



Why Kat Armas Believes Your Abuela Has the Answers

As a seminary student, she began to question why she hadn't been trained to recognize the importance of women in the Bible. Now her book, *Abuelita Faith: What Women on the Margins Teach Us About Wisdom*, examines how our lives would be different if religion centered the stories of women's sacred practice of survival.

Alicia Menendez: Kat Armas has a powerful question. What if the greatest theologians the world has ever known are those whom the world wouldn't consider theologians at all? That query is at the heart of her book, *Abuelita Faith: What Women on the Margins Teach Us about Wisdom*. We're going to talk about that wisdom and those teachings, along with how Kat's personal journey through faith and academia has shaped her thinking on how the world would be different if those voices were front and center? Kat, thank you so much for doing this.

Kat Armas: Thank you so much for having me. I'm so happy to be here.

Menendez: I'm so happy we finally made this work. I want you to take me back to your earliest memory of questioning your own faith.

Armas: I think that has been something that I've been doing my entire life. I mean, I'm sure many of us have, right. I'm Cuban, and we were just raised in this Catholic, this Roman Catholic faith, and it's something you just did, right? Abuela for me, my grandma was the beacon of spirituality in my life. I would go to church with her and I would watch her sing on the choir. I went to my catechism classes and CCD and all of that. I remember, yeah, just really being moved and yeah, just into a lot of what we were talking about. I just remember watching Telemundo with Abuela and seeing all the apparitions of Mary everywhere on a side of a house, or seeing Mary on a piece of toast. I just remember, at first I was terrified of it. I was terrified of these apparitions of Mary, but I was also in awe of them and wondering, "Man, is Mary going to appear to me? What if I see Mary? What does that mean?"

Armas: These were moments that really shaped me, but it was just normal. It's part of my everyday life. It really wasn't until I became an adult I began really wrestling with, "Well, what do I believe? What does this mean for me?" It was leaving my little Cuban bubble of Miami, and arriving to a place where I was the oddball out. I was one of the only Latinas where I was at. People just looked at me like a deer in headlights like, "Who are you?"

Armas: That definitely wasn't the earliest memory of me questioning my faith, but that was when I began to really wrestle with my cultural identity and my faith. Once I left my bubble where I was part of the dominant culture, and I was met with whiteness, I had to wrestle with, "Well, that faith that I had as a kid where Mary could appear to me anywhere and it was miraculous and it was ridiculous and it was weird, but it was beautiful."

Armas: Those moments with Abuela, or the women that raised me, sitting in front of an altar praying the rosary, and putting out little things of water for the saints, and driving through

past houses in Miami and seeing the San Lazaros with a dog licking their sores and being freaked out about it, but kind of understanding that that was sacred and holy. Yeah, I began to question that.

Menendez: As a Cuban Catholic that, of course, is all very resonant with me. A little different in New Jersey, but still some of the main themes are there. It is interesting to me to hear you speak with such affection for Catholicism given that you do become intellectually very critical, or you at least begin to interrogate it intellectually, and you yourself choose, at some point, to convert to Protestantism. What prompted that conversion?

Armas: Yeah. I think, during that time in my life when I was just a young adult and just really wrestling with my life and my career and what I wanted to do and who I was, I was invited to this Protestant event. I was just really drawn by the community and the fun and the lights and the this and the that. It just seemed so exciting to me.

Menendez: It has a very different vibe because I, likewise, the same way my mother is very much a questioning Catholic. She let me go to CCD because my grandmother would take us, and I think she thought it was an hour and a half of free babysitting.

Armas: Right.

Menendez: Same thing on Wednesday. The neighbors who were at an evangelical church, she me go with them because, again, it was two hours of babysitting, but the vibe was so different. I remember being like, "You guys got songs. People stand up and they clap. This is a party." I was like, "We're not having a party in Catholic church."

Armas: Exactly. And I think that that was what drew me. But again, there was so much cultural stuff that comes with that, and it wasn't until I left Miami and I left my Catholic bubble that I was like, "Oh, no. This is very deeply culturally embedded, and I am an outsider 100%."

Menendez: Can you give the listener a sense of where you were, where you felt that?

Armas: It was in New Orleans, and I say New Orleans but where I was, it was a very small subculture of white evangelicalism. I arrived there and it was a culture shock. I had this just completely different world view, a very different idea of what God was? It was complicated for me because I was raised by single women, a single mom and a single grandmother. I was raised to just be confident and loud and just say what you believe and whatever because I had no choice. We were all just women. There was no men in our lives telling us not to do that. I was loud and opinionated and all of these things, so when I got there, it was, yeah, it was very hard to navigate and I quickly was like, "I need to get out of here."

Menendez: I mean, so much so that you leave the first seminary.

Armas: Right, yes.

Menendez: Was there an inciting incident or was it a series of smaller microaggressions?

Armas: It was definitely a lot of microaggressions, but I can remember the one specific moment that I was like, "I need to go." I had been studying and I had been paying the same tuition as everyone else, right. You're studying, you're doing the things, and I was very serious about my education. I was in class one day and they were talking about how important it is to learn the specific ancient languages. I was like, "Yes," because I was studying Greek and I was studying Hebrew and I was all about it. All of a sudden the professor looks at me and he's like, "And ladies, your husbands will be very impressed if you can exegete scripture alongside them." Yeah. I was just, right. I was so appalled because I was like, "What do you mean my husband's going to be so impressed? I'm not doing this for my husband. Why do you think I'm here? I'm paying this money and I am putting in the work." That was the

Latina to Latina: Why Kat Armas Believes Your Abuela Has the Answers

moment I was like, "No, I have to go." But there were a lot of little moments very similar to that. Yeah, and just being a Cuban woman in that setting was just very bizarre for everyone, including myself.

Menendez: Does that change, though, when you go to the second seminary?

Armas: Yes, a little bit, I would say. The second seminary was in Los Angeles, and so we had a lot of Latinx people there. We had a whole program for Latinos in theology, and so it was very different. But I would say, in general, I mean the institution, academia, whatever you want to call it, is predominantly white and it's predominantly male. At the end of the day, you're going to hit roadblocks culturally or ethnically, then also if you're a woman. I think that while there were spaces where I was free to explore what I wanted to explore, pursue what I wanted to pursue, at the end of the day, theology. I mean, if you think back to the history of colonization, you think back to all of these things, I mean, theology is owned essentially by white men. There's always going to be roadblocks there.

Menendez: I do need to know, did Mom and Abuela think it was amazing that you were going to go study theology? Or, were they like, "Just become a doctor and a lawyer like everybody else."

Armas: Yeah. They weren't too impressed by me studying theology. They were just like, "Okay, that's cool, but why? What's the point of that?" Abuela was very committed to her faith, of course, but yeah, for me to go and study it, she was just like, "You just go to church. Why are you?" So no, they weren't very impressed by it.

Menendez: You're right. Scripture testifies the power and influence of grandmothers among the people of God. For years, I overlooked this detail because I hadn't been trained to recognize the importance or value of women in the Bible. Tell me more.

Armas: When I transitioned, I say transition to Protestantism, I fell in love with the Bible and it was weird because I just found it so fascinating. I mean, you have all of these stories of women doing all sorts of questionable things in order to survive, right? You have this story of Jesus appearing and saying, "Hey, all your rich people, get rid of all your money and take care of the poor." All of these very subversive and scandalous things that I thought were incredible, and I thought were beautiful.

Armas: Now, granted at that time of my life, I hadn't yet dealt with the way that the Bible had been used to suppress and oppress people. Of course, I knew that was a reality, but I hadn't personally dealt with that. It was easy for me to be fascinated with this book. I know that's not everybody else's story. As I was wrestling years later with this Abuelita faith, and as I'm working on this book and I'm investigating all of these women in the Bible and I'm arguing that they are Abuelita theologians, and I'll explain what that is in a second. I couldn't believe how the thread that runs through their stories is this idea of survival, right?

Armas: I mean, all of these women in the Bible are literally just trying to survive in a patriarchal culture, are trying to secure a husband, so that they don't die. I read that and I think that that is fascinating that these women are also in the genealogy of Jesus. They're elevated as women of great faith, righteous women, and many of them are literally pretending to be prostitutes in order to sleep with their father-in-law so that they can secure their future. I realize in that that, wait a minute, survival is sacred and survival is holy. Survival is this thing that I see the divine. I see God really supporting and encouraging. We see so much of that in the Bible, and that is something that I also see in the stories of our Abuelas. They're just

surviving, and in that survival, I believe that their lives are holy and sacred and they have so much to teach us.

Menendez: I would layer onto that, particularly for those of us who are Cuban, the element of exile.

Armas: Exactly.

Menendez: When you have this moment where you realize that you have not been trained to dive into all of this, what is your response?

Armas: In that, in this investigating these women in the Bible and in all of this, I realize, wait a minute. There are so many stories here that have been untold, have not been told. We skip over them because they may be scandalous or because they may be unimportant because they're women, or because they're short, right? I mean, the Bible is a book written by men for men, and so a lot of the stories that I find so incredibly subversive and fascinating, they're a couple sentences. For example, the story of Rizpah. A lot of people don't know who she is, but she was a woman who put her body on the line to protest the unjust murders of her sons.

Armas: I mean, there's so much, there's so many moments where women are doing things in order to protest injustice, or in order to do the right thing. They're lying to Pharaoh. They're standing up against empire. I mean, they're doing all of these things that nowadays we want to emulate, that we want to celebrate. If we really investigated this stuff, if we really read the Bible how we should, how I believe we should, then that would change a lot of how we practice, and that would change a lot of who we see on the pulpit. That would change a lot of who we consider theologians.

Armas: That moment was big for me. I mean, that was actually one of the moments, it wasn't when I was writing the book, but it was when I started realizing the stories of women, they have obviously been silenced and suppressed and all of these things. But this is not the way that I want to practice my faith or this is not how I believe that God would want it to be. That was the moment, actually, that I left that first seminary. It was through my just investigating women in the Bible. Then in writing *Abuelita Faith*, I just began to explore more of that, and it really changed. It sort of did a shift in my mind of who's a theologian and what is spirituality? And it's spirituality now I'm seeing is subversive, and it's spirituality now I'm seeing is daring, right, and it's scandalous, and it's seeking out to undo injustice.

Menendez: You describe, in *Abuelita Faith*, something that I've never heard before, which is this concept of research grief and experiencing research grief. What did that look like for you?

Armas: I talk about how, in that moment, I was sitting in bed with all the tabs, all my Google tabs, open researching stuff. I had, my ojas were dark purple, and I was just feeling all sorts of things. As I mentioned earlier, you know the history of colonization. We know that it has affected our communities. But in that moment of really researching, it became very personal for me. It became very, very personal for me. I was in a class. We were learning about women in the church and the history of women in Christianity. Of course, they were all European women, but yeah, and in studying them I'm like, "Well, what about Cuban women? Why is this just a side thing in our studies?" That's a very common thing in theological studies. You have Black history or Latin American history, or all of these sort of histories as a side, a little 10 minute lecture in a class. But I was like, "No, I really want to study and understand the history of Christianity in Cuba." Again, I knew about the colonization. I knew about the history of Roman Catholicism, but man, when I really began to think about it and think about how these are the women that I stand on their shoulders,

Latina to Latina: Why Kat Armas Believes Your Abuela Has the Answers

and that's when it hit me. There's so much grief here. There's so much generational trauma here. I experienced that research grief and I looked it up and it's apparently, it's a thing. When you really get into the thick of these topics and you start to realize this isn't just an intellectual thing, but it lives in our bodies and it lives in our souls.

Menendez: Which is particularly relevant for you as an academic, because as academics you are told not to bring your personal experience to the work, to draw a bright line. As I understand it from you, you reject that premise.

Armas: Yeah. I think it's impossible, and that's the thing with academia, and that's the thing also with theology is that theology is the study of God, and we want to just do it in our minds. That's really what I'm trying to get out with *Abuelita Faith* or *Abuelita* theology is that the study of God, right? The relating, the experiencing God, the connecting with God, happens everywhere but in your mind.

Armas: Especially with our *Abuelas* and the history of so many in our community, connecting with God happens in your body and it happens around the table, and it happens when you're, like I say in *Abuelita Faith*, discussing *la lucha*, the struggle of everyday life. That is theology. When you're sitting around and the *cafecito's* brewing and the floor is being mopped, you know how I mention in the book. That is the study of God. When you're sitting around and you're talking about exile, or you're reflecting on survival, or you're coming together with your community and shutting the door to the outside world and reflecting on where you've come and how far you've and how God... Because for many of our *Abuelas*, there is a spiritual, religious element to their lives. You're reflecting on how God has been present in those moments?

Armas: That, to me, is the study of God, that is theology. It's funny because I have several theology degrees, but I say, "No, actually that's not important at the end of the day." I talk about *Abuela* and how she sewed, and that was spiritual. That was a spiritual thing for her. That, I argue, is all an act of spirituality and theology.

Menendez: It's funny because reading *Abuelita Faith*, I couldn't decide if my grandmother would be like, "Yes, that is right. I am divine." Or if she would've been like, "Que *Americanada*, that she thinks I'm a theologian."

Armas: Right. Right. I would say even that my grandmother, she wasn't educated. She didn't lead a Bible study or any of those things. Again, she was just simply trying to survive and she would go to church and sing on the choir and do all of these normal "normal things". But yeah, I don't think that she would ever consider herself a theologian. Again, I just think that she was just living her life. But for those of us with varying levels of privilege, and those of us who are looking to the elite white male to teach us about God, that's who I want to say, "No, no, no, wait a minute. That's not where you'll find it." I mean, you may find information about God, but to really experience God, that's not where you should be looking primarily. It's funny because, yeah, I don't think *Abuela* is too, just like she is not too interested in my theology degree, she's not looking to herself as this beacon of spirituality. But I think that that's part of it, right? Like the white men in the pulpit saying, "Look to me," and then you have *Abuelita* saying, "No, no, no, no, no. Don't look at me. Don't look to me," and I think that's part of that sort of shift in your mind.

Menendez: How would our world and our faith shift if we moved our looking for the answers from the men in the institutions that you outline, and looked to someone like our own grandmothers instead?

Latina to Latina: Why Kat Armas Believes Your *Abuela* Has the Answers

Armas: Oh, my gosh. I think our worlds, our churches, everything would shift monumentally. I always say that one of the things that I talk about in *Abuelita Faith*, and I like to say all the time, is imagine if the colonizers or those with the highest levels of privilege, imagine if they knew how to be good guests. Imagine when the colonizers arrived to the Americas and were like, "Hey, I'm just here to be a guest." I mean, granted, they should have never bothered folks in the first place, but what a difference that would be if we could learn from those on the ground and again, not have it be an intellectual endeavor, but seek to be good guests. I think about that in every aspect of life. I think about what it would be if those with privilege would just be a guest at an unfamiliar table. I think about Abuela's table, and I think about how we were all guests. It was her table. She decided what she ate. She cooked the meal. She set the table. She did all the things and we just sat there and we enjoyed her and we enjoyed, yeah, just the life that she was offering for us.

Armas: I think, imagine if our Abuelas and marginalized people in our communities were hosts, and it wasn't those with privilege that were hosting the tables. We don't have to invite folks to the table. They have their own tables. I always say that Abuela had her own table. You don't need to invite her to yours. She's good. Yeah. She's happy at her own table. Why don't you go sit at hers and learn from her?

Armas: As someone who is in the theological world or considers myself a Christian, we constantly feel like we need to be the hosts. We need to always be the one serving, right, serving the poor or whatever it is. What if we let the poor serve us? I think that would shift our world, our churches, the way that we think about everything.

Menendez: As you can tell from my silent tears, I am incredibly moved by that idea of being a good visitor, so thank you. I will take that with me always. Kat, thank you so much for your ideas and for your time.

Armas: Thank you so much.

Menendez: Thank you, as always, for listening. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Manuela Bedoya is our marketing lead. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer, and mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. It makes our day. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMS on Instagram. Tweet us @Latinatolatina. Check out our merchandise that is on our website, Latinatolatina.com/shop, and remember, please subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcast, Google Podcast, Goodpods, wherever you are listening right now. Every time you share this podcast, every time you share an episode, every time you leave a review, it helps us to grow as a community.

CITATION:

Menendez, Alicia, host. "Why Kat Armas Believes Your Abuela Has the Answers." *Latina to Latina*, LWC Studios. April 11, 2022. LatinaToLatina.com.

Produced by:

