How Melania Luisa Marte Became a Word Weaver

The writer, musician and poet shares how her parents' migration from the Dominican Republic to New York City, and her reverse migration from the United States to the DR informs her exploration of colorism, colonialism, and love. She has poured it all into her new collection of poems, Plantains and Our Becoming.

Alicia Menendez:

Melania Luisa Marte is a weaver of worlds and of words. In her new book of poetry, Plantains and Our Becoming, she tackles everything from self-love to colonialism. Melania and I talk about centering blackness in her identity and in her writing, and the very first poem she ever wrote that got her in a lot of trouble. Melania, congratulations on this book being out in the world.

Melania Luisa Marte:

Thank you.

Menendez: Since so much of your work deals with diaspora and displacement, I want to begin with your parents' story. Tell me about how it is that your mom and dad met.

Marte: My parents met through an aunt of mine, my Tia Lesley. She lived in Santo Domingo in the capital, and my mom ended up moving to the capital when she was 18 or 19, I believe. She was just helping my aunt out by cleaning the house and running errands and things. And one day, my father called his brother, my Tio Ramon, who was married to my Tia Lesley, and my mom ended up picking up the phone. And he was like, oh, kind of falling in love with her voice and her wit. So he ended up flying to Santo Domingo to meet her, and they started dating. I believe six months later, they ended up getting married. My father was already living in the United States. He had an auto shop, and he was a mechanic. He also was a teacher and he taught mechanic in English, French, and Spanish. And so he already had a career in New York, and so he wanted to bring my mother. This is how my immigration story comes about.

Menendez: Do you think your mom understood what she was giving up by moving to the United States?

Marte: Oh, she completely did. I mean, she talks about it all the time. She tells me, she's like, because now I'm a mother and I chose to have my child in the Dominican Republic, but that's with the knowledge that he would gain dual citizenship and that he would be both a citizen of the Dominican Republic because by birth. But he would also, by my access in my American passport, he would gain his own American birth certificate and passport. Now, as a mother, I understand the importance of doing what's best for your children. And my mother definitely made it clear to us that although we love traveling, we would go to the Dominican Republic every summer, she would remind us that, "I know you love it here, but just remember that you have a better quality of life in the United States."

Menendez: Melania, you were seven years old the last time you saw your dad.

Marte: Yeah.

Menendez: Did you have time to process that he was dying, or did it come as a surprise?

Marte: Yeah, so he passed away in a drunken accident. So we literally spoke to him the day before, I believe. And then my mom got a call and then we had to go to the Dominican... At this point, he's living in the Dominican Republic, and we had to just go to the Dominican Republic for the funeral. It was very out of nowhere. And I literally, I have this vivid memory as a kid where we're on the plane on the way to the Dominican Republic, and I'm excited because I'm like, "We're going to my grandma's house. We're spending the summer."

And at one point where I'm sitting on the plane, I have this vivid memory, my brother's like, "What are you stupid? Papi just died." And then that it soon hit me, and I was just like, "Oh my God." And I had this moment where I'm crying. And so for many years, I had a hard time talking about it. And I've gotten to a space where I think, especially through therapy, therapy helps, guys. Go to therapy. I've gotten to a space where I've been able to use language and use poetry to explore that and also heal that. I still feel his presence. I still feel parts of him in me. And so I try to honor that.

Menendez: I love that, especially as I think about you trying to piece together this sense of being and belonging. When did you start writing?

Marte: So interestingly enough, I plagiarized my first poem. My first poem was a copycat poem from my cousin Maciel. My mom had sent me to the Dominican Republic when I was like five or six, and my cousin Maciel loved writing poetry, and she used to write her little lover. She had a little boyfriend. She was 12 or 13. She had a little boyfriend, and I wanted to be just like her. I was obsessed with her. I thought she was so beautiful. She is still so beautiful. She has this long, wavy hair and her skin just glistens. And she always wore like really clear lip gloss, and I was like, "I'm going to be just like her." And she wrote a poem about wanting to kiss her boyfriend under the mango tree at my grandma's house. And I was like, "Ooh, that's a really great poem."

And I tried to copy her poem. And then when I got back home to New York, my journal was full of these poems about kissing boys under mango trees. And my mom was like shook. My mom was like, "What were you doing all summer?" And she was like, "I'm calling your grandma." And she was just like, "No." That's how I got my first start writing poetry. And then, I just kept writing all of high school into college, and I ended up dropping out of college to pursue poetry and to just pursue my writing. And now we're here.

Menendez: Wait, that is a big choice.

Marte: Yeah. When I was depressed, I knew writing was my thing. I knew that's what I wanted to do, but I didn't really know how to navigate academia in a way that would benefit me in terms of poetry. And so I was just like, "I'm going to take a break." So I ended up moving here to Dallas where my mom was living at the time and joining the Dallas Poetry Slam. And I didn't really understand slam poetry because it's like the performance side of poetry. But with their help and with the community's help, I was able to really become a contender in the slam poetry community and ended up competing at Women of the World. I also competed at the Individual World Poetry Slam and made final stage on all of them. And I also competed with the team. Then it really just put some fire under me to understand that this really can be a career. Like you can tour with your poetry, you can write books, you can do amazing things. And so I just kept really at it for like, I would say five years. Really

five years of hustle. Granted I had been writing my whole life, so I already had this body of work.

Menendez: How are you sustaining yourself while you're on this poetry hustle?

Marte: Oh, working gigs. I would do performances, I would teach, I was also a teaching artist at the time, maybe getting paid 50 bucks a poetry show. And then when I stepped into doing conferences and I got a booking agent for college shows, that changed the game because then it's like, "Okay. Well, I can budget now because I'm getting maybe $3,000 here, $5,000 here." So it's like, "Okay, now this is more sustainable." And then really my big break came in 2020 when I wrote a commercial for McDonald's, and that gave me the financial aspect that I needed to really be able to sit down and just write. It gave me the freedom, the financial freedom to be like, "You can take yourself seriously now because the money matches."

Menendez: I want to give our listeners a sense of your poetry. Would you read Immigrant Math Problem for me?

Marte: Of course. Immigrant Math Problem.

If I give Mamá 5,000 pesos and Mamá gives 3,000 pesos to Tío for groceries and gas. And Tío gives 1,000 pesos to *la colmadera* for food, 500 pesos to *el pompiador* for gas and 500 pesos to his son. And *la colmadera* gives 200 pesos to her daughter for *motoconcho* fair to ride to school. And *el pompiador* gives 300 pesos to his wife for breakfast and dinner ingredients. And Mamá leaves 2,000 pesos for a small emergency. And keeps X amount of pesos in some nook and cranny that she calls a bank. And the bank is her home because she says the real bank that's owned by the government is unsafe. And at least in her home she keeps the money buried right next to her loaded gun. And and and how much more money do you think we will collectively need to erase the centuries of disenfranchisement that plagues us? Mami and Mamá have always taught me money is like a waterfall for people like us. It must trickle down or else some of us will drown of thirst. I want a math problem that will teach me to make enough to save us all.

Menendez: I once heard it said that there's universality in specifics, and that is such a specific poem. And yet, it captures the sense of how many of our families came here because they wanted to be able to send something back, and they wanted that abundance to be shared. I love that what you're landing on is this question of does it have to be this way? Do we accept the math as we have been taught it, or do we reimagine the calculus?

Marte: Yeah. You know, that's really beautiful what you just said, and I'm tearing up thinking about that because... So my mother is moving. She's on a flight right now as we speak, so I think it's just the beauty in timing. My mother is finally retiring from this country, and she's moving back. But she's moving back to a whole new world because she came to this country. I mean, she was able to buy land. She was able to rebuild my grandmother's home from a wooden cabin into really a grand home. And she's so excited now after so many years, 40 plus years, 30 something plus years. She's able to do so much more and have so much more over there. And so I think when we talk about these things, it's like we have to pat ourselves on the back.

The immigrant experience is sometimes filled with so much turmoil and just exhaustion. And sometimes it does feel burdensome to have the weight of your family, especially if you're one of the only ones who was able to make it out of the country and into more prosperous country. What does that look like in 40 years? What does that look like in 50 years? What does that look like in 100 years? And so, oftentimes I think about how, as

things become more expensive here, that means that folks are sending less money back home. And what does that do for the infrastructure of countries who depend on a dollar being sent over? How that impacts them? And oftentimes, it creates more crime, it creates more difficulties. And so it's just really important for us to reimagine, like you said, reimagine what that can be.

Menendez: So much of your work, Melania, is grounded in your identity as a Black woman, as a Black Latina. You write you were 12 years old the first time you realized your friends and you saw the world differently. Do you remember what happened that crystallized that for you?

Marte: Yeah, so I mean, it's just so interesting because I grew up in New York City, and I know many, many Afro-Latinas are like, "Well, I didn't realize I was Black until X, Y, and Z happened." But I grew up on the Lower East Side, so I didn't grow up with other Dominicans. I grew up with other Black folks, and I grew up with Puerto Ricans, and then a few white folks. And my Asian friends, a lot of my friends were from China. And so at a young age, I understood that I was navigating the world as a little Black girl. We have the same hair. We're listening to the same music. I grew up on Aaliyah and Beyonce and Destiny's Child and Missy Elliot. And so culturally, I was a regular, degular Black girl from New York City. And so in the poem on colorism, I'm exploring that because my friend, she feels seen in Latina.

She is the typical looking Latina. She's got the long wavy hair, she's mixed race, so she's able to just dip in and out of different identities. And the complexities of our friendship kind of shifted once I realized that she was a little anti-Black. And I didn't know why, because for me, it was like we're all friends, we're all sisters. But it was like, oh, there was a hierarchy that if you had softer hair, if you had lighter skin, if you were considered Latina and you could fit into Latinidad, you could be fetishized and romanticized. And if you were just a regular, degular Black girl, certain folks could feel like they can demean you and that they can degrade you and that they can pedestal themselves and feel like they are worthier than you are. And so, that conversation really started with my friend and I at the time. She was being really mean in a racialized way.

At the time, I didn't have the language, but I did say to her like, "Why are you being so mean to Black girls? What is it about Black girls that you're always picking on them?" Or like, I have no control over my hair texture, my eye color, my skin color. I have no control over these things. These are the things I'm born with. It's an inheritance. The conversation, what's missing is love for each other. Because I love myself, I'm able to love other Black women. And so, my hope is that the conversation on colorism, the conversation on anti-blackness within our communities is that we remember that if we love ourselves, we have to love our kin.

Menendez: Among your poems are an ode to Cardi B, an ode to Amara La Negra and I think one of the things that we're running up against very broadly is the limits of visibility. First, there is always a fight for visibility. I think what you're watching right now with the trans community is an example of this where almost a decade ago you had Laverne Cox on the cover of Time Magazine, and there was this feeling, it felt like an undeniable step forward. And now, almost a decade later, you're watching a lot of those rights be reversed. So in this conversation about blackness and about AfroLatinidad, I wonder what you think it would look like to move past the point of representation and visibility and have an honest conversation instead about equity?

Marte: It reminds me of a review I recently read on my book where a woman mentioned, she just said that my collection... I mean, it was a great review in a sense, but it bothered me a little bit that she said that my collection was almost obsessed with the trappings of capitalism and ownership. And I thought it was interesting because it's very difficult to talk about capitalism without talking about the fact that Black folks who were shipped here as cargo have never received their reparations. In this collection, I explore reparations a lot, and this book is my reparations, okay. Because let's talk about the fact that this is a book deal that I got, a nice hefty book deal that I got that gave me and my family so much more economic freedom. This life, I dreamt it up. I'm not supposed to be here writing and getting paid to write, that just was not the trajectory that systemically was set up for me.

When we talk about equity, it's just like given the opportunity to dream and then given the money to make the opportunities happen. So in order for us to really get to a space where we can say, "Okay, representation is here and everyone is truly equal. We have to really look like, is everyone financially equal? Is everyone economically equal? Do our communities have access? Do our communities have the same amount of resources?" It's very layered and it's very complicated. And so when the woman said that she's surprised because most poets of immigrant backgrounds talk about colonialism and capitalism as this really bad thing. And it is. And I do say it's a bad thing, but I also need to eat. And I think it's really unfair for us to put this burden of undoing capitalism on the folks who are most impacted by capitalism.

And so recently, I've been doing a lot of healing, healing my pettiness, but really healing my inner soul. But a lot of the healing I've had to do is forgive my ancestors, and it's not the ones who were victims. I'm forgiving because people forget that Black folks also have white DNA. I have to forgive my ancestors who also did wrong. And so, in order for me to get to a space where I can write about my joy, I also have to be able to release what weighs me down. We all have a part and a role in our own liberation and in our community's liberation and in the world's liberation. And so, we have to really get to the root. And that's why I wrote this book because I wanted to get to the root.

Menendez: It is so good. You are such a blessing, Melania. Thank you so much for taking the time to do this.

Marte: Thank you. This was amazing. Thank you so much.

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 mix this episode. We love hearing from you. Email us at ola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram or tweet us @LatinatoLatina. Check out our merchandise@latinatolatina.com/shop. And remember to subscribe or follow us on Radio Public, 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 Melania Luisa Marte Became a Word Weaver.” *Latina to Latina,* LWC Studios. August 21, 2023. LatinaToLatina.com.

Produced by: