

Mi Tacita

By Vanessa García

Ours is not a bloodline, but a text line.

—Amos Oz and Fania Oz-Salzberger

I just did 23andMe. I spit into a tube and my genetic code came back; my DNA. Myself. We do this—people—we look for who we are in patterns. Inside the genome, in language, in the *potaje*. My genome says I'm 97.9% European. Mostly, I'm Iberian, with a smattering of Northwestern European, a tiny .2% Ashkenazi Jew, .3% Sub-Saharan African, and .9% East Asian and Native American. But if you ask me who I am, I'll tell you what I've always said: I'm Cuban.

Mind you, I was born in the States. Technically, I'm American, born of two Cuban parents. ABC. American Born Cuban. So, why do I say this? And why do I write about Cuba obsessively? Why don't I say I'm Spanish, which is where most of my ancestors are from, it seems? Why don't I concentrate on Spanish politics, it's interesting enough, as we've all seen on the news recently. I could be harkening back to my Catalanian roots, and anchoring stories there. But I'm not. I'm sitting here, talking about Cuba.

Nowhere in my 23andMe report does it flash a red triangle with a white star and say: Martí or Maceo. Nowhere in there does it say: "You come from a little island of looming complexity. Forever tied up and tied to you." I mean, sure, yes, it's there in the subtext, definitely. That % of Native American in me is probably Ciboney or Taíno, and the Iberian, he's my grandfather, who carried the Old Country with him into the new. That huge Iberian percentage point is also the colonizer, of course. The African in me,

that's easy to imagine. The slaves, their ships set forth from home for reasons I wish I could erase. The Chinese: indentured servants. The subtext, it's all there.

But why do I feel like the Cuban-me inside the American-me is so much of me, even though I didn't see the island for myself until I was in my thirties. Why does my adopted friend, who has blonde hair and blue eyes, adopted by Cuban-American parents, say the same thing I do when you ask her what her ethnicity is: "Cuban," she says. Without hesitation. It's strong, that pull. Why?

Maybe the answer lies in a little corner of the 23andMe report, a section I almost ignored. If you click around enough, there's a section that will tell you your propensity toward vegetarianism and how likely you are to run a marathon. It's kind of like the "Fun Facts" section of your genetic code. In that section, it says that I'm 71% more likely to drink espresso-style coffee. When I read that I think: there. There it is. [305. *cafecito* time.](#)

It's funny, but it's also huge. That little *tacita* might just hold everything. The numbers say that most of the people that come from where I come from, with my genetic code, drink espresso instead of diluted, watered down coffee in big mugs. It shows up in our genetic code, but I don't think it's biology. Coffee, coffee is story. Passed on, from one person to the next, coded into the limbic system, into the canals of memory, to be rolled out with every generation.

Coffee is my mother beside the stove-top stirring the first black-ink trickle of *Bustelo* into the sugar, making *espumita*. Teaching me how, all the while, with every quick circle of her wrist. The first action of the day. Every, single day.

If the Cuban is anything, she is a storyteller. Our greatest fighter was also our greatest poet. Even Fidel, he was a master of language and myth. The man came down

from the mountain, like Jesus, slaying the shackles of race and religion. That was story. It's all story. *La Batalla de las Ideas*, the billboards, the beards: Story.

Growing up, not a day went by in my family, when Cuba was not mentioned. She was there in song and dance; in Gloria Estefan and Willy Chirino. She was there in sadness when my grandmother lost her mother and her siblings back “home,” who she hadn't seen since she left the island. She was there in the *Caja China* on Christmas, and in the Spanish everyone chose to speak instead of English. In the skirt of *La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre* at La ermita, Miami's miniature mirror of Havana's Malecón. Not once or twice, or three times. But everywhere, every day. In almost every single action. In every single sigh. There she was ... “*En Cuba...*”

Cuba lives in my body, as 23andMe implies in its subtext, but more than anywhere else, it lives in my mind. In my imagination, in my reality, and, therefore, in my “self.” In my story, my personal narrative. Even this, this thing I'm telling you now. This is story. This is power. This is a cup of everything. *Una tacita de café amargo, endulzado.*

Somewhere in me, I must have known this all along, that family and love are craft, that we are made of story. That our fabric and our texture is flesh and blood, but more than that, it's also words strung together, repeated and coded. This is why I write about Cuba. I write to tell my story, our story, and to make sure it is not forgotten. To pass it on, and to explain it to the American in me, and the Americans around me, to the agent that picks up my manuscripts, the gatekeepers that edit them, and, ultimately, the readers that take up my books. I write to connect with all the other stories out there inside our fifty States. For the Dominicans in Washington Heights, the Somalians in

Minneapolis, and the Vietnamese in Santa Clara County. Moving farther across the globe to Muslims in Madrid; East-Asians in London.

If I trace a thread to the origins of this need to write and connect, there are many. The picture is a tapestry not a single string. But let me pull one thread for you, unravel a single color, a single day, a day I was reminded of when I went to see *On Your Feet* last year, the musical about Gloria and Emilio Estefan. I saw it in New York City, on Broadway, and found myself weeping, alongside my best friend, Yanik. We were both with our husbands (mine is Uruguayan and hers is a super Gringuito). They were not crying. How could we explain, then, why we were?

It started when Yanik and I we were 13 in a drive-thru Taco Bell line, in the car with my parents. A *Gloria Estefan and the Miami Sound Machine* song came on the radio. Something from the 80s. *1-2-3* perhaps, or *Anything for You*. From the backseat, I turned on my teen noxiousness and said: “I hate Gloria Estefan.” Yanik agreed. We were just too cool. We preferred the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Nirvana, anything that smelled like teen spirit.

Our coolness, however, was soon cut short by a jolt. My father had pressed the breaks, full force, and my mother had whipped her head back to stare us down. I didn’t know it yet, but I’d made a big mistake—huge. And my parents were just about to Cubansplain it to me.

“You cannot hate Gloria Estefan,” my mother said, almost jumping out of her seat. “You are not *allowed* to hate Gloria Estefan, do you understand me?!” My mother’s infamous vein was sticking out of her forehead, pumping a lifeline into her full-volume speech. Yanik and I shut our mouths fast, eyes wide, confused.

“You don’t know anything, little girl!” My mother shouted. My father started in too: “Do you know what it took to get to where Gloria is, to get to where *we* are, do you know what we’ve had to do in this country?” The cars were honking behind us, there were people fiending for burritos, but my parents didn’t care. “*Nuestra sangre!*” my mother said, “How dare you?!”

Our blood? That was dramatic. I eye-rolled toward Yanik. Surely, my parents were overreacting. But I knew better than to say this out loud. You learn that early: When your Cuban mother screams the way my mother was screaming in the car now, you shut up and listen, even if you disagree. It wasn’t until many years later, that I understood my parents’ feelings in that car. Watching Gloria and Emilio’s story on “The Great White Way,” firing back at the Canon, I turned on a more mature voice and thought: *Mom and dad, you were right. I know that journey in my skin now. And I love Gloria Estefan.* The one place I disagree is that loving Gloria is not about blood alone, it’s also about our story.

How could Yanik and I explain why we were crying at *On Your Feet* to our husbands? It was our childhood, our people, on stage—it was love, crafted; art. And if the world is, indeed, a stage, then the world was finally admitting they’d been listening to us, to Gloria, for a very long time. That they found in her a beat they were unfamiliar with, wrapped inside a synthesizer they knew well. That it said something to them, spoke a language they understood, whether they wanted to admit it or not. Here was our Cuban story, our migratory tale, our history. Here was America. Here was the inevitable assimilation of the Cuban into the United States, but here too, importantly, was America’s assimilation to us. There was a massive amount of power to that.

This is why I write. This is why I write about Cuba. For a very long time, my Cuban story has felt, in me, like a responsibility. But more than that it's love—it's the fibers of family and identity.

This journey, of writing about Cuba, has not always been easy. The gatekeepers have not always thought it was an important story. I've received hate mail. I've battled family and friends, and, most importantly, I've battled fear. The same vein that showed through my mother's forehead in the car so many years ago, appeared again when I first told my mother I would have to travel to Cuba to make my story a reality. To bring the imagined island into focus, and into the present. On the ground, in the moment—it's what I needed and wanted, in order to tell the story I needed to tell. The story *she* had inspired me to tell. The story she fought, but eventually became a part of, when I convinced her to come with me to Havana. The story that had the most power to move my people—all of them, the Cubans, as well as the Americans.