

Textbook on the Desegregation of an Afro-Latinx

Grisel Acosta

Chapter 1

the red flame flamboyán sitting on top of a Matanzas mountain
shelters the hesitant embrace of your light-skinned Mami and
negro Papi, open Caribbean Sea before them, ancient gateway, portal, key

Chapter 2

Abuelo boycotts the wedding porque Papi is too black
it will be 20 years before Mami speaks to Abuelito again
no one voices the silence at home, so you stay mute, too
quiet like a scroll wound so tight it cannot be opened to release its words

Chapter 3

you make books before you can read, stapled volumes of crayoned letters
Mami reads to you every night about Johnny Lion, the exploring cub
when you turn three, you read to her, and by five, you've written your first
play
but your characters are like Snow White: foreign, cold, trapped

Chapter 4

Mozart School, in Logan Square, teaches you to be quiet is to die
so you better learn to yell and cuss and spit the evil eye, as if

84 Grisel Acosta

you were two different people: the one who breaks a girl's glasses for kicking
you and
the one who buys school supplies early and scores beyond her grade level on
tests
someone quietly submits your name to a magnet school
you don't know who did that, but you take the tests and get in

Chapter 5

you are bussed to Kenwood Academy, where everyone is Black and
they see you as Black, so you go home and ask Mami, "Am I Black?"
Mami and Papi look at each other and say nothing, leaving you to
take algebra in 7th grade, and watch the rich African American
teenagers who drive to school in their parents' Rolls Royces or Jaguars and
only
talk to kids who use Coach purses or wear clothes from Marshall Field's
leaving you to wonder if you fit in more with the Latino/a wildcats or Black
bourgeoisie

Chapter 6

you learn that the Kenwood college prep program was started to address
civil rights issues that were fought for in the 1960s, so you are proud,
excited to learn about your history, but your teachers only teach Thoreau,
Dickinson, the Greeks, the Holocaust, and you know this is good because
they say this is good, but you wonder about García Marquez, and Borges,
all the authors on Mami and Papi's bookshelves, and even more so you
wonder about
Morrison, and Angelou and Hughes, who are also on Mami and Papi's
bookshelves, and
you wonder why Kenwood is great at teaching you discipline and drive but
isn't
teaching you about your Latinidad or what seems to be your emerging
Blackness

Chapter 7

you stop paying much attention at school
instead you spend hours listening to Jello Biafra recite lyrics about Cambodian
atrocities
RevCo frontman Al Jourgensen pounds beats into you about the Bhopal
disaster
X-Ray Spex remind you that your identity does not lie in a false, gendered
mirror
you resist the prevailing '80s message that greed is good, while classmates
obsess over
gold hoops and getting into Ivy League schools and the latest Bell Biv Devoe

Mami and Papi fear you because you wear black boots and lipstick
and blue and purple bruises from slamdancing with shaved head Mexicanos
from La Villita

Chapter 8

somehow you make it to college, you're even on the college newspaper, and
you write
about how a catcalling man on the street said you didn't like him because he
was Black, but
you answered, "I am Black," and he said, "You can only be a spic or
something"
this idea seems wrong to you and you explain in your newspaper essay that
you identify as Black, you claim it, to all of Columbia College Chicago, in
black and white print
a professor responds to the essay with a map of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade
that shows
most Black slaves were transported to Cuba, Colombia, the Caribbean, South
America, your homes,
your world is Black

Chapter 9

you go home and tell your parents, "I am clearly Black. Can you please
explain this to me? Tell me."
they slowly voice the story about Abuelo's racism, self-loathing, directed at
their love
Mami explains how even in her own family there are Black relatives, but they
were ostracized, too
you are 22 years old when they finally tell you who you are
you have carried a black and white fissure, like marble stone, inside your
stomach,
a rock you've instinctively tried to break with the pounding of flesh and bone
under black and white strobe lights, as if the answers were in the extremes
of dark and light, dark and light, dark and light

Chapter 10

you are almost 45, an educator of Latinx literature, Afro-Latinidad, la cultura
tuya, but
the journey, you are certain now, began when you were bussed to Kenwood,
and you saw
yourself in the Black faces of the proud, studious, driven-for-success peers
surrounding you there,
and they saw Black you, confused, conflicted, on the edge of danger, and
forgave you for not knowing

the separation had happened, for maybe they didn't know either, yet there you
were, together
like siblings who had drifted off from sea wreckage, finally floating toward
each other, ready
to begin a cuento that twists and turns like the salty writhing of a sparkling,
multi-hued, crashing
wave with no beginningendseparation, an eternal spiral of knowledge as old as
the gold fire in the sky