“My Colorful Nana Project” by Lauren Brown

Lauren Brown: The inspiration behind the creation of this project starts with me. A couple of months ago I was digging through my nana’s photo collection dating from the ’40s, ’50s, ’60s and so on to now, I found this beat up, stained, and wrinkled picture of this most powerful and gloriously bright women that looked familiar and yet distant to my memories in the most beautiful way because she was a piece of me that I am and a part of me that I wish to become. Her bodacious afro, glimmering hoop earrings and that sprinkle of pride in her eyes I think that was the perfect product of being a black and bold female, growing up in the 1960s. Thank you, Nana, for encouraging me to live comfortably and confidently in my own colorfully assorted home that lays within the ins and outs of my hair and my body.

Ya see, I grew up in a predominantly white community, located in Westchester, New York—in a quaint Jewish town called Chappaqua. Here, I was bullied, teased, consistently asked, and unexpectedly touched by an unwelcoming hand who yearn to learn about the ins and outs of my hair and my body. They would ask me questions that I simply did not know the answer to: *Why does your hair stick up like that? Why do you put ketchup in your hair?* “No, no it’s olive oil,” I would attempt to say. *Why don’t you wash your hair every day . . . That’s disgusting. Wow, I really want to just cut your hair off right now.* Ouch, yeah, it still kind of gets me. But here’s the thing, Chappaqua was a bubble, filled to the brim with confusion, left with faces that look nothing like me. Chappaqua was segment in time that I often look back at, surprisingly fondly. Chappaqua was home, my home. A home I wish I could have allowed myself to conquer—right from the beginning. My Colorful Nana welcomes you into a world where you walk, talk, and dream—freely. Welcome to a preservation of self-love that comes from within the black female body.

Chapter 1: What It Means To Be Other-ed

Janean Cuffee: Hello, my name is Janean Cuffe, I’m eighteen years old, I’m a female, I identify as half black, half Spanish, and I attend NYU. I grew up in Maryland until I was around nine, and then I moved to NYC.

The Eurocentric beauty standard in my opinion is a stigma that I think is surrounded in America and all over the world. That straight, blonde, brown hair, blue eyes, green eyes, is the norm slash what people strive to be seen as in order to be beautiful. Like, if you go on Google and your search “Beautiful” or “Pretty”—the first twenty or twenty-five pictures will be white women and then you’ll keep scrolling and then you’ll finally find a black woman on there.

I definitely questioned why that was seen as beautiful, considering like, I grew up obviously

thinking my Mother was beautiful, and she was none of that. I won't say I haven't straightened my hair because I think it looks pretty and that norm of me thinking straight hair is pretty has definitely come from Eurocentrism, but in my head I am not doing it to be white, I am doing it because I like it. But that doesn't mean that stigma doesn't also lay in me because I live in America and I am centered around Eurocentrism every day.

Even though at a young age it's something hard to touch on, it needs to be addressed in a household for young black women to understand what other people view them as. So I personally think the alienation of black girls is bigger than just like white suburbia or white people because I think alienation starts within the black community. Like I see like black women turn on each other all of the time. Black people there's always the fight of, "oh light skin is better than dark skin" and I think that stigma within our own culture and race, leads to white people also believing the same thing if we can't even come to a conclusion of support within our own race and system.

Kayla Patterson: My name is Kayla Patterson. I am twenty-two years old. I am African American. I am from NYU, well I was born in Cincinnati and I've been on the go ever since—I've lived in about eight different states. It's always been a battle [laughter]; I feel like it's always been the battle of hair. I listened to the song a lot, "I Am Not My Hair," 'cause I think that was my entire experience growing up doing my hair. I remember the first time I got a hot comb put in my hair. In order to get my hair straight, my Mom would put grease in my scalp and she would sizzle it with a hot comb and it used to burn, and I just don't understand why I had to go through that. But I'd do it every single time I went to church or like when I had to go for picture day at school and it was just not a very fun relationship.

So, in order to get out of the whole hot comb situation, we decided to do the perm. It was nice because I just felt like I was like, I don't know . . .I was a part of the group. I was in the end crowd. Like everybody was getting perms, "Like oh, I got my perm, girl, you see them edges, like they were laying flat." We're in elementary school getting so excited about our perms. But then I also remember when the perm made all of my hair fall out and my hair got really thin and my scalp was burning and that was a really rough period for my hair and my whole life finitely of myself because we're so attached to our hair and like how we see beauty, is very attached to our hair.

So then I just started letting my hair be curly and natural, and that was still a battle too. Because it's not as easy as just waking up and taking a shower and leaving and letting my hair be. Like I had to wake up, I had to prepare, I had to tame it. It's like a lion, you have to tame your hair. It's never like a I can get out of bed and just go, it's like, I don't know, it's always like a big thought process of like *How am I going to tame my hair so I can be presentable to walk out of the door today.*

So like if we went over to like family gatherings and you brought your daughter's hair, and their hair was not like neatly combed, like freshly like twisted, and didn't look like crisp . . . They'd be like *Why do you have her leaving the house like that? Why does she look like* . . . There's just always that stigmatism in the household of like not looking presentable like having to look presentable all of the time. And so, I don't know, I guess that just . . . that mindset cultivated with of my of like *Okay, I have to make sure, like, like*—it started with like my aunts like making comments like *she can't like . . . like leave the house looking like that.* It's just a culture I guess that we kind of just reinforced.

So I feel like it's not like acceptable to for me to leaving looking with my hair not tamed because that was always something that was like shunned in the household, started there and like when I went out with my friends, they'd be like *Girl, what's going on with your hair? What are you doing?* Ya know, like it always had to be together. Ya know, I could never have a bad hair day.

Lauren: What is the difference in like bad hair day depending on culture?

Kayla: I don't know I think it's like, when white girls tell me that they're having a bad hair day, I honestly don't see the difference sometimes [laughter]. Like, they'll be wearing their hair down, they'll be like um this is such a bad hair day . . . I was like *why?* Like it's down, it's still . . . you can go anywhere and anybody won't really recognize any type of difference. It's like, "Oh, well I couldn't comb through it the same way I did yesterday." I'm just like, girl, like I wish that was my problem. That I could just walk out the door and be like *Today is a rough day, but I'm still presentable.* Ya know?

Lauren: So to be presentable is to be what?

Kayla: To be tamed.

Lauren: And a white person's hair is tamed?

Kayla: I mean, in our societal standards, that's what we see as tamed, yes. Unfortunately. Which is really sad because I told you guys the story about—and like that's just one example—my little sister like not being able to wear her afro puffs, and that's something that made me so boiled down to like my blood. They told her like she cannot wear her hair puffs. Her natural, poofy gorgeous, just flying, fluffy, beautiful hair. And they said that "you can't cheer with us." They would not allow her to wear this in the cheer competition for their school if her hair was in puffs. So she went and damaged her hair and straightened it and blow-dried it. She quit the team because they wouldn't let her just wear her natural hair out. Because she was damaging it to try

and fit into this ideal like standard of what like beautiful is, what tamed looks like, what put-together, what uniform looks like. This is uniform, this what we need to look like, no but like, this is how I came. I came with my poofy. I should be able to wear it that way. I have the pigtails still. Like it's still the same arrangement as eerybody else, but just because mine puffs and theirs goes down straight, like, there shouldn't be any stigmatism towards that.

Ya know, all the guys in school had crushes on the Bettys, the Beckys, and they never have a crush on me, and so like in my mind, the popular girls were always the really small like white girls or whatever. And like it's nothing against white people, it's just like that's what was seen as as like the pedestal. This is the standard, this is what people will praise, this is what people look up to. And so like that's just always the image that I had seen there. So like, just to like be able to separate myself as a kid and be like that's like. I don't know, erase that. That's irrelevant . . . to tell myself that all of that is like really irreverent, look around, like look at the beauty that is sitting right next to you in your house and your home then I think that I would have definitely like been a stronger-minded individual, I guess . . .

Chapter 2: My World

Rick: Hi, my name is Rick Brown. I grew up in Los Angeles, and I'm black. So Nana, my mother. I think I came up with phrase of describing her as *Colorful* because she is very eccentric. And so for lack of a better description, I came up with the phrase of *Colorful.* Which is an ability to see things in the way that other people don't.

As a teenager, you're in high school, you were actually at the time not only getting your hair permed, but you were getting a weave. And you asked me one day (laughter) what I thought about your weave. And I said "Lauren, ya know you shouldn't ask Dad these kind of questions. I'm going to give you my honest opinion." And you were like, "No Dad, tell me the truth, tell me the truth, what do you think?" And I'm like, "Oh my God, I don't like it, it's not pretty." And you were like, "Why?" And I'm like, "Because your hair, your natural hair is prettier." But you didn't talk to me for about two days [laughter] because you weren't happy with my response. But the really funny part of the story was I started funding your weaves and perms because you were in a great mood when you came out of getting your hair done. Like, it was amazing to me how confident and how happy you were when you got your hair done. I naturally said, that's what I want. I want for my daughter to be happy. I, I think immediately your hair would be beautiful and the first thing you would do is pull it into a ponytail. Because I think that's the way all the girls wore their hair. So even though your hair is beautiful and it was hanging down just beyond your shoulders, the first thing you would do after we spent all that money is you would pull it right up into a ponytail. That was the most important thing is *was that ponytail perfect?* So I don't think that it was conscious. I think subconsciously you were working towards something that fit into the majority. And like I said, I don't think they had to do with white or black, it's just your

majority happened to be white. And so, that's what your aspirations were. You cried for . . . oh my God, had to be three and a half days when you got braids. Which was to me, like, one of the most beautiful things you have ever done to your hair. So, to contextualize that [laughter] story, you went from wearing a weave to wearing braids. You were concerned about what your friends were gonna think about you having braids because nobody else had braids. And what I was thinking was, it doesn't matter what they thought. You looked beautiful. So even though nobody else had braids, you carried it and looked beautiful, so why would you care what anybody else thought.

Chapter 3: To Breathe with Bliss

Phyllis: I'm Phyllis Modamma. I'm a hairstylist at Harold Melvin's Beauty Salon on the upper west side of Manhattan. One day I was leaving work, at the time I was wearing um, braided extensions. And I had gotten to the corner of west 72nd Street, waiting for the light to change and a white father with his young daughter on his shoulders saw me and just said, "Wow I love your hair." Because kids is just so honest and so pure and [laughter], ya know, they just kind of say what they mean. And the father turned around and looked at me, African American, and then whispered something in her ear. And the poor girl's facial expression changed to like one of happiness to like confusion. And so, I knew the father must not have said something so nice about my hair or me or whatever, and I just said to her, "I like your hair, too." Because her hair was blonde and she had these really beautiful curls and again, I'm a hairstylist. So I like hair.

The powers that be cooperate America, really wanted blacks to wear their hair straight, cause' it made them feel more comfortable. And so, we started straightening our hair because hair straightening wasn't made for black people. Hair straightening, oh and straighteners were made for Jews who had curly hair, so they could straighten their hair and fit in with the European whites here, in America. That's where the whole relaxing and hair straightening came about.

Again, I can't stress enough, no matter whether you white, black, ya know, latino, that education is key. And all hair is beautiful, especially when it is in the best condition it could possibly be in.

Chapter 4: The Life of Another

Mikaela: My name is Mikaela Read. I'm twenty years old. I'm a female. I'm white. I go to NYU. Oh, I grew up in Dallas, Texas. In my grade, there's probably one to two African Americans. And in total . . . okay so, in my school, each grade has about five hundred a little over five hundred. So, about two thousand go to the school, and I would probably say, like, I feel like ten is a high number. But ten could be how many African Americans we have at that school.

Nazz: My name is Nazzerine Waldon. Call me Nazz. I am twenty years old. I am a junior at NYU and I'm half black, half Thai. I was born in Columbus, Georgia, which is a city right next to Alabama. And it's predominantly white. And I went to elementary school there. And then moved to Atlanta for middle and high school, but while I was in elementary school, I remember just having a hard time with race in general. Because I, being biracial, I never really fit with either crowds. And in the South, I find there's like a huge dichotomy between black and white. Unconsciously, there is a separation.

Mikaela: So I was on a team called DFW Elite in basketball, where I was one out of two, maybe that's . . . one out of four or five white girls on the team. And then everyone else was African American, like everyone.

Nazz: So like, the black girls hung out with the black girls and the white girls hung out with the white girls. I was always kind of alone. 'Cause I never really knew where my place was. And even though I looked a lot like the black girls, they would sometimes like . . . not really want to hang out with me a lot. And the white girls were always . . . they were always like a larger group so they would kind of go out of their way to not allow me to hang out with them.

Mikaela: You probably experienced this so it sounds a little whiny when I say it. Going into this team being one out of four people that was of one color and everyone else was… I mean I'm sure you've experienced this. But everyone else was, well in my case, they were black. But in your case they'd probably be white or whatever. I mean, ew . . . it just like, makes me sound stupid now because after talking about my high school, eight African Americans going to this high school and now, I talk about I go to this team and I'm one of four girls that were white. I can now understand what they went though every day at high school. Meanwhile, all my practices were only three times a week.

I'm thinking about a black girl coming to my high school because now that I look back on it, like, I'm going to basketball practice, fucking basketball practice. You don't have to talk in basketball, you just have to dribble a ball, and shoot, play defense, you're done. You don't have to be friends with them. You don't have to be like . . . like them. And still, even though I did not have to do any of those things, I felt isolated because I was one of the only white girls. Ya know what I mean? But, I feel like being one of the only black girls at a high school . . . Where you do need to make friends, you do need to have someone to sit with at your table, or you do need to know someone in your math class who you can study together with for this hard test. It's not just going in and out and you're done. If you don't talk to them . . . It's a lot longer than two and a half hours. It's eight hours, five days a week. That's fucked. I feel like to help with isolation, one good answer would just be more black girls, why does it need to be one?

Chapter 5: Standards Are Lame

Nazz: I also had a hard time in high school with the black beauty standard because I also don't live up to that. I think that a lot of the African American culture really value thick, black women with curly hair, super super light skin, and I never really was that. Aside from the curly hair. I grew up like super super skinny. For the most part, I'm like lighter brown, so not like that yellow light skin that they liked. And so that also made me uncomfortable so I think I've just always been uncomfortable with beauty standards. Like they would make fun of me all of the time for being skinny. I will never . . .

Lauren: Black people specifically?

Nazz: Yeah, like, I will never forget in high school, they use to call me like No-Ass Nazz and stuff like that.

Lauren: That's terrible [laughter].

Nazz: Because… And like… Honestly, it's fine. But at the same time, a lot of guys would just be like "No one's ever going to love you because you don't have anything to love on." And then I come New York and it's like fat girls, like thick girls, like you have . . . that's too much ass… like . . . ya know what I mean . . . And it's just so . . . I'm just like nobody's ever going to like anything that I am, so that's where I am right now [laughter].

In elementary school, I never did my hair [laughter]. I would just wear it in a braid, a braided ponytail every single day. The people who were doing my hair, like, purposely went out of their way to make sure [laughter] that I didn't have to endure anything. Because I really never wore it down. So when I went into middle school, so I moved to Atlanta, and then went to middle school. I was kind of like tired of wearing my hair up all of the time because it's just an annoying thing to do. And so I started wearing my hair down. I literally didn't know what to do with it [laughter]. I didn't know how to do it. I remember this one time, in the sixth grade, I liked this guy a lot. And he basically started bullying me about my hair because he figured out that I liked him. And ya know like, twelve-year-old boys are not going to respond well to that. And every day I would come in, he would just ask me if I combed my hair that morning: "Do you own a brush?"

Since I wore my hair up so much in elementary school, when people started making fun of me when I started wearing my hair down, I began to pay a lot of attention to it. That's when I started straightening my hair a lot. I went through a phase where I was like straightening my hair because everyone around me either had like, like straight hair or the black girls would relax

their hair. So everyone was kind of, ya know like, whitewashing their hair. So I started to do it too. And I didn't know how [laughter], 'cause my mom, she's Asian, and like she didn't know how to deal with straightening black hair.

I have a little sister and so I'm trying to figure out how I'm going to advise her through this. Just not worry about what other people have to say. Genuinely, don't think about others and like don't compare yourself to others. Cause' I think like that was a big issue for me because I was constantly comparing myself to other people in my class and like constantly comparing myself to people around me. Every single person is unique and though one person may fit one beauty standard, there's just so many beauty standards in general. And so, you have to understand that like, though, you may not fit one, you may fit another. But either way you shouldn't worry about the beauty standards.

Just know that every single person is unique and that standards are lame, honestly.

I specifically don't want her to compare herself to anyone else because she is mixed growing up in the South and like I know that even now she's in a private school with all white kids and she's clearly different. She's four years old.

Lauren: Wow.

Nazz: She's already making those differences. Like she's saying like "Oh Mommy, I have long curly beautiful hair." Like but she says it in a really positive way so I kind of want to continue to advise her to just see herself as pretty. If she is going to see those differences early on, I want her to see them as positive differences. I think that'll be really important.

Chapter 6: The Growth of Glamorization

Lisa: My name is Lisa Stockmon. I am a black female, I am Lauren Brown's mom. I'm originally from the Midwest, but I raised my kids in Chappaqua, New York. Raising a black daughter in a predominantly white community was challenging in many ways. Lauren had a bad relationship with her hair, unfortunately. I think she always struggled with being the other. And I think people who are the other in predominantly white communities struggle. Lauren and I had discussions about hair and it was… Ya know, I tried to do the, ya know, India Arie sort of "you're not your hair" and that, ya know, you're not defined by your hair and whether it's short or long or straight. But it's very hard to do that and for a child to believe that.

I can remember when she was really little in the bathtub once and I said "Lauren, be careful your hair will go back." And [laughter], she said, "Back where?" [laughter] And I remember laughing hysterically. I said, "Well it's gonna curl up, it's gonna kink up." It just made me smile 'cause it made me realize that she didn't have the community that I had where my aunts and

uncles were around me and my cousins and we'd go get our hair done on Saturday and we'd go to the beauty salon. And that just wasn't part of her growing up. There are trade-offs living in those communities.

I love that she is ya know, delving into this. At one point this would be a point of crying and tears and ya know, *why doesn't she look like everyone else.* As she ages, I love the fact that she's comfortable and she enjoys the fact that she doesn't look like everyone else. I would like her to celebrate her natural hair even more. So I look forward to as her growth continues.

My own hair? There's times I've loved it. There's times I've hated it. I think all women, your hair is no different than thighs or your butt. You have to come to grips with your life. With your body and celebrate it. Part of understanding your total package is your hair.

It wasn't until I was in my forties that one of the dressers said, "Look, hair is just an accessory, Lisa. It's yet another way that we sort of glamorize ourselves or not glamorize ourselves." Ya know, it's up to you, and I think there's a lot of peace in that when I see how so many black girls are doing different things with their hair. And I love it. I celebrate it. I think it frees it up. It doesn't mean you have *good* hair or you have *bad* hair. You just have hair. And I think that's a good concept.

Lauren: At one point this would have been a time of crying and tears. My Mom is certainly correct. At one point, it would have been. I am more than my hair. I am, we are beautiful as the way we are and learning to love the ins and outs of our very essence will lead us each to an even greater celebration of every neutral instance of our colorful being. I look forward to my continue journey of self love. I look forward to unwritten chapters and unforeseen memories.

My name is Lauren Brown and I am a proud member of the My Colorful Nana Project.