLatina.com](http://LatinaToLatina.com).

Produced by

