



Why Ada Limón Refuses to Perform Identity

The 24th U.S. Poet Laureate shares her journey from theater to marketing to poetry, the loss that inspired her to reimagine her life, and her refusal to allow others' expectations to shape how she shows up in the world.

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- Alicia Menendez: This year, Ada Limon was named the 24th U.S. Poet Laureate. Her poetry has been lauded for its ability to connect, which is funny to me, given how much of it addresses that divide we all feel inside. Not enough of this. Too much of that. The ambivalence around freedom versus commitment, the who we are with ourselves versus the who we are in relation to others.
- I got a chance to sit with Ada in person at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. and she was every bit as brilliant and charming and funny as her poems made me believe she was. We talked about her path from theater to marketing to the event that compelled her to go for it, to make all the poems, to not miss out on her own life.
- Ada, how amazing to be with you in the Library of Congress.
- Ada Limón: Oh, thank you so much. It is such a pleasure to be here. The Library is one of my favorite places on the planet. It's so beautiful.
- Menendez: So, how does one find out that they're going to be the next U.S. Poet Laureate?
- Limón: It's so interesting because it's not something that you apply for. You know? It's not something that you've sent out a resume and asked people you know to write letters of recommendation. So, it's not really on your radar. It certainly wasn't on mine. I got a invitation from my representative, Vaughan Fielder, who is marvelous and a dear friend, and she said, "You're going to need to be on this Zoom call at 10:15 on Wednesday morning and I'm sorry I can't tell you anything more." And, I said, "Okay. But, you know, I have physical therapy that day, so I'm probably not going to be able to make it." And, she said, "No. You're going to want to make it." She said, "Also, you might want to put some lipstick on, do your hair." I was like, "What is this?"
- And so, I sat down and got all ready for the call and had no idea it was happening. They sent me a link. I went to the link and in the middle of the Zoom call was Dr. Carla Hayden, the Librarian of Congress, and she invited me to be the 24th Poet Laureate of the United States.
- Menendez: And, you said?
- Limón: I mean, well, first of all I said nothing because I was completely without words. I was... I never say the word flabbergasted, but I feel like flabbergasted is a great word for that. I was flabbergasted and so I found myself really sort of staring into the ether and thinking about all the people who have come before me in this position. And, it really felt like they were all kind of with me in the room at the same time, and of course I said yes and partly it

was to recognize the importance of this position and to honor the legacy that they've so beautifully created through time.

Menendez: You are of course the first Latina to hold this position and I grapple with firsts. You know? The... Are we celebrating a first? Are we acknowledging why it took us so long to get here? And, for you, like me, being someone who has one parent who identifies as Latino and one who is mixed European ancestry, I think it's additionally complicated how much you step into that identity.

Limón: Yeah. I love that you say that because I was just thinking about my complicated relationships with firsts and whether or not I felt like is that something sometimes that I want to be like, oh. At some point, there'll be no firsts. Right? That we'll have all have access to everything. And yet, there's also this level in which I want to make sure to represent for Latina poets that are coming up or Latinx poets that are coming up. You know? I want to represent this position not just for myself but for them, not just for them or myself, but for my ancestors. And, that also feels really important.

Menendez: You articulated something that gave me a different way of thinking about my own situation. Your parents separated around the time you were eight. My parents separated much later. I was about 19. And, while I've always thought of them as coming from different ethnic backgrounds, they also, like your parents, had very different relationships to ambition and I think because my parents separated so much later, I always imagined that as being diametrically opposed. You have to choose one path or the other. You seem to understand it as an abundance, a variety of choices. So, tell me both about them and how it informed your own sense of ambition.

Limón: Yeah. Thank you so much for that question. At first, I think, like most people who go through a split of any sort in the family, was curious about which side of the family I belong to. You know? It's that sort of sense of I need to choose one and there's like, who are you closer to? Or, those casual questions that even get asked by friends. And, that never rang true for me. You know? I really feel like I was close to all of my family and every part of them.

And so, I think for me, one of the things that I have always tried to embrace is that here my mother is a painter. Her paintings are on the cover of all of six books and she spent her life as an artist and really trying to dedicate herself to art. She would wait tables. She was a caretaker on a ranch. She would do all sorts of other jobs but in sort of the service of being a creative person making art in the world.

My father really craved that artistic release and he played guitar and sang and did all those wonderful things. But, then he also was my elementary school principal. You know? And, then he was the administrator of instruction for the largest school district in Washington State. He was an incredible achiever, gave remarkable speeches.

And so, I feel like there is a level in which I saw the artistic passion. I saw the artistic drive and then I saw what it was to really be interested in achieving and be driven as a way to re-envision success. And so, I think that those are two parts of me. If those are two rivers, I feel like I am the confluence of those things.

Menendez: Among the biggest champions of your work was your stepfather, and as someone who has two little girls, I have really embraced part of what you've relayed about him, which is this idea that he took you really seriously as a kid.

Limón: Mm-hmm.

Menendez: And, that makes such a difference in the life of a child.

Limón: Yeah.

Menendez: Not every child may become an artist. May not be their art that you're taking seriously. But, to see someone, to invest in them, changes an entire sense of self.

Limón: I think that there was something about him and the way that he took the time if you walked in and said I wrote this poem or I wrote this short story, where he'd say, "Okay. Great." And, he'd sit and he said, "Read it to me." You know? And, he'd stop and he'd look at you just as much as if you'd walked in with an A on a math test or with something that needed a really intense attention. He would offer that and that kind of offering is such a remarkable thing to give to a young person, so much so that I felt like... I don't think I took it for granted but I kept thinking, "Well, no. He thinks I'm a poet and I can do this." You know? And, how many people don't have that when they grow up?

And, it wasn't so much that he was always like, "Oh, you have to do this." Or, you know? But, he would say, "Oh, you're really good at this." Didn't mean I couldn't be good at something else or choose something else, but... And, then he would take the time to also critique it a little. "Well, I think I maybe liked it, the ending, if you... Without the last line. Try it. Read it that way." I mean, this was the first lesson in editorial decisions and it was huge.

Menendez: I love that he tends to edit toward sparseness where you... You're like, "No, no, no. I'm keeping the last line."

Limón: That's absolutely true. Yeah.

Menendez: But, you don't become a poet right away. Instead, you become a theater kid, study drama. You go to get your MFA at NYU. And, where the story I think becomes really relatable to a lot of our listeners is you get a quote unquote real job.

Limón: Mm-hmm.

Menendez: Which is what we all think we have to do. And, there's some truth to it, just to sustain yourself.

Limón: Absolutely, and I was someone who really wanted to be able to support myself. I wanted to be able to pay off my student loans. I wanted to be able to pay my rent and not rely on anyone's help. I didn't have anyone really to rely upon, but... And, that was really important to me. One of my first jobs was temping at GQ magazine and from there, I went to work for a lot of different magazines. I worked for Martha Stewart. I worked for Brides, Modern Bride, Elegant Bride. They were all part of the same group.

And, then I ended up back at GQ as the copy director on the marketing side. The last job I had in New York was the creative services director for Travel and Leisure magazine with an incredible group of friends and a cohort there that was really fabulous and encouraged me to take the leap, which was in 2010 I really wanted to know what it was like to be a full-time artist and that's what I've been trying to do since then.

Menendez: But, there's... There's something else that happens in 2010.

Limón: Yeah. In 2010, my stepmother, who was a wonderful human being, died of colon cancer at the age of 51 and my father and my little brother and I were by her bedside and it really made something shift inside of me that made me think if I had only that much time left, what do I want? And, you know, it wasn't to be in the magazine world. It was to be making poems as earnestly and as... With my whole heart as much as possible. It wasn't about squeezing in the artistic time, but really leaning into it.

I think sometimes when you watch a loved one go, they give you something, and I think that she gave me that determination to live not just a creative life but a life that was dedicated to witnessing the world in its full tilt. You know? Whether it was joy or pleasure

or grief or trauma, but to really recognize it and embrace it and to pay deep attention to this life, this moment, this breath that we have. And, when you lose someone, there can be an impulse to really grieve and numb out or there can be an impulse to double down, and I think my impulse was to double down on this life.

Menendez: The other intimate area of your life that you have shared so beautifully is this question of whether to have children, whether to remain child-free. You've shaped my thinking about even just the words we use and the agency we take away from women when you say childless or you say infertility as though these are choices and not circumstance. And, a funny outgrowth of that is that because you have shared so much on the page, we all feel like we know you deeply, intimately, like a best girlfriend.

Limón: Mm-hmm.

Menendez: And, you're like, I've... I've never met you. Hi. Hello. What's your name?

Limón: Exactly.

Menendez: Where are you from? Now, I wonder how you have navigated that asymmetry and the relationship you have with your readers.

Limón: Yeah. I really appreciate that question because I think it's something we don't always think about as poets when we write because a lot of times we're writing alone in our room and sometimes we definitely have someone in mind. We might have other poets in mind. We might have an intimate partner in mind, a friend in mind, someone that we're reaching out to. Some of the poems in *The Carrying* are directly written to Natalie Diaz, the wonderful poet and friend.

So, I think it's interesting. We write in that way and then we release the book into the world and you kind of prepare yourself and then there's this other part of you that thinks, okay. I'm going to read these poems. And, I remember when *The Carrying* came out, there was a moment where a lot of these women in the book line came up to me afterwards and said, "You know, you were reading those poems about not being able to have a child. Here's my doctor's number. Have you tried gluten-free and dairy-free?." I wish I had, by the way. And, suddenly I thought, "Oh, no. I've opened this door for advice." And, a lot of it was so loving, so kind, and very generous, and a lot of them were really open in sharing their own personal journeys and stories with me. So, I don't want to take that for granted at all. But, I will say the very next reading I gave, I said, "And, I want you to know that I'm okay. I'm very happy with my life. In fact, I love my life and I think this was the right answer for me." And, those things are personal and private and sometimes those are the ways that I can draw my own boundaries and make a little safe space for myself and my creative work.

Menendez: Would you do me the tremendous gift of reading me one of my favorite poems of yours?

Limón: Yeah. This is a poem called *The Contract Says We'd Like The Conversation To Be Bilingual*. The contract says we'd like the conversation to be bilingual. When you come, bring your brownness so we can be sure to please the funders. Will you check this box? We're applying for a grant. Do you have any poems that speak to troubled teens? Bilingual is best. Would you like to come to dinner with the patrons and sip Patron? Will you tell us the stories that make us uncomfortable but not complicit? Don't read us the one where you are just like us, born to a green house, garden. Don't tell us how you picked tomatoes and ate them in the dirt, watching vultures pick apart another bird's bones in the road. Tell us the one about your father stealing hubcaps after a colleague said that's what his kind did. Tell us how he came to the meeting wearing a poncho and tried to sell the man his hubcaps back. Don't mention your father was a teacher, spoke English, loved making beer,

loved baseball. Tell us again about the poncho, the hubcap, how he stole them, how he did the thing he was trying to prove he didn't do.

There's two threads to that poem, but one is that there are times that representation feels like representation and then there are times that the search for representation or the effort towards representation can feel like tokenism and it can feel like here we are. We are all gathered but I want you to suddenly do this performance that makes me comfortable because it makes me know who you are and I'm comfortable if I can put you in a box. I'm comfortable if I know who you are. That makes me safe.

And, I've always really taken umbrage with that, and so, the poem really speaks directly to those people. That was a true story of that ask. And, then the second part of that poem is really a tribute to my father who, when he was working for a school district, someone did say, "I don't want to park my car here because the Mexicans there will steal my hubcaps." And, my father, being Mexican, went out and stole all the man's hubcaps and then the very next meeting, he wore a sombrero and a poncho and he was like, "Hey. Hey. You want a...? I got some hubcaps. Do you want some hubcaps?"

And, he really just put this man in his place and really was like, "This is... Be careful who you're speaking to." Right? And, there's so much power in that and he did it with such humor and sort of eviscerating delight that when he actually left that school district and moved to Washington, they gave him an engraved hubcap for all of the incredible work that he did.

Menendez: I think this poem matters in this moment for you, where you are going to have to choose what type of U.S. Poet Laureate you are and what that means in this context and in this moment. And, I wonder how it is that you've thought about how you make it your own.

Limón: I think that's really wonderful. I think that one of the things that I feel very suspicious of is that I want every writer and every artist right now to be able to write whatever they want to write about.

Menendez: You've had people tell you that you don't write about identity.

Limón: I mean, I had a huge, yeah, that happened in Chicago at a reading and she was a white woman and she said, "You're not writing about your identity. It's not in here. I don't know why you don't write about it." And, it was very funny because there was a woman next to me who was Latinx and she said, "If you read the book, her identity's all over the pages. It's just not the identity that you want her to perform for you." And, that was something that was so wonderful because we were able to stand in community in that space and she had my back and I had hers.

But, that happens and I feel like when we talk about that uncomfortability with firsts, even, or we talk about that uncomfortability with labels... Like, I'm very proud of my Mexican heritage. But, I want to be seen as a writer and I want to make sure that a young 15-year-old poet who is of any identity is told like, "Oh, you get to write about joy. You do not just have to focus on a border experience." You know? Or, you don't have to focus just on this. You are a whole person. And, I really do feel like leaning towards that wholeness, not necessarily joy or pleasure. Those things are part of that. But, wholeness, all of that, is radical and I think that's how we make an argument for our full humanity.

Menendez: Ada Limon, this is such a gift. Thank you so much for doing this.

Limón: Thank you so much for having me.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. Latina To Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Florence Barrau-Adams mixed this episode.

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