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WRITING

History and Me

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TYPE

NARRATIVE

GENRE

GRADE 11

I live on Independence; each block a different terrain of street. Some like slabs of moon with craters that can turn a good car's transmission belly up and puncture the vulnerable underside, and others smooth and quickly driven. The houses you pass have the history of the city written into their structure, three prominent cultures carved into the ironwork, displayed in shutters, and felt in the layout. My house is at the end of the 1600 block where Independence meets Claiborne. William C.C. Claiborne was the first non-colonial governor of Louisiana and of the English. A mortal man seeking to brand his legacy into the land he governed—essentially a weak play at immortality—his name will be a major intersection at the center of the Crescent City with three remembered father's.

When people look at me their first impression is that I'm black. Then I speak and not only am I not from the South, I'm definitely not from New Orleans, and

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I’m not really black. Then they hear my name and wonder if I speak Spanish. They never think to ask if I’m Latina and they never guess I’m from Jamaica—speech lessons bleached out my accent long ago. When a foreign colored person immigrates to America, they take on the title “Black.” There’s no Nigeria or Sierra Leone or any other country in that continent, they’re automatically African. They become ensnared in the history of the survivors of the Atlantic slave trade. It becomes their new identity, regardless of whether they are currently or ancestrally from some place in Africa.

You can see the English bones built in the high houses on Esplanade. The English were the last to settle in the belly of New Orleans, and English was the first to cultivate my tongue. English was my first language and it came in two parts, the birth of a gulf that separated my mother and father for 21 years till they met. Their dialects of English met on my mom’s Jamaica, and he brought us back to America five years after my conception. My vocal chords were like the false bones you have when you’re a baby at that time, the cartilage still malleable. Old and new English are at war in my throat; it’s a cold pressure in my head, and an embarrassing nausea in my chest. Jamaica and most of the Caribbean have the same colonial ethnic history.

In Jamaica we drive on the left side of the road and “color” is written “colour,” and so when I came to America I spoke like its mother and no child speaks like the preceding generation. Jamaica is one of, if not the, only island in the Caribbean that speaks English

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as its first and only language. The whole country speaks in a broken slang, with throats and tongues dipped in twang. It developed from a past scared to be “smart” to its enslavers, but nevertheless it’s still English. I came to America, the land that outside eyes—people of paradise and people who are paralyzed—visualise as paradise and I was remade to fit their code. Speech lessons to speak “proper” English stole the Jamaican jewels ingrained in my teeth and locked them away for heated moments.

So many Americans want to experience culture, a deep-rooted connection that’s lost in the business of their streets, but when it meets them face to face they automatically try to break the stallion. Imagine a sheet of printer paper folded into a horse. The horse is history, its events written with black ink. The horse is black. Regardless people try to coerce the ink out of the stallion, to rewrite with what’s relative. In my experience it was Americans who tried to re-break the bones and rename the roads, but me and I are interchangeable in my house. Till m-e turned to m-i and and turned to y.

Claiborne can’t bring you everywhere, so sometimes when I exit the driveway of my house, I turn left. Galvez is the next main street that runs parallel to Claiborne. Bernardo de Galvez was a colonial governor of Louisiana and Cuba. Cuba is north of Jamaica and I think it’s only fitting. If Jamaica is at the center of my life compass and the proper direction to go in go is up, where am I to go? No soy de Cuba pero mi Padrino y su familia son. Todos hablan español y mi Papi también. Mi Padrino no habla mucho inglés

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y mi mama y mi hermanita no hablan español y yo hablo español pequito. The Spanish were the second to have New Orleans and Spanish will be my second language. I met my Padrino when I was five. We were living in New Orleans at the time, but because of Hurricane Katrina and other circumstances I didn't get to see him until nine years later. I never met my Madrina—she died before I was born—but her picture hangs above our mantle that holds our bobada at home.

You can see the Spanish in the way I call my dad Papi unless I'm agitated and how he calls me negrita when he is, (otherwise mija is usually used). How he blesses me "que Olofe tequida te mi compania mija" whenever Mama, Alma, or I sneeze. How I leave the house as my dad is jamming out to Mercedes Sosa's song La Meza, and Che Guevara; I say "luego" and he responds "cuidate mija." People hear my name, Corazon, and ask again—after the forever exclaimed "What!"—"Do you speak Spanish?"

I'm a socialite but people stress me out. I've been ethno-analyzed repetitively too many times. It makes me laugh sometimes when people ask why old black folks don't put up with shit, it's no wonder. I'm only 17 and I'm already past tired of it, but it's a package deal, my pigment and its baggage. It's like an undertow every time I meet someone new. I find myself questioning my integrity, juggling all the ethnicities I'm a part of, in terms of religion, pigment, culture, etc. Why do kids with their Spanish heritage prominent in the paint of their skin, the structure of their facial bones, get to claim their heritage but

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speaks not a lick of Spanish and haven't tasted a home-cooked tamale? Yet I can't claim my Jamaican heritage because I don't have the accent. I'm not bitter about it, annoyed lots of the time, but mostly curious. Why am I not considered Hispanic? It's not like my parents went on Nameberry to choose a pretty name. I have a Spanish name for specific reasons, to honor specific people, and a specific part of myself. Everywhere I look at myself I find myself wondering if I have the right to claim that part of my heritage. Am I like those other Americans who count the percent of their heritage to claim something they know nothing of? I don't think so. I don't claim 16% Cuban, 34% Jamaican, 34% American, 14% Native American, and 2% milk.

Everyone keeps going on about Africa. But it's a continent, not a country, and even in the small countries that have one national language, their "country" is a colonial apparition with sub-cultures, dialects, languages, and tribes forcibly crammed together. So claiming I hail from Sierra Leone is quite impossible. People treat the countries in Africa like they treat the states in America, but it's more specific. Think of it on a miniature scale. Think of street runners, not cross-country skiing. Sierra Leone is a good regional area, but I'm from the Mende Tribe. The tribes are the countries. Pro-black people all walk around wearing ankhs and preaching about Kemet (Ancient Egypt), but I find it humorous that they don't seem to remember that Egypt is on the east coast of Africa. Its history is engulfed in the Mediterranean Sea intermingled Europe. Slaves came from West Africa; it's very unlikely you're Egyptian.

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How can I, without actively searching, know so much Greek mythology, but little to none African mythology? The more I learn about this mysterious continent, I see the stories hidden behind the loudness of Europe, and under the cloaking armpit of Europe, Russia, and China, I find myself no longer upset about their unknown myths. Our stories will remain untouched and accessible only to us. What I find myself upset about is the abuse, neglect, and the people being taken advantage of. People are so fascinated with France. This is why most people learn French. Most aren't looking to go to Haiti, or the many French-colonized and French-speaking areas of Africa. I particularly don't like French. Someone once told me it was phonetic, I don't see it, but whatevs.

I don't visit the French Quarter much. It's not really something New Orleanian residents do, unless for work or entertaining visiting friends. People come to New Orleans, sometimes learning French beforehand, to find that no one speaks French. Seriously, in my three years of living in my Papi's home city I've only met one person who speaks French, that lives here. Maybe a few that speak creole french, Haitian or Cajun. But you can find the French in the Crescent City's name, Orleans. You find it in accents on the homes and the street names. The gallery houses, where people crowd the balconies for parades. It's honored in carnival season with the French title Mardi Gras (Fat Tuesday). I believe that the only reason I would learn French is so that I'd go somewhere in Africa, but once I go there I'd find a local and learn their language: that mix of whatever French dialect and their ancestors' native tongue.

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New Orleans isn’t a tourist destination for me. When I look at the map and feel my wanderlust tug at the base of my stomach, I don’t see monuments and souvenirs; I see the people and I see in the lines of their elders’ skin the history between those folds. I see in the smiles and tears of their youth the boundaries of their customs. I realize that I’m my own mini New Orleans. With many histories. With third-world streets and first-world villages and a rich assortment of people. I’ve left out the Vietnamese, the Hondurans, the Haitians, the Natives, and other cultures dotting the mosaic of New Orleans because those aren’t my stories to tell. I haven’t uncovered them in me outside of my peers. I wouldn’t represent them well. I left out the religions, the story behind Mardi Gras and King Cake, the real truths about the wrongly represented Voodoo and Santeria, and the cloned practices of Christianity that so many have taken between their legs and into their souls.

I’m only 17 and haven’t gotten the chance to discover all the curves of myself. All the countries pasted together to make my body, languages tucked between my teeth and on the cusp of my lips, customs branded into my hands, and cultures fixed to my hips. New Orleans is my home. Jamaica is my home. Spanish (the language) is my home. English and all its dialects are my home. French is my annoying cousin. And everything else is added to my crown like wishes that once hung from a Kalpavriksha Tree but is now worn on the wrists and ankles of those fulfilled promises and thank yous.

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New Orleans is remembered out of three soils kneaded and rolled out to bag the bones of her residents, the hidden stories, the specks of elements and minerals that make up the meat of those soils. I know the people blacklisted to the colonial standard of their pigments and disregarded for the sweat their ancestors spent to water the crops. I'm one of their children, hailing from queens in rags, that held the crown jewels molded into their teeth, and kings who wear their pride in the eyes of their babies. I cradle my head in its double consciousness and punch through the drywall of faith like Katrina. Wake up to water carrying my bed. The abused of this society count love in belated birthdays, but celebrated each day they make it to the bed alive. Deaths are brushed under the living's rugged carpet after a celebration to honor their carbon footprint because we're busy surviving and counting the cards at the table.

"Negrita!" Papi calls. Little black girl. I see the word negro and think the color black first. Negro. I see Spanish.

"Negrita," Papi says, but in his voice there's no persecution.

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