

A Precious Inheritance

Lessette Manners

In my country, there is a popular saying that has been passed from mouth to mouth for generations. This saying comes in the form of a question that may seem superficial to other people, but for Puerto Ricans it has a very deep meaning. The saying goes, “*Y tu abuela, a dónde está?*” (“And your grandma, where is she?”). Before I explain what this phrase means, I want to remind you that racism exists in almost all societies, and of course

Puerto Rico is no exception.

According to the *National Geographic Society*, the average Puerto Rican has DNA that is 12% indigenous, 65% Western European and Asian, and 20% African.¹

In other words, almost every Puerto Rican has a precious heritage of three races: black, Indian, and

white. This means that Puerto Rico, an island just 100 miles long by 35 miles wide, is a tiny spot on the planet where you can find a wide range of races in all their shapes and tones. If you are looking at hair, you will see all types: straight, curly, wavy, blond, brown, black, and red. We have everything!

That is why the saying “*Y tu abuela, a dónde está?*” has a special meaning for us. It is because in this country, even if you have a very light skin and blond hair, your genes carry the remnants of all these races. You don’t have to look too far into the past, sometimes as recently as a grandmother, to identify the presence of another race.

Despite these facts, in Puerto Rico, there is discrimination against people with dark skin. For example, companies that produce hair care products almost always advertise the typical hair of Caucasian women. This conditions people—especially vulnerable young people—to think that there is only one kind of beauty. In my case, from the time I was a little girl, I heard people tell me I had “bad” hair. (I have curly hair that comes from my African genes, type 4c.² See “Hair Types” chart on the next page.) At school, other students and even adults made me feel ashamed of my natural hair. I started to see my hair as a defect instead of embracing and accepting my African heritage. This led me to try to hide my inheritance through



“*¿Y tu agüela, aonde ejtá?*” (“And your grandma, where is she?”) by Fernando Fortunato Vizcarrondo is a poem written in the Puerto Rican tradition of *Poesia Negra* (Black Poetry). In this youtube video, it is recited by Eduardo Cortés. <tinyurl.com/ytuabuela>. Find the text of the poem in both Spanish and English in the Extras section of our website <changeagent.nelrc.org/issues>.

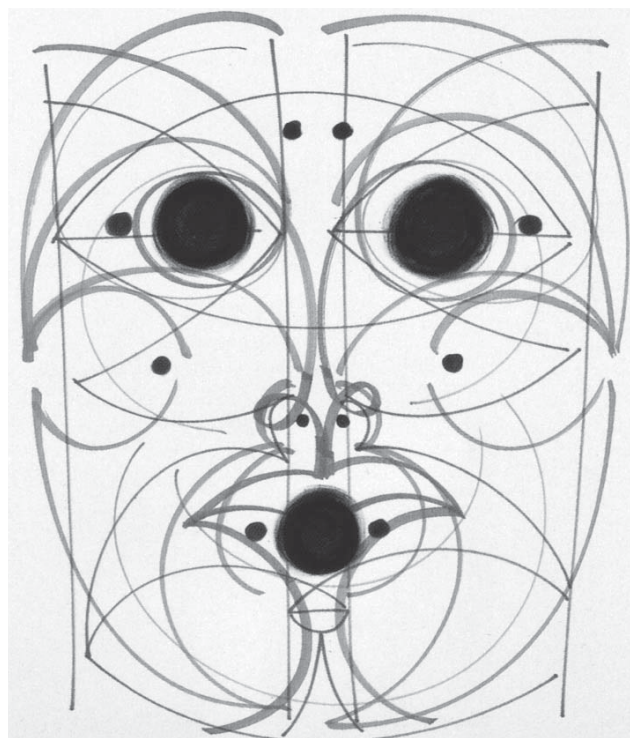
chemical treatments like relaxers.

As an adult, I always had the desire to free myself from the slavery of straightening my hair every six weeks. The chemicals burned my scalp and ears and, over time, I began to lose my hair.

When I was 35, I lost my mother. One day soon after, when I was with my sisters trying to cheer ourselves up, I asked my sister to cut my hair. That same day I got up the courage to be me and accept my race. I decided that I have beautiful hair, not “bad” hair. My hair is a precious inheritance from my African ancestors. From that day forward, I determined that I would be proud of my hair and leave behind those chemicals that had affected me both physically and economically for so long. Now I am a natural goddess, because — my grandma, I *do know* where she is!

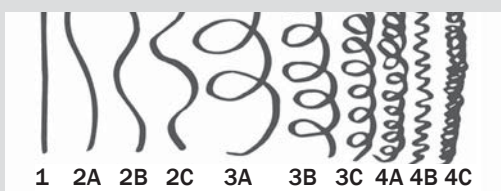
Sources: 1. Vilar, Miguel “Genographic Project DNA Results Reveal Details of Puerto Rican History,” *National Geographic Society (Blogs)*, 29 July 2014, <voices.nationalgeographic.org>. 2. “Hair Types.” *Déjà Vu The Blog*, April 2014, <dejavutheblog.files.wordpress.com>

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Artwork by Bruno Munari is called “Presence of the Ancestors.” What do you think the author is trying to show? Photo from Flickr, licensed under Creative Commons.

Hair Types



What type of hair do you have? In what ways have you been noticed for your hair—in positive ways or negative ways? What do you know about your ancestry? Or, in the words of the poet, “¿Y tu agüela, aonde ejtá?”

DNA



DNA stands for deoxyribonucleic acid. It looks like a double spiral, and it contains the genetic codes passed down from your ancestors. Here is how you pronounce deoxyribonucleic: dee-ok-si-rī-boh-noo-kee-ik.