



How Kali Fajardo-Anstine Fought to Tell Her Ancestors' Stories

The best-selling author of “Woman of Light” and “Sabrina & Corina: Stories” shares how she subverts expectations (in real life and on the page!), the necessity of complicating racial hierarchy, and her commitment to writing Latinas back into the stories of the American West.

Alicia Menendez: If you tell Kali Fajardo-Anstine what she can and cannot do, she will prove you wrong time and time again. When high school teacher told her school would never be for her, Kali dropped out, earned her GED, college degree, and then an MFA. When others told her readers didn't want short stories. Her book of stories, Sabrina and Karina became a national book award finalist. When publishers told her they didn't understand why her Latina characters didn't speak Spanish, she stood firm in her desire to tell a true and unflinching story about her people. Now that work, "Woman of Light," a story that spans five generations of an indigenous Chicano family in the American West is a national best seller.

Menendez: Kali, thank you so much for being here.

Kali Fajardo-Anstine:

Hi, Alicia. Thank you so much for having me.

Menendez: I noticed that all of your bios say you were born in Denver and you are the second oldest of seven children. I feel like the fact that it has remained in your bio, even as your career has progressed means that you feel it says something important about you. What is that?

Fajardo-Anstine: I want people to know exactly where I come from because I think there's a lot of confusion that Latinos can come from Denver, that we can be born and raised there. It's really important to my identity and my worldview that I come from a large family of seven siblings and that I'm one of the older ones in that group of siblings. Growing up, I did not see a lot of representation about Chicanos from Colorado, and I especially did not see representation of big families in the media, and that also made me feel very alone and isolated.

Menendez: Kali, you struggled with depression when you were young and there is an exchange in woman of light that to me captures some of that feeling so well where you have loose saying, "I'm not a child, I hate it here," and everyone thinks by here, she means here this place, and she comes back with, "I mean, here inside myself in this life." When in your life have you felt most that way?

Fajardo-Anstine: Definitely when I was a teenager. My depression really was the defining characteristic of my adolescence. In some ways I felt addicted to my sadness because it was the default mode of existence. I rarely went to school. I would ditch all the time. I would go to the library and get books and then I would go off alone at a park and I would read. But I really

struggled with feeling low energy. I was often very lethargic. I was trapped in my body, in my community, in the place where I was from, and I had a negative outlook on my self-esteem. Through the act of writing, that's when I really began taking fiction seriously was when I was a teenager. I remember feeling a lot more powerful, and at the end of a writing session I could look down at the page or at the journal and I would see just pages and pages of my own handwriting, and it was like having this proof of my existence and of my space in the world. Early on, writing became the counter to my depression.

Menendez: You're going through all of this and you have a teacher who says, "You're never going to make it in school," which is wild to me that an educator would say that to any student, but for you it makes the decision for you.

Fajardo-Anstine: Yeah, that was one of the hardest moments in my life, and we have these memories that are burned into our existence. You'll never be able to forget that. And the day that my English teacher told me to drop out of high school, it's such a flash memory, I can close my eyes and I can see her holding the paper I wrote on Flannery O'Connor, waving it around in the hallway saying, "You might be a pretty good writer someday, but you're never going to be cut out for school, and giving up on me."

Fajardo-Anstine: And because I was dealing with my depression, with my mental health struggles and I'm also stubborn, and I think my stubbornness comes from being one of seven children, it comes from really having to stake a claim in that family. But because I'm so stubborn, I took her up on that. I said, "Well, I will drop out." And I went home and I dropped out that day, but it wasn't like a, "I'm going to quit dropout." It was a challenge that I was going to prove to this person and to myself that just because the traditional school system had failed me, I was not going to allow myself to be a failure.

Menendez: And you prove that in spades. You earn your GED, you enroll in summer classes at Metropolitan State University in Denver. You eventually become a full-time student. You graduate, you go on to get an MFA from the University of Wyoming. How are you sustaining yourself financially throughout all of that?

Fajardo-Anstine: I come from a family that on my mother's side, they've had to work for everything they have. They're working class people. My great grandparents didn't even have the ability to read novels. They were not literate in the traditional sense. And when I was applying to graduate schools, it was very important that I applied to a school that had funding, and I did not have to go into debt for my graduate program, which changed my whole life because then when I got out, I could just focus on any little jobs I wanted to take and I didn't have to find another career path right away. I could also focus on my fiction.

Menendez: One of the things that's interesting to me about the process of *Woman of Light* coming to being is that as I understand it's a novel you tinkered with as a teen. What pulled you away from it and what brought you back?

Fajardo-Anstine: Definitely. It also has to do with graduate school. I get into graduate school, I have this idea that I'm going to write an epic novel that has to do with my family migration. I wanted people to know about Chicanos from Southern Colorado. I wanted them to know that a lot of us came and a lot of our ancestors came in the 1920s to the cities. But when I got to graduate school, they said, "Well, the fiction workshop is really focused primarily on short stories. That's what the form has traditionally been used for in the classroom setting.

Fajardo-Anstine: And it actually, it brought me back to high school. It brought me back to the teacher who told me to drop out because in that class, that was my first introduction to the short story

form. We were reading Flannery O'Connor. I remembered this short story by Alberto Rios, and suddenly I said, "Okay, I'll give this form a try."

Fajardo-Anstine: I had already been writing some short stories, but I became obsessed with the short story form, and I actually felt that I was pretty good at it. My rejections would say, "No, you're not very good at it." But I had this feeling because I was handing my short stories to anybody who would read it, like the clerk at the grocery store, or one time a bug guy came to my house and he needed to exterminate all these bugs, and I gave him a copy of one of my short stories and he came back and he told me he read it and he loved it. And I started to realize that everyday people were really connecting with the short stories that I was writing. And I pivoted away from *Woman of Light* and I focused on learning how to get better and better at telling a story.

Menendez: But then you come back.

Fajardo-Anstine: Yeah, it was never my intention to abandon that novel completely. I always knew that this would be one of my great callings. My ancestors lived these incredible lives. My Auntie Lucy, she came north to the city at eight years old after her European father had abandoned the family and essentially left them for dead, this is the 1920s. Without his income, they would have no way to make it. And I knew that part of the reason that I had been called to become a writer was to tell that ancestral story. It never occurred to me that I would just leave it, but also the market. Publishing does not want short stories as much as they want novels. I knew that if I wanted to ever get a book deal from a major publisher that I needed to have a novel going, and boy did I have a novel to write.

Menendez: You referenced this idea I think a lot of us have that we have the capacity to write the next Great American novel, and I think there are a lot of us who believe we could just sit down at a desk and crank it out. I think your story proves how much work and how much chisel goes into this. Take me through what it required of you both at the MFA program, the workshops you're part of, how did you get the most out of those collaborative environments and how did you find workshops that you felt were really a fit for you because they seem pretty critical in your journey.

Fajardo-Anstine: One of the things that my MFA program did for me, which is not necessarily a positive or negative, but it showed me that a certain kind of writing about the American West was being valued by New York City Publishing. I'm in class, I am the only Chicana in my classes. I am the only person with indigenous roots to the American Southwest, and I'm seeing all of these short stories by white men from the East that have to do with finding themselves in the wilderness. They're getting published left and right. They're in the biggest magazines in the nation, they're getting book deals. And that showed me that there was a disconnect.

Fajardo-Anstine: And I made a decision in graduate school in a fiction workshop. I remember it was one of those moments again, just burned into my memory. I was sitting on the floor at my professor's house, there was a fire going. It was winter time. We were talking about a student's paper or we were talking about a student short story. And I remember thinking to myself, "I'm going to write about the American West. I'm going to write about my people."

Fajardo-Anstine: Now, I got a lot of support from workshops like Voices of Our Nation, VONA, where I worked with professors and writers of color. And suddenly I started building my peer network, people who were going through the same things I was going through, and I had people to talk to when I was getting frankly racist rejections that would say, "Oh, this story is sugar babies. No one has a life like this. We've never seen characters who have Latina

last names, but none of them speak Spanish. And why are they like this? We don't understand." I suddenly had a peer group to talk to and say, "I'm going through this. What are you going through?" And that really fortified me through the over 10 year journey it took to see *Women of Light* to publication.

Menendez: Growing up, what were the stories you were told about your ancestors?

Fajardo-Anstine: There are so many, and they're often told by my auntie Lucy, Lucero. She lived on Denver's West Side, and you would come into her home and the couches would be covered in plastic and Turner Classic Movies would be on the background. And there was a whole wall of all the family photographs, black and white photos of our ancestors, newer photos, and she would always be doing her nails. She always had makeup on. Her hair was always curled until her nineties. And she would just be sitting there painting her nails, her Revlon pink, and suddenly she would launch into a story. A lot of the stories focused on them working in the fields. They picked sugar beets in Colorado. She talked a lot about her father. He was a Belgian miner. She would slip into a fake French accent when she would talk about him and about the pain she felt at eight years old when he abandoned the family.

Fajardo-Anstine: She talked about getting married at 16 and getting pregnant. But she also talked about these incredible dances where my great grandma Esther met my great grandfather, Alfonso, who came to Denver from the Philippines. And these dances, when they would talk about it, they took on this fairytale realm for me. I wanted to know about their clothes, and the music, and the instruments. And listening to those stories, I knew that other people would want to hear them, but I also knew it was important for other people to know about. Their existence was very beautiful, but it was also marked by a lot of pain.

Menendez: You've said that your multiethnic existence is a protest against racial hierarchy. And I wonder if you can tell me about a time when you felt called upon to complicate that notion.

Fajardo-Anstine: It happens to me still every day. Often as a child, when I was growing up, people would pull me aside, particularly white women, friends of friend's parents at school or something, and they would ask, "What are you? Give me a definition of why you look the way you look." And I started realizing early on that they only want one word answers. They want you to say, "I am 'Hispanic,'" or, "My father is this, or my mother is that," they never wanted a very complicated, nuanced answer. I remember when my great grandfather died actually, a lot of relatives came from California who were Filipino, and I had never met them. And I got pulled aside out of all of the grandchildren, and they pointed to my eyes and they said, "Okay, this one looks the most like us. This one's the most Filipino." I was like, "What's going on? I'm just like my sister's sister. There's no way that we're separated like this."

Fajardo-Anstine: But very recently, I visited Idaho and I was asked to describe my background, off the bat, very beginning of this interview in front of a live audience. And I started to talk about it. I said, "Well, I have a great grandmother. Her mother was an indigenous woman, a Chicano woman from Southern Colorado. My great grandfather's Filipino. My maternal grandmother is Jewish, and I also have a white American father from Nebraska." And when I was finished, I was met with laughter, and the MC said, "Well, aren't you a little bit of everything?" And I said, "No, I'm not. I'm of a very specific group of people that came out of this land and other people came and they joined us." But I think there is an impulse in the American identity. You have to pick one thing and as the generations go on, you have to drop all your other cultures so you can meld into the supposed American melting pot.

Menendez: I wonder why they left.

Fajardo-Anstine: I have some ideas. I think it has to do with the discomfort of me standing proud and tall in all of my cultures. That's anti white supremacy. White supremacy comes in and says, "You must assimilate. You must become part of just one American culture. And that is the goal of reaching whiteness. And if you want to remain part of those other things, it's just laughable and ridiculous." But I won't be defeated by that. I will still keep talking about all of the things that I come from and all the cultures that created me.

Menendez: One of the things I found wildest about *Woman of Light* was the extent to which it mirrors our current moment. And I wonder if that was apparent to you as you were writing it or only after it was done that you were like, "How are we back here?"

Fajardo-Anstine: It's twofold. I remember while I was working on *Woman of Light*, these stories of the Ku Klux Klan were told to me firsthand by my Auntie Lucy. She would talk about having to hide and lay down on the floorboards of their tenement as the Klan would march outside in downtown Denver in the 1920s.

Fajardo-Anstine: I worked in this for over 10 years. I actually remember when Trump got elected. I wrote my literary agent and I said, "I think we'll actually have a chance of getting this novel published. I think that people will realize that this is important to talk about." And of course, I can't believe that I equated the rise of Trump with people needing to understand the racism of the past because it suddenly was right there before us full-fledged again in the present.

Fajardo-Anstine: It became more apparent as I was working on the novel. But something that really surprised me were the protest movements of the Great Depression. There is a moment in *Woman of Light* where Loose and Ph'avell are walking and they see people holding up signs that say, "Stop police brutality, stop the evictions, fair wages." And when I was going through the edits of *Woman of Light*, someone said, "Hey, I think this feels a little too contemporary. Maybe we should take out some of the signs." And I revealed a photograph from 1933, and it was a mixed crowd of people, black people, indigenous people, white people. It was a total multiethnic crowd. And people were holding up the exact signs that I have in that scene. And that surprised me because it showed me how long as Americans, we have been fighting for equality.

Menendez: Kali, there's a word that has come up several times in our conversation, and that word is rejection. The amount of rejection you had to go through to get to this point. What did that require of you to power through that rejection? And what's your best advice for someone who's facing the same?

Fajardo-Anstine: First of all, if you are a person that's trying to achieve any goal, if you're a creative person or if you're more business minded, it does not matter. You will face rejection. It's one of the facts of life, and it's something that we need to learn to deal with if we want to remain healthy and also humble when rejection falls to the wayside and you suddenly are getting acceptances. I started submitting my short stories to literary journals on the East Coast. I would just put them in the mail, put a stamp on it, and wait and wait, and then months later, a rejection slip would show up. I would tell myself that I needed to change my stories, that I needed to get stronger, but once I did get stronger and I still was receiving rejections, I had to really stand in my identity as an artist and decide what is it that I want out of these works?

Fajardo-Anstine: Do I need to change myself in order to fit someone else's ideal? And ultimately, I did make some sacrifices in order to get things published, but I stayed true to myself. My advice for those who are seeking their goals, when rejection seems to be overwhelming and seems

to be the entire theme of a season or a few years, think about how you can regroup and go back into yourself and your grounding and think about what your goals truly are. You can't force somebody to accept you. There's no way you can do that, but you can work on yourself, and your goals, and your own creative output, and you can control that.

Menendez: Kali, I am excited to watch your star continue to rise. Thank you so much for taking the time to do this.

Fajardo-Anstine: Thank you so much. I really enjoyed our conversation. I appreciate it.

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. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DM's on Instagram or tweet us at Latina to Latina. Check out our merchandise at latinatolatina.com/shop. And remember to subscribe or follow us on Radio Public, Apple Podcast, Google Podcast, Goodpods, or wherever you're listening right now.

CITATION:

Menendez, Alicia, host. "How Kali Fajardo-Anstine Fought to Tell Her Ancestors' Stories." *Latina to Latina*, LWC Studios. October 24, 2022. LatinatoLatina.com.

Produced by:

