



How Natasha Alfred's Lived Experience Informs Her Political Analysis and Storytelling

The Grio's VP of Digital Content and Senior Correspondent, and CNN political analyst joins Alicia to talk about blending memoir and cultural analysis in her new book, *American Negra*.

Alicia Menendez : Natasha Alford and I have run in concentric circles for years. A mutual friend connected us when Natasha was making her transition into media. Now as the VP of digital content and the senior correspondent for TheGrio and the political analyst for CNN, Natasha is doing what she was always meant to do, tells stories that inspire and inform, that includes her own story of identity and self in her new book, *American Negra*. Natasha and I talk about perspective in journalism. What happens when people stop seeing you as an underdog and how she's thinking about what it means to be Black and Latina now that she's a mom herself. Natasha, how full circle that we are finally here.

Alford: It's incredible.

Menendez: I want to start with some of the context of *American Negra*, which is that your dad is African American, your mom is Puerto Rican. How was race explained to you or discussed in your home?

Alford: It's so interesting. I think for the longest time I didn't make a distinction between race, ethnicity, and nationality, and that is just part of the American condition. We talk about these things interchangeably, which could be a little bit confusing for a kid. And my mother told me when I was a child that you are Black, you are Latina, and you are a girl.

Essentially, you have three strikes against you because of this. And so it wasn't until a bit later that I had a more nuanced understanding of Latinidad and understood that Latinos come in all colors. There are many different people who could be categorized as a different race under that umbrella of Latinidad.

Menendez: Yeah. It is interesting to me that in some ways your academic work is actually what begins a real personal evolution flowering. There's also something interesting that happens around 13, which is you start developing a central ethno racial identity and you feel pressed to choose what is it that happens at that moment?

Alford: It is a byproduct of growing up in the North. We tend to think of the North as a place that represents freedom, a little bit more perhaps progressive views on race, but the North is just as segregated as anywhere else. The difference is

that perhaps it's maybe unspoken or there were certain laws in place for years that produced that segregated experience, even if it wasn't official. And so because of the schools I went to, they were predominantly Black schools or white schools, and so people wanted to know where I fit. And so even though folks knew I had a mother who's Puerto Rican or Latina, they just thought of me as, oh, Natasha's a Black girl with a Spanish mom. And there wasn't really a nuanced understanding of, well, how does my Puerto Rican upbringing shape my views of the world, my sense of self, just my experience in America and my American story, the origin story that our family had? It was growing up in the North that forced me to feel like I had to choose, and as a result, I ended up understanding the world better too.

Menendez: How does your mom take it when you come home? Because you do come home and declare that you have made a choice.

Alford: Yeah. Well, my mom was often offended when she heard me say that I was Black without adding the Puerto Rican heritage part. Puerto Ricans are very proud people. You're proud of where you come from, and so I think for her, she may have felt that it was a failure of some sort, that I didn't feel that pride, but also I think it was her way of telling me to insist on my belonging, to take up space, to not be afraid to do that. And she just probably didn't have the language for it because she too had an interesting place in the world.

My mother is a mixed Puerto Rican woman. She's not white. I don't think people will look at her and say that she was Black, but she's certainly an Afro descendant. And so when you operate that ambiguous space, sometimes it can be hard to know how to talk about race. And it was in her relationship with my father, an African American man, undoubtedly a Black man, that he kind of eliminated that racial innocence in her life as well. So I watched her change over time to become more racially conscious, to become more conscious of the ways that systemic racism is at work. So over time, I think she's been more understanding of that position that I took as I was younger, but I think that she's also proud of the ways in which I've evolved and grown around this.

Menendez: What is it about the academic study of Afro-Latinidad that cracked something open for you?

Alford: I think in the academic study, I found overlooked history that felt so essential to the American story. Why is it that more students and US public schools don't know the story of Puerto Rico? It is a colony right now. This is not something that happened over a hundred years... It's so relevant right now.

I think that is some of our problem as an American society is that it is this sense that we live in a bubble and the world revolves around us, which is why when we have these big international crises, there's an element of the American electorate that is just unaware. They don't really understand our relationship to other countries or why we're making the foreign policy decisions that we're making.

So I think this consciousness, this overlooked history is important to understanding the American story, our role in the world and why people have a certain perception of Americans and our policy decisions. So that's what did it for me. I just had this real desire and yearning to elevate this history, and that's why I wrote this book. It's as much a cultural analysis and an analysis of history as it is a personal story.

Menendez: One of the things I had forgotten about your trajectory, Natasha, was that when you graduated, you have this values tension that a lot of us have, which is we have been sent by families who are not necessarily families of means, and we feel like we need to make financial good on the investment that was placed on us. And you make a choice. You make the "responsible" choice. You also get this really sought after job at Bridgewater.

Natasha S. Alford: Yeah, it's the largest institutional hedge fund in the world.

Menendez: And I actually don't want to linger there for very long so much as I want to get to the off ramp where you, the whole time, have known this was not where you were supposed to be, but a decision to leave a six figure paycheck, a decision to fly into the unknown when you don't have a safety net is a really hard thing to do. What did you start to do to prepare yourself to make that pivot?

Alford: I think it started with going back to my roots, talking to the people who knew and loved me before I stepped foot in the Ivy League, and when every single one of them said, "Yeah, this doesn't seem like you," or, "Where you're going next, yeah, that's you. That sounds like you." It was really affirming. I got the courage to really just say, "This is not who I am."

And I'm confident enough in myself to walk away from that and to let people see me differently because there's such a security and people looking at you and saying, "Oh, you work there?" The light that's in their eyes in terms of what they think about you and what they think you're capable of. But that's a crutch. And so it's really important to take away those crutches and those superficial things that keep us locked in place, that's why they call them golden handcuffs, in order to really unlock our true potential.

Menendez: Of all of the moments in the book that knocked me out, I think the one that was top of my list was when you leave Bridgewater. There's a writeup in the local paper in Syracuse about your move, and you make the mistake that everyone made in the mid aughts, which is you go into the comments section and the comments are along the lines of like, "Why is she making that much money to begin with?" And here's what you write. And I identified so fully with this.

You say, "In that moment, I had an epiphany. I was no longer the underdog city school poster kid to root for. I was considered to be an elite, a person of privilege by virtue of my education, regardless of nothing materially changing from my family. Whatever difference I wanted to make in society, I should do

without expectation of applause or anyone's approval. Now I was back in the real world and it was time to serve."

That happens for so many of us that the story we tell about ourself begins to change and we have to step into that new reality, which is not to say that you're not still the underdog city kid. You'll always be the underdog city kid. But now there's actually an added layer of complexity that in some ways makes you more alone. There are fewer people who have lived in that duality of being both things. So yes, we all want to be exceptional, but I think it's easy to gloss over just how lonely it is to be exceptional.

Alford: Yes, I think about all of those viral videos of the kids gathered around the laptop as everyone cheers for them while they get into the elite university. That's supposed to be the happy ending. When reality is they're just about to start another leg of the journey that won't always feel like a victory. I think I did it for those kids. I wrote this story for those kids who've been told that they have great expectations and they've gotten the straight A's and they've worked hard. And when they get to the other side of it and they start to question themselves whether they really can do it, whether they actually are as smart as everyone else, I want them to know that what they had within them that got them that far can get them to the next stage and that they don't have to be someone else in order to experience that victory and that true success.

But it's hard to know when you're at that moment, and that's why people like us have to go back and say, "We have to take off the mask. Yes, I'm on television. Yes, I'm an anchor, but I'm still fundamentally that same person." I think it's incumbent upon us to go back and tell those stories and truths.

Menendez: One of the reasons I've kept my eye on you over the years, Natasha, is because we talk a lot about how there are so few Latinas in news, but there are even fewer Latinas in the political news space. And I wonder for you, when I watch you on CNN, often the only woman, often the only person of color, often the only person under 40 sitting at the table, it's a lot of responsibility and I think there's always a push and pull between I'm here in part because that lived experience informs my perspective and my analysis, but also I cannot speak on behalf of any of these groups in their sum total. And so I wonder if you can tell me about a time when you felt you needed to lean into that lived experience, into that identity in order to do the work, to do the analysis justice.

Alford: The moment actually just happened. I had a moment where I was on with a senior political analyst, Republican conservative, and we were talking about Nikki Haley and her comments about race and that America has never been a racist country. That's the claim that she made. And the first segment, we actually kept it pretty cerebral. We just talked about it in the context of the election, but once we got to a certain point in the conversation where my fellow panelist was just giving the usual talking points about the Republican Party being the party that championed the end of slavery, I really tapped into my lived experience of being a Black woman in this country, being African American, being Puerto Rican, knowing the ways in which the pain of racism is

still happening and affecting people in my family to this day, affecting our community.

I'm from Syracuse, which is just a couple hours from Buffalo, New York where Black people were gunned down. This is in the 2020s, this is not the 1900s, and that easily could have been one of my family members in the grocery store that day. And so I think sometimes we live in two Americas where there's a segment of the population that just can't empathize. They can't put themselves in the shoes of their neighbors who are living with this fear, who are raising their children the way that I have a Black son and I have to think about things that they may not be thinking about. It is my responsibility to elevate that lived experience.

It doesn't come up all the time. It doesn't always need to come up, but when the moment comes, it's a missed opportunity if I don't speak from that place. And so in that moment, I spoke my truth. I talked about the pain of racism and being a descendant of an enslaved American.

Menendez: You led me to exactly where I wanted to go, which I do want to talk about your son because one of the things that I was struck by reading *America Negra* is there were so many well-intentioned people at so many steps of the way. I think about that mentor who in your early adolescence really wanted to cloak you in Black excellence and Black womanhood and wanted to make sure that you understood your place as a Black woman. I think about that talk your mom gave you that you referenced where she said, "Natasha, you are three things. You're a Puerto Rican, you are Black, you're a woman." It was not for lack of trying. And I wonder sometimes as we struggle with these questions of race and ethnicity and our place in society, if you feel that there was anything that could have gone differently in that journey that would have made you feel more aligned, more seen, more understood in your own complexity.

Alford: I needed to see more Black Latinas. I needed to see more Afro Latinas who were proud of their blackness, who understood the history, not just, oh, this is my skin color, but who could articulate this is my experience of marginalization in society. I think I would've felt less ashamed. I think having other Black Latinos who could speak to that would've normalized some of the fears and anxieties that I had, and then I would've just moved past it more quickly.

Menendez: Do you think we're in a different moment now then?

Alford: I do. And I think for all of the terrible realities of social media, that is one of the positives. And I wrote about this in an op-ed for the *New York Times*, just how an online community changed my awareness and took away that sense of isolation and loneliness. When you go on Instagram and you see a Latina with your hair texture talking about the choices to wear her hair a certain way or talking about when she goes into the bodega and she starts to speak Spanish, but the Latino cashier still insists on speaking broken English to her because he doesn't really believe that she knows Spanish.

You hear those stories just more frequently now. But we needed that growing up, and the trajectory probably would've been the same in terms of the different struggles and insecurities and the growth and ultimately the acceptance and the confidence. But I think it just would've been a quicker path to that epiphany of belonging.

Menendez: You are not in a parallel situation with your mom when it comes to raising your kid, both because you very much identify as being Black in a way that your mother did not. You have a son, rather than a daughter, and you're doing it in a different community that is more ethnically and racially complex than the community you were living in, which was much more of a binary. And so I wonder how becoming a mom and raising a son has shaped or changed the way you think about these questions.

Alford: I think if anything, this is where intersectionality, as much as that has now become a hot button phrase, intersectionality is so real to me now raising a Black son because this sort of inherent assumption of criminality put on the Black male body. I think women experience it, but men experience it in a different way, in a way that feels even more intense.

So his place in the world as a young Black man, that brings up a lot of fear for me. And there are certain techniques and coping strategies that I think I had as a young Black girl that he won't be able to rely on. And so I think it's not just race, it's gender in that case, and that makes me really invested in how are we supporting young Black boys in society, giving them space to show up in different ways, giving them examples of what they can be in the world. All of that is just so real now that I'm a mom.

Menendez: What did I miss, Natasha?

Alford: One thing I think we can talk about. So we have an election coming up and we're talking about coalitions in a multiracial democracy. The way that we talk about the Black vote versus the Latino vote, we have to continue to strive for nuance in that conversation. And we also cannot be afraid to talk about anti-blackness and the role that plays in breaking down political coalitions, breaking trust. We cannot just have this assumption that because Latinos are discriminated against and experienced their own kind of marginalization in this country, that therefore it's not worth it to talk about the colorism and the racism within the community. If you don't address the bias, we'll never be able to realize our full power.

Menendez: Natasha, I am so thrilled that I get to say I knew you then. Thank you so much for taking the time to do this.

Alford: Thank you. Thank you for seeing me so early in my journey.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Virginia Lora is our producer. Kojin Tashiro is our lead producer, Tren Lightburn mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com, slide into our DMs on

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