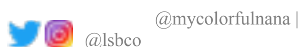
My Colorful Nana

History of the "N" Word & Respectability Politics

June 17, 2020



The My Colorful Nana podcast is a collective of Generous Thinkers. We invite all people to consider and celebrate their individual definitions of the words "beauty," "femininity," and cultural identity. We are an educational and creative platform that encourages our listeners to define "identity" on their own terms. Learn more about our work and journey by following us.

@mycolorfulnana | @lsbco
http://mycolorfulnana.com

Our first Mother-Daughter debut. Founder, Lauren Stockmon Brown hosts a special episode featuring Richard Pryor's daughter and granddaughter, Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor and Lilli Stordeur. Famous 1970's comedian Richard Pryor had his own journey around the "N word," and current Smith College Professor, Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor explains how her father disavowed his own use of the word.

Dr. Stordeur Pryor shares how studying her father's use of the "N word" is a triangulation of her personal life, research and classroom teaching. An intimate conversation that focuses on "true ally ship," "familial ties," "respectability politics," and of course, a Black mother and daughter's relationship to their own hair. Learn how the lack of language that, particularly, Americans face when attempting to describe and teach the "N word" relates to the lack of understanding regarding a Black woman's relationship to her own hair.

Link to Podcast

TRANSCRIPT

Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor: [00:00:00] If you haven't thought and process very much about the way racism works in the world, you are very likely to put your foot in it.

Lauren Stockmon Brown: [00:00:16] Thank you guys so much for being here. For our listeners, my name is Lauren Stockmon Brown and we're here with My Colorful Nana project. Lilli and Elizabeth, if you could say your full names, your pronouns, your race, and your gender identity to start. Lilli, you can start.

Lilli Stordeur: [00:00:34] Okay, my name is Lilli Stordeur. I'm a woman. I use she/her pronouns. I'm 21 and I'm African American, mixed, African American.

Lauren Stockmon Brown: [00:00:42] Awesome.

Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor: [00:00:53] My name is Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor. I am African American and Jewish. I use she/her or they/them, and I consider myself a woman, that's my gender identity.

Lauren Stockmon Brown: [00:01:09] Awesome. Elizabeth, if you could say a little bit about your experience with your research and your experience as professor at Smith College and as Richard Pryor's daughter.

Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor: [00:01:22] Yes. So, I started researching the N-word because I was studying early 19th century Black travelers. And what I saw is that when people like Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown were writing about their experiences of trying to get into stagecoaches and, you know, trains, et cetera, inevitably they had this experience and actually all free people of color in the north before the end of slavery had this experience of being confronted by the word, the N-word when they were in public spaces. And so, since it appeared so often and so many narratives and memoirs, I mean, it was, it's like it was standard. I started to think about what it meant for those travelers to go abroad and not hear that. And they wrote about that, too. They would write about say things like, you know, I stepped on British soil. And I you know, I walked in Liverpool and I felt like a man for the very first time or I almost entirely forgot my color. And so, I started thinking about just like actually the, the actual, like, kind of work as a sound object that the N-word would do. Hearing it so much in public space in the north and then going into a space where you don't hear that. It's not that people aren't racist, but you just don't hear that word hurled at you. So, I started doing the research and that sort of collided with an incident that happened in my classroom. Where a white student who was delightful and always on my team, was trying to connect with one of my lectures and actually quoted a line from like a 1970s comedy that had two racist slurs, one for people of Chinese descent and the N-word. But the students said the actual words. And I was just stumped in my class, you know, with that, with not knowing how to handle that as a teacher, that I've never really thought through what to do when the N-word enters my class in that space. So, I started researching more and more. And as I started writing about it, I mean, the research was really fascinating. And I can talk about that more, but I don't need to. But as I started researching it more and more and started writing about it, more and more people started saying to me, my father's Richard Pryor, who was a very famous comedian in the 1970s and 80s, really groundbreaking Black comedian, groundbreaking comedian. And he used the N-word in a way that people were not accustomed to hearing it. He talked, he used the Black version, like the way Black people spoke to each other and in their homes, on stage and kind of broached this for a white general audience. So, when I started doing this work and people knew who my father was, they'd be like, you're the perfect person to be writing about the N-word. And I was like, really? Why do they say, you know? Are they sure? Or they're just saying that because? And then I realized how. My father had his own journey around the N-word in his work. He started using it a lot and ended kind of disavowing it. And that it really was kind of this triangulation of my personal life, my research, and my classroom.

Soundbite of Richard Pryor: [00:04:37] It's nice to have pride about just you. I went home, to the motherland. And everybody should go home to Africa. Everybody, especially Black people. One thing I got out of it was magic. I'd like to share it with you. I was leaving, and I was sitting in the hotel and a voice said to me. "Look around. What do you see?" And I said, "I see all colors

of people doing everything, you know." And the voice said, "Do you see any n-----s?" And I said. "No." And he says, "You know why? Cause there aren't any." And it hit me like a shot, man. I started crying and shit. I was sitting there and said, "Yeah. I've been here three weeks. I haven't even said it. I haven't even thought it." And it made me say, "Oh. My God. I've been wrong. I've been wrong. I've got to regroup my shit." I said, "I ain't gonna never call another Black man a n-----." You know. Cause we never was no n-----.

Lauren Stockmon Brown: [00:05:45] So, Lilli, when you hear that your mom has spent so much time studying this one word and then of course, you're a descendant of Richard Pryor as well. And you identified in this podcast that you're mixed. How is your relationship? Is your relationship to the N-word different? Is it more intimate? Because you're surrounded by someone who researches it. Is it? What are your thoughts?

Lilli Stordeur: [00:06:06] I think that my relationship with the N-word is more academic, like I said. And like you can see, I'm mixed, but I'm definitely white passing. And also, just like the communities I've lived in, like. The N-word isn't a word that like I'm hearing in my house or like with my neighbors or with my family. And so, I don't like feel connected to like the colloquial version that my mom was describing and that my grandfather used on stage. I definitely think the academic version of the word, I feel super entrenched. Like any time, it's brought up in classrooms or on the news or whatever, like I kind of feel like an expert about like that use of the N-word and how it's used as like a racial slur, though that's kind of my connection. But I personally don't use the word myself.

Lauren Stockmon Brown: [00:06:58] Liz was talking about how in your TED talk, how generationally we use the N-word in music and different cultural phenomena is just a level of expression that we have, that we're surrounded by, whether you're mixed, white, Black, Asian, Indian, whatever. Do you feel like it's more common used in music now, than in the past? I guess it's a question for both of you.

Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor: [00:07:23] Well, is it more common? Well, yeah, it definitely is more common because I think starting with people like my dad, Dick Gregory, before him, who had a memoir just called N-word. But the actual word. You know, I think it's important for anybody listening to know that the fact that we're using the phrase the N-word, that is a that's a new phenomenon. When I was growing up, people didn't have a phrase called the N-word. That's something that like in the late 80s and early 90s, started to develop with Black activists and intellectuals, created this sort of standard phrase. And it quickly caught on. I mean, I think it really speaks to how uncomfortable people are in using it and how often also people kind of needed to say the actual word that there's a stand in for it. Right. So, NWA, you know, people like that. I mean, hip-hop was sort of like this... this kind of crossing over where an old guard of African-American activists and civil rights activist really were uncomfortable with young Black artists, musicians inserting the N-word, so kind of freely and easily into their music, like with such nonchalance. And so, like a lot of the first kind of protest against the actual word comes from even Black intellectuals, who don't want to hear it in that context. But, yeah, I mean, I think

for sure, it's definitely used in music more. There's no question it's used in music more. And that has to do with the fact that Black culture in all its valances is, you know, celebrated and recognized and that it's not disguising itself. There's not always the need for, what do you call it, respectability politics. Right. That I think the use of the N-word in that way is sort of a flouting of respectability politics. Got it.

Lauren Stockmon Brown: [00:09:22] So even now, it's just, again, a question for both of you. I think we're in such a timely point in history or in modern times where, white people don't always know what to do when there are Black deaths or when their words like the N-word or when there are these uncomfortable topics surfacing to point where you can't really look away, you can't really deny that it is reality. So, a question for you both is, you know, what is something that you would suggest or recommend or something that you found helpful for someone who is white, seeing the reality of the Black experience in 2020? How would you suggest going about that? Would you suggest posting more on social media? Would you suggest sitting quietly researching?

Lilli Stordeur: [00:10:12] I've been thinking about this a lot lately because of the death of George Floyd, which just happened a few days ago in Minneapolis. And I think that, like, there are a lot of politics around, like white ally ship, and like what feels good to like Black people, when it comes to white ally ship. And I personally think, like, the thing that feels best and most important is like active pursuit of like justice and research and education. And so, it was really meaningful to me to see, like to see friends calling the DA's office in Minneapolis after the death of George Floyd. Actions like that I think are the most important. I think it's really harmful when white people are silent about racism. I think that's like possibly the worst thing they can do. Education is definitely important if people are less comfortable with, like, being more active. But I think calling in, like using their white presence as this power to actually like, do some good, I think. What do you think, Mom?

Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor: [00:11:22] Like, if you're really going to be an ally, if you're really going to be teachable, and have the humility in in the movement and that you've got to know that you're walking into something where you're going to be a big, like kind of clod, you know, walking into walls, bull in a china shop and still come out and have the willingness to be how people put you in your place once in a while. Like, not kind of. I think what I see sometimes is like the response, like, "SEE, we tried to help Black people, but they just end up doing this and this and this when we," you know, like those kinds of responses. And, you know, the you know, the fact is, is that like it goes so deep, this is so layered and so deep. And if you haven't thought and process very much about the way racism works in the world, you are very likely to put your foot in it, you know? And I think it takes a lot of like real ally ship is humble.

Lauren Stockmon Brown: [00:12:22] I like that a lot. I like that a lot. So, let's start to pivot into this topic of Black hair. So, a question that I have for either of you, whoever feels more comfortable talking first. How does the lack of language that U.S. citizens face when attempting

to describe and teach the N-word, relate to the lack of understanding regarding a Black woman's relationship to her own hair?

Lilli Stordeur: [00:12:54] It's a really good question.

Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor: [00:12:56] It is a good question.

Lilli Stordeur: [00:13:00] Mom, I want you to go first.

Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor: [00:13:02] So. I mean, I think that. Where these issues intersect, is the fact that we're not supposed to talk about them or that the answers are already there. Like, my thing, like I was never allowed to really talk about my hair because I grew up with good hair. Like so all the Black women in my family said, "oh, you have good hair." And that was sort of like the end of the conversation, because what it meant was my hair wasn't super kinky, you know to my head that I had kind of a loose ringlet. But to me in the world, it did not feel like good hair, you know. But that little space in there, by what people are telling me. And then, of course, white people who always say, "I love your curls," you know, you're like, no, you really don't, but things I hear what you're saying or want to play with my ringlets or now my hair is like completely chopped off and my husband cuts it with a clipper. But, you know, I think there's like an idea, just like with the N-word that, like, we already know the answers. So, we really don't talk about this. Like the conversations about the N-word are often polemical, like you say it, or you don't say it. And I feel like in between you say it, or you don't say it, which seemed like the least interesting parts of those conversations. There's so much more depth to be able to mine and explore. And in between, like, you should be happy with your hair. You should wear it down. You know, it's beautiful. You know, be yourself or all these other kinds of things that you get told around your hair, like there's a whole conversation there, and that space hasn't really been developed to explore. So, I think that's the connection for me, I think. What about you Lil?

Lilli Stordeur: [00:15:11] Yeah, like, I think I second everything you say, but also I think my experience is pretty similar to Lauren's where like I probably still don't even really have the language to talk about my hair or like Black beauty and kind of the history behind like why I don't have those words or like why I think a certain way about my hair. I had a similar experience to you Mom, where like I grew up and Lauren also, I grew up in like predominantly white community. The most "beautiful girls" in like my elementary school were like blond and had straight hair, like that was like, oh my God, Emily is so gorgeous. It's like that was like what we always heard. And so, I don't know, it was like this weird balance between people telling me, like, oh, my God, I would pay for your hair Like, do you know, people go and get perms to, like, get your hair. So, like that that was what I heard often. But what I felt was like, I want my hair straightened all the time. I remember like down to like each iron stroke, my first hair straightening like and how big of a deal that was to me. But yeah, I definitely I think it was only maybe this year in classes that I kind of started learning about, like the history of language behind beauty and like marketing standards and what it means to be beautiful in the US and also in South America. But yeah, I have a similar experience to you, Mom.

Lauren Stockmon Brown: [00:17:05] So Liz when I first approached you to be on the podcast, I didn't even consider it, I didn't know you had a daughter and I didn't consider that it would be brilliant to have a mother daughter interaction recorded. So, I'm just wondering why that came to mind for you to have your daughter, to have Lilli part of this episode.

Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor: [00:17:25] Well, I mean, as soon as it was about hair, because my daughter is obviously you can see, or the listeners can't. She's gorgeous. I get to say that because I'm her Mom. But there's this one place where I see her kind of coming against her. It's like, this kind of one place where she gets stuck about her own beauty and it's her hair, it's always been the hair. Even when she was like when she was little. Her hair took a really long time to grow in. And the words she would use is, "when am I going to get my long hair?" Like, that's how she would describe it, cause it just took so long for her hair to grow. And so, it's really like been a lifelong issue for her and a place where somebody who has a lot of experiences in life, where they can kind of put their Blackness on hold because they are white passing. But this is a place where, you know, for whatever reason, she's not allowed to pass through. Like, this is not your white passing place. And it's, I don't know, I just I thought it would be great to hear how Lilli would think through this kind of tension for herself.

Lauren Stockmon Brown: [00:18:44] So, Lilli, when you hear that, one of the things I realized in doing this work, I'm doing it for the last two years. Is that what it all comes down to, whether you are, you know, non-binary, Black, white, whatever, mostly Black people or people who are half Black or anything like that biracial feel this is that it's their relationship to their hair is rooted in their relationship to their mom or the relationship that their mom has with their hair or how their mom treated their child's hair. So how do you feel hearing that and being on this episode with your mom?

Lilli Stordeur: [00:19:19] It's really funny because until I saw the questions for the episode, I like pretty much never thought of the connection between my mom's relationship with her hair and my hair to like me. When I was thinking about it, I thought of this story that my mom tells me all the time and I'm so embarrassed about. Do you know what I am going to say mom?

Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor: [00:19:44] No.

[00:19:50] Which is in elementary school, I asked her to grow her hair out like all the pretty other pretty moms or something like that. And like my mom said, she's really curly hair. I think of it as like super kinky and curly I like. And so that I feel like is like the baseline for like my understanding of, like, beauty and my mom's hair. I think my mom's beautiful now. I don't whatever. Like, it's such an embarrassing story for me to hear. But that, I think is like my strongest connection. I also think my mom like. I don't know when you stopped doing my hair, mom, but like maybe I was seven and like since that point, I was like doing my own hair. Do you remember? I don't know if that's right, but like, I think I was, like, in charge of my own hair from a really young age. And my mom had pretty short hair for my entire life. And so it was kind of

like, I think my connection with my hair was like a little bit like you're on your own. Like, you kind of got to figure it out. Like my mom never, I don't think you've ever really pressed by hair or blow dried it or really done braids. And I was really little. And so that's kind of been like my connection with my mom and my hair.

Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor: [00:21:08] The only time I'm thinking about, I got to jump in the one time I feel like Lilli and I got hair bonded was when she had lice, she was like two, though. But really, because she had it and I was like, read everything about how to treat it and stuff. I think she's probably like ten or nine or something. I think actually was her 10th birthday party where we discovered all the girls had something like that. And I would sit her down and pull the hair, you know, thread by thread, like every night, a couple of times a day, we would sit her down. And it was that kind of one time, I think that I had that mother daughter hair connection. But she's right. I think for the most part it was, you know, I'm thinking through, like, why did I do that? And, I didn't want to impose, like I knew that whatever choice my daughter made about her hair was really in some ways making a choice about her race. And I really didn't want to impose my, I mean, of course, I wanted her for the health of her hair to wear it natural, but the way that... I didn't want to tell her what her beautiful what's her own definition of her own beauty, her own feelings of her own identity. I didn't want to kind of make and shape that. So, I think that's kind of why I backed off of that. But it's really interesting that that's her perspective, that I kind of left her alone to her own devices with her hair.

Lauren Stockmon Brown: [00:22:47] So, Liz, you said that you are Jewish, and I know growing up in quotes because I don't know your experience growing up, but if you lived with your mother, who is white and Jewish. What was that like for you? Especially like once you got so interested into the work of African studies, you ended up in a biracial relationship, or interracial relationship, raising biracial children. What's that like? How do you how do you make sense of it? And have there been any interesting epiphanies or realizations in that?

Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor: [00:23:23] Well, it's so funny because just hearing your talk is reminding me about how Lilli looks a lot like my mom. But I think, you know, my mother used to, she really did do her best, but one of the things that she used to say to me all the time in this is how Lilli and I just as humans are very different. Is like my mother would always say to me, you don't play with your hair. "Why don't you play with your hair? Why don't you. You know, why did you try braids? Why don't you try to curl it? Why don't you know?" She always wanted me to try to do something with my hair, like to try to... And I didn't really have interest in that. I don't make wear makeup. I'm doing a I'm doing a fundraiser tonight on Zoom and I spoke to somebody who's like do I have to dress up? And they were like, here you might want to, you know, did it up, put on a little makeup. And I was like, well, I'm not doing that. Like, I just don't I mean...I'm just that's not that's not... I was like, unless my daughter gets to me and starts doing something with the circles under my eyes, but I don't really see... And but yeah. I mean, it was. It was a contentious thing for me only between me and my mom, because it always felt like I should be doing more if I really cared about how I look. My mother used those kinds of things, like "if you really cared about how you looked, you would." She wasn't telling me not to have

my hair curly, but she was just telling me to be almost like more Black and more connected to my hair. Which actually reminds me of the story of Lilli's that you kind of introduced the whole conversation and which is when she was told, you know, to wear her hair down. I don't know if you want to talk about that Lil, but that's the kind of messages I got like I should be doing something with the hair. And then eventually what would happen was when I mean, I wore in a ponytail all the time and I tried to wear it down. I didn't like the feeling of it on my neck. It was heavy. And I wore in a ponytail so often that one day, I just decided to cut it off and see what that would be like. And Jada Pinkett was my inspiration.

Lauren Stockmon Brown: [00:25:34] How old were you?

Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor: [00:25:35] I want to say just back in the 90s? I want to say, just probably right after I married, my husband's maybe 97 or 98 or something like that, right after the baby was born, Lilli was born somewhere around there. And yeah, I cut off the hair and I have I tried it at one point to go longer. That's when Lilli said, why can't you have, you know, have your hair long like the pretty moms? I think that's what I tried to grow it back out for her. And then it just was the same thing. It felt like the same thing. And I you know, I cut it off again because I felt like at least I had some flair when I had to completely cut off and putting it back in the pony, putting it back in the pony. Always having that pony. And, you know, so.

Lauren Stockmon Brown: [00:26:28] So, I didn't I didn't know that once Lilli said that they you tried to grow it out again.

Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor: [00:26:33] Oh, no I did. I listened to everything she tells me. Up till this day.

Lauren Stockmon Brown: [00:26:39] Well, what was that like when you decide to grow it out again? Why? What was it to make her feel safer? Was it to make you feel safer?

Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor: [00:26:56] [PAUSE] I don't know. I don't know. I always would listen to a little kid. Go ahead Lil.

Lilli Stordeur: [00:27:03] I think part of the story that strikes me is that whenever I hear I'm like. I mean, I don't know, I guess it's like this combination of, like, kids always tell the truth, like stuff like that. And so that's probably what it felt like. But I'm always shocked to hear like that, my mom actually grow her hair out when, like a 7-year-old, like I asked her to and told her that was beautiful. And I think that's like the part of the story. I'm like, wow. Like even that she remembers that. I said that is like more of what is impactful than, like, me saying it. It's like, okay, this is a 7-year-old telling you what is beautiful is like going to stick with you. You're going to remember it and you're also going to like act on that. That's like what I think is like the most powerful part of that story.

Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor: [00:27:53] I mean, I think part of it was like, you know, now that you're saying is when she was in elementary school. She was like we had like a Brownie club of like four little Brownies that, like move through the world together and they put them. They put them in the classes together every year. The school is very conscious of it and kept these four girls together and there was some way in which her saying, like, I felt like. Yeah, I guess I felt like it was truth, and in my mind, it's funny. There's one mom in my mind that I felt like she was talking about it, too, you know? And so, it wasn't just about my hair. My hair was the part that I could deliver, the part that I couldn't deliver was like the diamonds and the really nice house. And because I was in graduate school and my husband was a working stiff and all this, you know, like I couldn't deliver all those other things, but I could grab my hair because we were on scholarship at a an elite private school in L.A., that was terrific for her. But that that had a lot of wealth around it. And I think that's part of what it was. The thing that I could do was grow up my hair in response to that, when I think what I heard her say was a lot of other things also attached to like the pretty moms, you know.

Lauren Stockmon Brown: [00:29:17] It's really interesting, especially just thinking about truth. Lilli you said, you know, I was you know, you think of younger kids, you think that they're telling the truth. It's like some of these topics are so ingrained in us that when you say them, it's like this is true. This is true. And, you know, my hair is lesser than your hair. This is true. So, it's a lot of unlearning, that's been really exciting to do and realizing, OK, well, what really is the truth of this? Like, how do I feel about this? My last question, last question for both of you. I ask all of our what I call them, Generous Thinkers, anyone we interview, anyone who helps out with generous thinking. What do you think is the importance of the My Colorful Nanna project and having conversations like the one that the one that we had today?

Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor: [00:30:07] You want to go first Lil, or do you want me to?

Lilli Stordeur: [00:30:07] Sure, I can go. I love this project. I feel like it's like I'm going to be a listener now. But I just think it's really important. And I think people are doing it now. Like, I even see I'm like, TikTok or like YouTube. People are talking about Black hair more and the meaning of Black hair and why it's important to take care of your hair and think your hair is beautiful. But I really wish that I had that growing up. And I like, look back on pictures of my hair and think like, wow, it's so beautiful. Or even like it wasn't beautiful, but like wishing that I could have, like, embraced it more and known the meaning behind to like, why wearing my hair natural is important or what it means to press your hair and why that's important. And I just like wish that I had more conversations with people who are like thinking about this and I like really didn't have that growing up. And I think it would have been important, hair wise, and also just like understanding what race means to me.

Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor: [00:31:18] Yeah, it's beautiful. I mean, I love just being able to have this conversation with you. To you and my daughter, two young people who are, you know, just graduating from college and, you know, just seeing kind of like the generational differences, but especially like sitting, you know, my daughter and I - Lilli and I are super, super close. I mean,

we're a close family. And she's, as you always say, that you always like to say that. But it's true. We are close. I have a lot of respect for her. She's incredible woman. And but we don't talk about this a lot. And so, this was a really, I think this was like a really neat way. You know, for me to not, like kind of get on my, like, holy roller high horse and be preachy about, you know, the hair or like, you know, start breaking down, like, I'll start talking to her about slavery and stuff. And she's like, wait, no, I'm just talking about my hair, you know? But this was kind of you created a bridge for us to be able to have these conversations. And I think it's really important probably for a lot of people to be able to have that bridge to just be honest about where they're at with their hair, because chances are if you're African American, you're thinking about it.