

Stop: 19th and Broadway

Route: 11

Directions: Walk up East 21st

Lengua

The man on the bus told me I was wearing Zulu colors and asked if I was Ethiopian. I told him no, didn't correct him on the fact that Zulus are from southern Africa, and said my family comes from the Dominican Republic. This is only a quarter true.

English is not my language. It is the language I speak but it is not one I own. During sleep, my brain cultivates alternate linguistic universes. I speak to my Colombian friend with ease. The Latin blood that runs through me flows from my tongue. In waking life, there are times when my bathroom acts as a safe haven. I speak to myself in the minimal French I know, creating sentences with strange meaning or translating the words on the soap dispenser. Joy builds inside of me when I can understand the entirety of *mode d'emploi* on the back of the bottle. It is strange how the mouth can feel so comfortable with words the brain cannot understand.

Joy builds when I can communicate in another tongue, but disappointment arises when I cannot. It forces me to remember the streets of Nicaragua, bustling with foreign yet seemingly familiar words and phrases. How beautifully the language bounced off of the bright colonial buildings, inside the walls of the 400-year-old church while the father, El Padre, recanted words I could not understand. How cryptic and expressive was the language when the teenagers whispered during. I remember the sadness that overcame the faces of people who tried to talk to me in Spanish. They addressed me as if I was one of their own. I denied their familial invitation when I responded with *no hablas espanol, lo siento*.

I would feel no shame if English was my native tongue, and by native I mean the original language my bloodline spoke. But my great-grandfather was from France and he passed through the West

Indies to pick up a woman, my great grandmother. She was from the Dominican Republic, coming to age after its peak of colonization. I imagine she spoke both Spanish and the language of the indigenous, but I cannot be certain. Much of my ancestry is obscured.

I do not know how much I believe in carrying the genetic memories of our ancestors through DNA. But I do know how my mind goes blank when thinking of the Natives, of the Africans, of the nameless individuals who contributed to my existence yet whose image I cannot conjure in my head. I wonder if that genetic amnesia is inherited, somehow. If that automatic shutdown when we begin to think about our roots is passed from parent to child. When we think about the parts of us that were moved and removed. The parts of us that were invaded.

I used to rarely think of the Europeans who, morally or immorally, made their way into my blood. Into my genes, the most personal parts of me. When my mind goes blank, it enters a state where my eyes no longer focus and thoughts silence: I believe *this* is ancestral dissonance. This is the effect of not knowing where you *come* from. What languages I speak as opposed to which I *could* and maybe should. Language is how I connect with myself and it is also my disconnect. Adopting language was an obstacle forced onto most of my peoples and as a result, I speak English. All of the possible ways my tongue could move and the sounds my mind could understand have been limited because of history.

Language is not all that has been lost. I have a general idea of my paternal lineage because the men in my family have always been proud of their origins. I do not know much else besides my mother's genealogy. My sister got her genes tested through her job. Daughters happen to only carry their mother's genetic information, so my one sister testing herself allowed all seven of us to know half our person.

The results from the rest were not surprising: fifty-five percent African, thirty-four percent European, eleven percent Native American. My mother is beautiful for her blackness but it would be doing discredit to the many different peoples running through her bloodstream if I did not

acknowledge them. In America there is so much inside of blackness and my family is the epitome of this fact.

Her light skin is comfort to me because she is my mother. She represents the strongest idea of beauty in my mind but I believe she wished to be darker. Her thick spiraling hair ties me to her. I see it in my own, it is what she has given to me, what her mother gave to her. I am still convinced her blue eyes change colors with season or mood, tide rising or falling. Science hasn't changed me.

I feel as if the stories about my origins have been swept under the rug and if I lifted it up, too much would be revealed. The dust might blind me. I know very little about my dad's mom but I have seen pictures of her parents. On her father, deep smooth skin and porcelain teeth. On her mother, a smile that attempted to make its way out of the picture, to break the barrier between photograph and viewer. The frame will always divide me from her, as her death does. Some knowledge leaves with the dead.

If I had one wish it would be to pay more homage to those who have died, the ones who have passed down life to the living. I tell myself there must be a good reason my family does not speak of things I've only heard glimpses of. But I will always want to know more. There will always be more questions to ask. Cultural amnesia is not something I want to participate in. Time does not separate us from history as much as we think.

My grandfather has told the story many times, the one about Leon Pecot taking a ship to the *Republica Dominicana*. During the holidays, I am tossed back a century by his oration. I imagine a French man with the notorious bulbous Pecot nose combating raging seas and violent winds. Just so he could get to the Caribbean. Just so I could exist today.

I imagine who it was he took with him to Louisiana. I like to think she chose to go with him on her own accord. She wanted to leave the Dominican Republic with a white man not because that was her only way out but because she wanted the adventure. I'd like to think my great-grandfather would

have had a moral code like my own. That compassion runs through my genetics. He would not have plucked a girl from her roots and bring her to a foreign land just for his benefit. I like to think they were actually in love, despite racial barriers. But I have an intuition: it is unlikely this was the case.

My father believes in genetic memories. I have seen what this can be like. I have always sensed a seed of black-over-black superiority in my family. Maybe because some of our hair curls gently and grows long while some of our hair embraces itself tightly and grows toward the sky. Maybe because my great aunts and uncles look both Cajun and Creole. There is a myth Pecots were the kind of black people that owned sugar cane plantations. My dad once said that Pecots were entrepreneurs, hard workers, and builders in more than one sense. But what about my mother, what is she?

I do not believe in a slave mentality, not in the feeble way people define it. Darker skin on a plantation meant harder work out on a field. That is resilience unheard of, strength my grandmother passed down to me through my mother. That is the human body being challenged and succeeding, continuing to endure mental and physical beatings without knowledge of an end. That is continuing to wake up every morning even though the sunlight brings no type of liberation but a mutilated sense of revival. Straddling these two ideas of blackness, I feel my eyes unfocus and my stomach clench. And so what am I? A person enslaved to a metaphorical field in the twenty first century? An uncle tom, ignoring the pain of those blacker? Can I be both and neither, tied to or disconnected from the experiences in my blood?

I have never felt like anything other than a Pecot and I have never felt like a Pecot. I have taken pride in my scattered geographical origins but with little reason as to why. It is not like I speak Spanish or French or know the origins of my Indigenous DNA. Pride in one's heritage is to feel included in one's culture, but I feel detached from every culture running through my blood. What do I know about anything historical except that I am a black girl living in the 21st century, waiting for delivery like we always do? Will delivery come through self-knowledge or knowledge of this world? I do not know. Do you know? I don't.

The picture was old, 1900s, and the people were Creole. My mind split when I found it, a small picture at the bottom of a page in *National Geographic*. The man on the far right looked identical to my grandfather when he was 30 years younger. The women all looked like variations of my aunts. The same type of division happened when I saw a picture of my great grandmother Regina. The one from my grandfather's story. She had a face just like my fifth oldest sister and sadness in her stare.

It's disorienting not to know the origins of your body. This is a stress far too many black people have to consider. For people whose origins seem to be randomly dispersed throughout many cultures, countries, continents, it's more than disorientating. It is disembodiment. It's not that the intermingling of cultures is damaging in itself; but having no knowledge about which cultures are contained within you is just another burden weighing down, down, down on your identity.

The man on the bus told me I was wearing Zulu colors and asked if I was Ethiopian. I told him no, didn't correct him on the fact that Zulus are from southern Africa, and said my family comes from the Dominican Republic. This is only a quarter true. The Dominican Republic is the only direct point of origin I have for my blackness and even that knowledge is diluted. My grandfather's blackness does come from that island but I don't know about my grandmother's. I do not know about my other grandmother or my other grandfather because I forget to ask.