How Writer Leslé Honoré Knows Poetry Changes Lives

Her poems have gone viral and reached millions. Now the writer behind "Brown Girl, Brown Girl" opens up about finding her way out of an abusive marriage, the decade where her kids became her poems, and the power of putting what you want into words.

Alicia Menendez:

Leslé Honoré's poetry has gone viral, but the mission behind the work is bigger than likes or shares. Leslé is committed to helping others find and use their voices. That shows up in her writing and in the work she has spent almost two decades doing in her Chicago community. And much of that ethos is shaped by Leslé's own experience as a Blaxican woman, a single mom, and a believer in the power of connection.

Leslé, thank you for doing this.

Leslé Honoré: Thank you for having me. It's just such an honor to be asked. Thank you.

Menendez: What is the first poem you ever wrote?

Honoré: I think the first poem I ever wrote was something in first grade and I think it was about a bird, and my dad helped me practice it and do it for a talent show for my very Catholic school. You know, there was always a good talent show in Catholic schools.

Menendez: And was there anyone who said, "Ooh, this girl has it?"

Honoré: My seventh grade teacher was like, "You're a really good writer." And I was like, "That's nice." And my mom and dad told me I had to be an attorney or a doctor, and in high school I had some really great teachers who were like, "No, this is what you should do. This is really, really good." I thought about it from there, like, "Well, maybe it's something. Maybe I could do this. Maybe I could be a writer like the writers I love." And then it just kind of unfolded when I got to college and there were so many people that were so supportive of my writing, and poetry, and just teaching me how to be in that space. And just tap into what I wanted to say authentically and kind of tune out what a lot of the other influences are. You know, other writers.

I think growing up in the '90s, I wanted to talk about identity a lot. I mean, it wasn't until the late '90s until we even had something in the census that allowed you to be biracial, so I would always get the questions, "What are you? What are you?" You know, just very rude comments, often feeling not enough of one of the other. Not feeling Black enough, not feeling Mexican enough, so I wrote a lot about my identity and how I felt.

Menendez: Your dad is Black. He's from New Orleans. Your mom, born in Mexico. Immigrated here when she was 15. How did those cultures… How are they playing out at home?

Honoré: It's lovely. I love that my kids identify as Afro-Latino, and that they even have that term to identify with. My oldest daughter, who is Brown, and we talk about how we are mirror images of each other's experience, where I fought a lot to inform people of my identity as a Black woman, she does the opposite to inform people of her Latinidad. And so, we talk about that a lot, and she really pushes me to see how the world sees me and how the world sees her. And how they see her as Black first and how they typically see me as Latina first, and what does that mean about how we move in spaces? It's a celebratory household. I think I get that from both of my cultures.

We do ofrendas for Dia de los Muertos and then we have gumbo for New Years. We are very lucky to be able to tap into so many different parts of us.

Menendez: How did it play out though when you were growing up?

Honoré: Oh. My parents didn't talk about race. It was not a forward conversation probably until the Rodney King riots, and I think I was a sophomore in high school, and my father at the time was working for the LAPD. And so, we did not have a conversation the way I have with my kids about race, ethnicity, identity, how the world sees you, what to be prepared for. And then maybe around my sophomore year in high school, right before the riots, I was doing a lot of reading and read The Autobiography of Malcolm X, and I say that radicalized me. That very much flipped on my activism button that has never been turned off since then, and pretty much in succession, then the riots happened, and stuff was bubbling in LA before Rodney King. There was a lot of tension between Black and Korean communities in Los Angeles, and so it wasn't something that happened out of nowhere. It definitely was a rise that shifted a lot. That shifted a conversation.

Like, I never knew my dad was locked in his apartment during the Watts riots. We had never had that conversation before. And my mom is that quiet strength that looks weak to people, but it's just very like, "I've lived through hell and back and I don't have to prove it to you," so she's just very… and she's tiny. I'm not. I'm like five-foot-nine, and I wear a 16, and I take up a lot of space when I come into my room, and my mom is completely opposite of that. She's like five-foot-two, just eency.

When I did start to ask questions, she was like, "There's nothing for you to ask questions about. You're Mexican." And I was like, "Right. There isn't." When it came to my Black identity, there's so much more learning that had to take place there and nuances of what it means to be Black in America. Being Black in America has so much more of a span when we talk about slavery, and the different places in Africa that people came from, and the different tribes, and the different languages, and then the different places the boat stopped, whether it was in the Caribbean, or whether it was here in the United States, and then all the nuances that come from that. The subtleties from staying in the South, or being in the Midwest, or Northern, or Western, or Gullah. All of that is a huge experience of Blackness that can't be pinpointed to one place, one language, one culture.

Menendez: What happened when you stepped out into the world armed with this sense of self and this information?

Honoré: It was transformative. I think going to an Historically Black University, specifically in New Orleans, where there are Black people who are lily white but are Black and don't deny their Blackness, and in my family we have every shade of Black you can imagine on that spectrum. It was the first time that no one ever questioned my Blackness. It was like,

"Yeah, you're Black. What else?" And I could just express it and it was so liberating, and I could explore other parts of myself. I could give in freely to writing about love, or political topics. Of course, they're seeing through my lens, but it was the place that made me a woman, where I coined my term of Blaxican.

I love saying it now. I hated saying this and that, over what goes first, what has the priority, and what gets hyphenated, but I wish I would have trademarked it. There's tons of Blaxican people now. There's like a Blaxican Instagram page with lots of people from Los Angeles who identify as such, so it's been great. Like I said, this was way before we had Afro-Latina.

Menendez: Does Afro-Latina resonate for you?

Honoré: I don't think it resonates for me as much as it does for my kids, because their Africanness is very much more forward than their Latina. I just love that we're finding ways to explain what I think I've been trying to explain to people, like there are Black people who speak Spanish all over the world. There are Black people everywhere. That's what the slave trade did. It stole people and brought them to other places, and that's where they live now.

Menendez: Take me back then to 1999. You move to Chicago. $400 in your pocket. No job. No place to live. What was the plan?

Honoré: Oh, I did not have one. I was such like a crunchy granola, barefoot on stage, broomstick wearing, incense burning, it's gonna be okay, patchouli oil smelling... I did not have a plan. I stayed with friends. And so, when I tell my children, you have a plan, and you know that your plan may not work out, but you have to have a plan, I didn't have one. And so, it was okay, like I was like 21, and farting around, and then met my ex-husband, and got pregnant, and I was like, "You know, I'm gonna have this baby." And so, when my ex-husband asked me to marry him, even though I knew it was not a good idea, like I had originally thought about going and doing Peace Corps and just strapping my baby on my back and building wells in schools. I said yes and we got married.

And very soon I found myself in a verbally and emotionally abusive marriage and was in it for 11 years until he left, and that was a very dark period of my life. I stopped writing. Just a decade of no poems. My kids were my poems, like I hyper focused on being a mom, hyper focused on protecting them from what was happening, and building a family in Chicago that was out of friends and really deep connections here, which is why I stayed in Chicago. This city has given me a resiliency that I don't think I would have gotten anywhere else. And I love it. I love what... It's given me a career, it's given me the sisters that I didn't get from blood, it's given me purpose. It's a beautiful, broken, gorgeous city.

Menendez: It stands out to me that we all know you as a poet, but you also have this whole other professional life where you're doing nonprofit work in Chicago for almost 20 years, and part of what I find striking about what you just said is that as I understand it, so much of the core ethos of your work is about empowering young people to find their voice, and yet you spent 11 years losing your own voice or feeling like it was squashed in that marriage. How did you reconcile these two things? That on one hand, you're pulling other people's voices out of them, and you're losing your own?

Honoré: So, during that period, I was just working in service. It wasn't... I hadn't made that connection yet. That connection really did not come until after my ex-husband left. I mean, I say the two greatest things he gave me were my kids and leaving. Because I think when

you're in that cycle of abuse, it's very scary to figure out how do I get out. I didn't see myself as strong. I didn't see myself as having an ability to be a single mom, of raising these kids. I didn't see that, so it was terrifying to try and imagine it. But when he left, one of the first things I started to do again was go to open mics. And I wouldn't perform. I wouldn't read. I would just sit in the back and let it all wash over me.

I would listen. I would go every Thursday. My friend, Dena, Dena Dean and Celeste had an open mic at a vegan restaurant, Soul Vegetarian in Chicago, and I… It was my therapy. I went religiously every Thursday at 7:00. And slowly I'd be like, "Oh, that's a crappy poem." And then I'd be like, "Why? You can't call somebody's poem crappy. You're not writing any." So, it was like this inner conversation I was having with myself and then very slowly the words came again and my kids at the time were 11, 8 and 2. And I think had they been any older, I don't know how we would have recovered, like those ages… I'm grateful that it happened when it happened. It was really hard. It was horrible. My ex-husband changed the passwords on our bank accounts. I wasn't working at the time. I had just left a job and paid off bills with my whatever they gave me, just like, "Here's your vacation time and four weeks."

Wasn't working. He tried to take the car. I had no access to money. As most abusers do, he was going to prove to me that I needed him. And I had an amazing bunch of women here in Chicago who just swarmed in, like they made sure we were fed until my unemployment kicked in, they made sure my kids got back and forth to school, that they didn't miss anything, and slowly I pulled myself out of that and what I realized as that was happening was the difference between my ability to succeed and recover, and my kids' ability to recover and be okay, I didn't know how they were gonna be okay I just knew they would, was because I was educated and I had access to resources.

I knew people who could tell me where to go, where to be, how to maneuver, what to ask for, and I knew the people who lived in my neighborhood did not. And that slowly informed how I wanted to shift my career and where I spent time when I wasn't with my kids. And so, that meant often taking a lot of lower paying jobs, which shouldn't be lower paying jobs, in case management, and working with the mentally ill in Chicago, working with the YMCA, but it was always programs that meant more than a check. I was helping somebody. I was laying the foundation.

And it really wasn't until maybe 2016 where I started to look for ways to incorporate my own passion into my profession, and I've been really ridiculously lucky to have an avenue to do that, and to work with youth and see the empowerment that it gives them. You know, specifically because I'm a poet, poetry. To write however you want to write with no rules but your own… I mean, there's all different types of poetry. You can do a Haiku, or a sonnet, but in free verse, it doesn't have to rhyme, you don't have to have punctuation, you don't have to capitalize, there's no form other than what you want it to be, and that freedom to Brown and Black kids who are constantly being told that what they have isn't enough, that what they aspire to they will never get, for them to be able to say what the hell that they want to say, however they want to say it, and share it, watching that take place was just amazing.

Menendez: Your poem Brown Girl, Brown Girl really put you on the map. It's when a lot of people first became aware of your writing. What went into writing it?

Honoré: So, I love talking about that, because who knew? You never know what the vehicle is that is gonna take you somewhere. So, I had started putting my poetry on social media around 2016 when we first started to see that summer of police brutality with immediacy because of social media. I started to write and one of my girlfriends was like, "You should make this public. People would like it." I'm like, "Nobody's gonna read poetry on Facebook."

And guess what? They frickin' did. So, I wrote like crazy over that summer, and then did a Kickstarter campaign to self-publish my first book of poetry, Fists & Fire, and it was just such a village book, and the book, the last couple of pages are everyone who donated to the Kickstarter, because they helped birth that book. My best friend did the cover. It's a special thing. And Brown Girl was in... is in Fist & Fire. And I was writing a lot about being the mother of a Black boy, who at the time was 13, and had just hit... He was as tall as I was, five-foot-nine, and I knew that was a shift. He wasn't gonna be seen as a little boy anymore. And I remember one time he rode his skateboard to the corner store and the police followed him. And he came back home, and he was just like, "I don't know what they... They were going slow next to me, mommy, and I don't know why." And so, I started writing a lot about that, and then we lost Tamir, and we lost Trayvon, and we lost Mike Brown, and so I was writing very heavily about the trauma of being a mother to a Black son.

And Sage, my oldest daughter, who is every bit her name, was like, "Hey, this is great. This is really great. I don't see my story in here. Where are we?" And I was like, "Oh, crap. I suck." And I wrote two poems out of that conversation. I wrote And The Light Dims, which talks about colorism, and I wrote Brown Girl, and kind of walked away from it and a lot of people told me they loved it, but that was that book in 2017.

Then, when Vice President Kamala Harris was elected, I was in the car and I write a lot immediately. If it's something is happening in the world, I write about it that day, that hour, that minute. The quicker I can get it out is my sweet spot and how I connect with people. My daughter was in the car with me and she was like, "Pull over. You know you want to write about this." And I did and I just kept thinking about Brown Girl, and all of the Brown girls who were seeing this moment, and what it meant, and I just did a couple of changes on the poem and then there was a picture of Vice President Harris and her great niece, one of Meena Harris's daughters, sitting on her lap, and I remember the caption about Meena's daughter telling her great aunt that she wanted to be I think the president and an astronaut or something like that.

And so, that's the picture I used. I just was like, "This is the perfect picture." And I posted it and look at where we are now. Like would have had no clue, none. I think NPR covered the story first when the principal in Brooklyn was having her kids recite it.

Principal: Brown girl, Brown girl, what do you see?

Students: I see a Vice President that looks like me.

Principal: Brown girl, Brown girl, what do you do?

Students: I fought, I hoped, I spoke what was true.

Honoré: First, I'm crying, and then I'm like, "NPR! It's my poem! Please credit me. Please let people know. Please, please, please, just at me. You don't even have to like... Just tag me. That's it." You want to run this story? Here's her headshot. Here's the stuff that she's done. This is

what you can link it to. And so grateful for that, because they did. I think This Is Politics added my picture, and they added my book, and they linked my social media, and then Meena retweeted it, and then I'm like crying, and snotting, and ugly face, like, "Oh my God! I can't believe this is happening!" Just losing it.

And it's just been so beautiful, but I think the most amazing thing out of Brown Girl is opportunities like this, and I don't know why this is, I always say I'm Black and Mexican. This is the first time in over 20 years of writing as an adult that I've been asked to talk about being Latina. Just being able to have that conversation, like I'm Latina, too. I'm first generation. You don't get more American than my story. My story is both of the people who occupied this country and the people who were stolen and built this country. This is my freakin' America. And I talk about it a lot, so I'm so grateful for that, because it is never... I've never had an opportunity to talk about that part of me before.

Menendez: What types of opportunities then did the virality open up for you?

Honoré: It got me a literary agent, Johanna Castillo with Writers House, like reached out to me and was like, "Do you want to be represented?" And I'm like, "Are you crazy? This has been on my manifestation list for as long as I can think of," and the fact that she is a Brown woman and an immigrant from Ecuador, like did God just say, "Let me find the exact right person for her?" I truly believe the universe sends you what you're ready for. I'm ready for it now and I'm dreaming bigger, like every time I hear a cheesy commercial for a Nike commercial, I'm like, "I could have written you a much better 15-second spot. Olympics, please call me."

I want children's books. I want books of poetry. I want speaking engagements. I love my work in equity. I would really, really love to do this full time. I would love to be able to support myself, and my kids, and know that I can continue to pay for everyone's college by just doing poetry and talking. I love a good panel. I love a good keynote.

Menendez: And you found your voice. What is the advice you give to someone who is struggling to find theirs?

Honoré: It's not gone. It's just there. I don't have a fancy writing process. A lot of my poems I write in the bathroom on the toilet with the door closed, because as you can see, my life just continues to happen. Also, like Apple people, hello? If you're listening, I wrote my whole book, Fist & Fire, on my phone in my Notes app. Your commercials with people taking big, huge pictures, a whole book. No tap. Call me. Call me. I share it from my phone, I save it in my phone, I edit it on my phone. There are lots of tools that we have, especially for writing, that you can do it anywhere and everywhere and you don't have to share it, but there is something about writing that is so cathartic and is such a release. Writing down your intentions makes them real. My dad used to tell me before he passed that if you write something down, your mind will, the universe will find a way to make it happen. And every list I've had about what I wanted to come true, it has happened or really close to it. Like my list for before I turn 44 I want to be on The Today Show, I was on Good Morning America and Nightline. Right there.

I still want to talk to Hoda though and Al Roker, because I really like them. Just write it down. No matter how silly or foolish, no matter how scary, or angry, or embarrassing, or hurtful, just write it down. It's something about being able to command your own language that shifts it, and you will see it show up in other places.

Menendez: Leslé, I really needed that right now. Thank you so much.

Honoré: Oh, I want to hug you so bad. Why is it COVID? Why are we so far away? Why are we not in a studio close?

Menendez: We'll do a do over in the post-COVID world. Leslé, thank you so much for doing this.

Honoré: Thank you for having me. What a dream this was. I'm just... Thank you for checking one more thing off of my list of things I want to do.

Menendez: Thank you for joining us. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our senior producer. Our lead producer is Cedric Wilson. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor and ad ops lead. We love hearing from you when you email us at hola@latinatolatina.com, when you slide into our DMs on Instagram, when you tweet at us @LatinaToLatina. Remember to subscribe, follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, wherever you're listening, and please, I know I ask this all the time, but do leave a review. It is one of the fastest, easiest ways to help us grow.

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