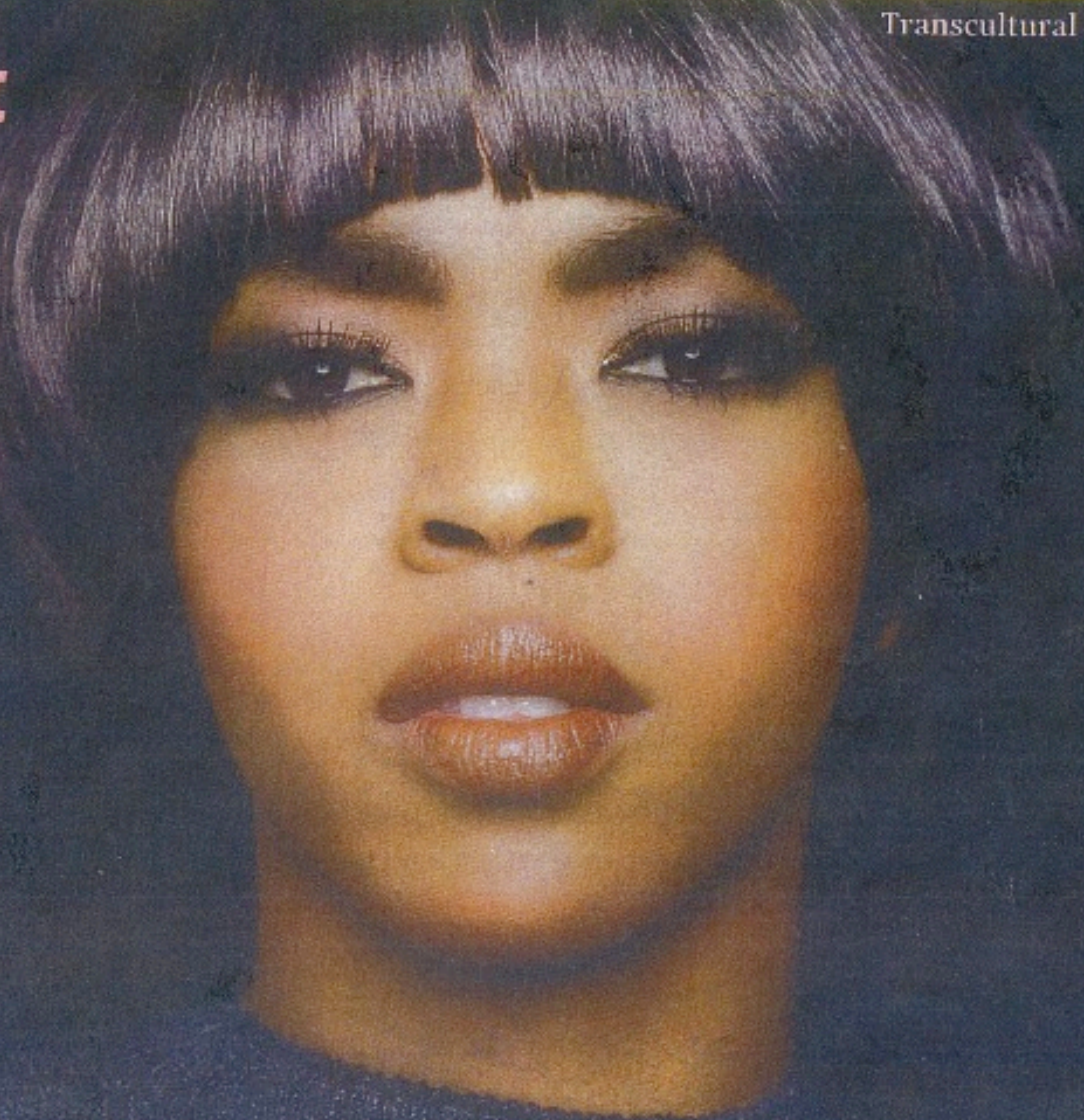


TRACE

Transcultural Styles + Ideas

Black
girls
rule!



LAURYN HILL

WORLD EXCLUSIVE

1000 57>



CASSIDY, WHO WAS BORN IN A LUTHERAN COMMUNITY, NOW USES THE MEDIA TO VOICE HER VIEWS.

Cassidy wears a bolero-style short-sleeved top by Abby Z.
Hair by Simone C. Saint Laurent @ L'Oréal salon
and makeup by Laura Edie.

1/3/2001

Honey,
Talking with you on the
phone tonight.
Do it.
Tell the story of the
Little Brown Girl, born
in Synanon but didn't come
to America until she was
six. To the world closest
to your heart. Love,
mom



BABY CASSIDY.



CASSIDY ON THE ROAD.

CASSIDY WARM IN THE WOMB



CASSIDY AT PLAY.

PARALLEL LIVES

Raised outside of traditional American life—in a hippy commune, a Kibbutz, a utopian community—these women have grown up to rule by their own definition.

text CASSIDY ARKIN photography KALALEA

I WAS BORN IN A UTOPIAN COMMUNITY CALLED SYNANON. As I grow older, I have realized that there are many women who, like me, are the product of their parents' idealistic choices to create a life in an alternative community. Synanon is an experimental utopian community that grew to include over 2000 adults spread in Synanon houses located in half a dozen cities, but primarily concentrated in California. My mother, Sandy, chose to move into Synanon in order to create a community that would radically reform American society.

Synanon was founded in the mid-'50s. My mother began participating in Synanon activities in 1965 and actually lived there from 1969 to 1980. I was born in 1974, in The Synanon School, and was deeply imprinted by the Synanon lifestyle and values. As a six-month-old infant, I lived separately from my mother and was raised in a Kibbutz-style school. I lived in a "family" of twelve other children my age. "Demonstrators," or Synanon role models, raised me. My mother fought to remain in contact with me throughout the six years that I was raised separately from her, regularly volunteering in the school community and frequently visiting me. Although its utopian dream was genuine and commendable, Synanon was flawed and the school did not protect me from physical and emotional abuse. As time passed, Synanon lost interest in its children, and both the school and Synanon itself collapsed.

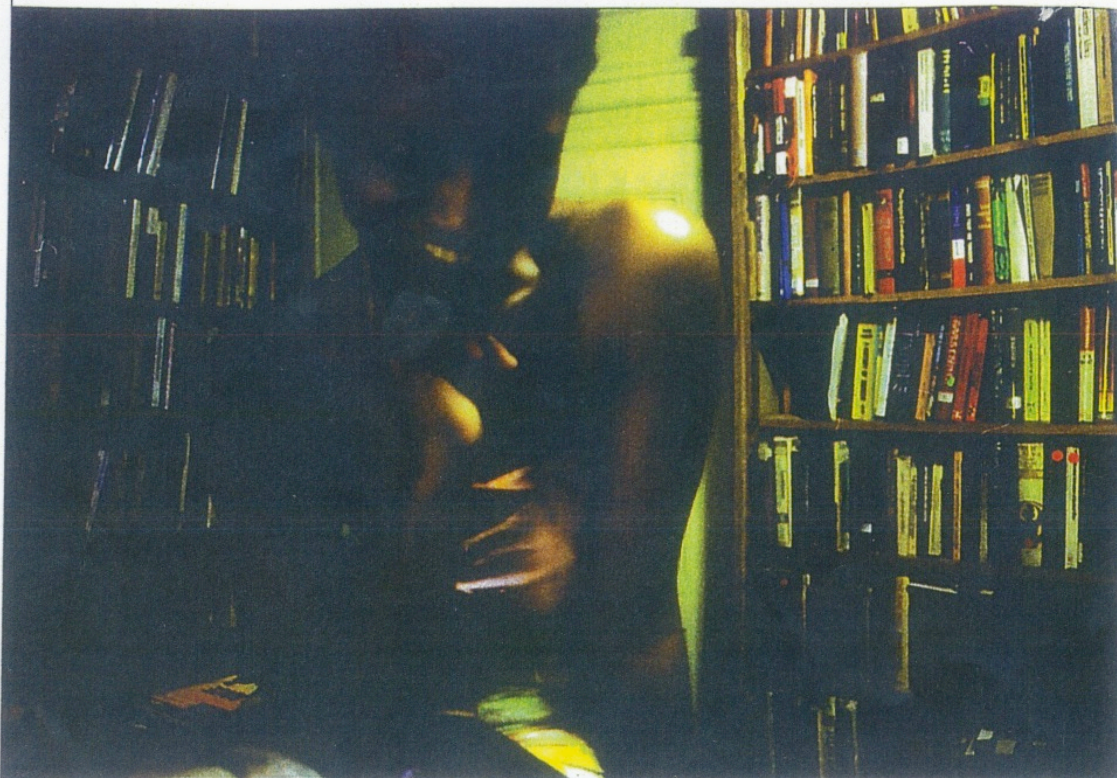
I moved out when I was six years old, and although Synanon was collapsing and I had suffered abuse, I longed for the good values I had learned there. I rejected the American notion of a nuclear family, something my mother and new stepfather were desperately trying to reestablish; they both provided me with a wealth of love. I lived in a tiny cottage in the roughest and meanest part of Oakland. I was reunited with my father and stepmother, who had also lived in Synanon but moved out when I was two years old. I had a very close bond to my real father. I was happy to have him back in my life, and vis-

ited him in Southern California on the weekends and during holidays. My mother and stepfather were poor. My father and stepmother were well-to-do. America was truly crazy.

When moving to the outside—to Oakland—there was none of the social order that Synanon had attempted to establish. The American values I was exposed to were shallow and commercial, so I rejected them. Above all, I discovered that I was a mixed-race child, caught between the well-defined and segregated racial communities that characterize the San Francisco East Bay. Mainstream America was no safer for me than Synanon had been.

Although in time I became somewhat integrated into American society, I clung to the communal values I had lived by in Synanon. I used the tough social and verbal skills I had learned in Synanon's high-pressure and self-conscious community to manipulate and reshape American society as best I could. I continually found myself resisting and verbally battling with my teachers in school because in Synanon we were encouraged to do this, but on the "outside" this verbal openness was looked at as a bad mouthing and having a bad attitude. I felt compelled to fight for my survival and for the survival of others like me. I became determined to tell my own story, to reveal something about both Synanon and American society to the world. As a consequence, I discovered the media, and since high school my preoccupation has been to achieve the skills I need to tell a story called "Little Brown Girl."

Now, at 30 years old, I live in New York City, struggling to survive as a producer and correspondent for television in NYC's entertainment industry. I've learned that I am drawn to people who have experienced nontraditional upbringings. Many of my friends in New York City had similar backgrounds growing up. They each experienced an extraordinary birth culture and lifestyle during their early upbringing. They then were thrust into American society and scrambled to make adjustments.



FORMER FLOWER CHILD JUA HAS GONE FROM MODELING TO FILMMAKING.



LITTLE JUA ON THE BEACH.

"WHEN I SAW MY FIRST SHAMPOO AD, I WANTED TO HAVE LONG FLOWING HAIR JUST LIKE THE GIRL FROM THE AD, JUST LIKE BLACK BARBIE."



JUA AND HER MOM FLASH A SMILE.

JUA: Jua has a distinctive look; she is tall and curvaceously slender, and her dark-skinned complexion is complimented by Spanish facial features. At a very young age, Jua appeared on the covers of *Seventeen* and *Essence* magazines, and was featured as a model for Cover Girl Cosmetics. Her single mother raised her and her four younger siblings in San Francisco, California. The first child of five, all from different daddies, Jua was, in a sense, the leader of the pack. Her mother is a native New York Venezuelan and her father (who was not actively part of her life) is black American. Jua was raised unconventionally vegan at a time when vegetarians were looked upon with suspicion. Her mother helped start Rainbow Grocery in San Francisco, the first organic whole foods co-op market. Jua attended a nontraditional school while taking worldwide assignments as a model. Initially, she came to New York to model full-time, and then ended-up engineering a career for herself in television and film.

Even at an early age, Jua was exposed to the hardships and realities of adult life. "A lot of my mother's male friends died of AIDS. They were gay and I can remember at six years old someone dying from AIDS." But if her mother showed her life's true colors, she also protected her from the American "values" and social stereotypes that many other young girls were being influenced by at the time. She didn't go to church, nor did she celebrate holidays or birthdays. "I always had to battle the definitions people have for black girls. When I saw my first shampoo ad, I wanted to have long flowing hair just like the girl from the ad, just like Black Barbie." Jua assumed the nickname "Giraffe" because of her height and slenderness. Now, the curse of her non-traditional family background works to Jua's advantage. She is successfully making her way in NY's television and film industry. "My goal is to eventually run a company that produces and directs content for film and television that gives face to the many cultures and stories out there," she explains. "Everyone has a story."

BRENDA: Brenda is "Española-Mexicana," which she defines as Spanish and Mexican descent on her mother's side and Mexican on her

father's. Brenda has Spanish, French and Mediterranean features—dark hair, olive skin and deep-brown eyes. She was born in San Antonio, Texas, and raised alongside five brothers. Brenda's parents were swingers, married couples who swap sexual partners. At 15 years old, Brenda learned that her dad was not her biological father. "I remember coming home from school and my mother pulled me aside and told me the story," she says.

Not unlike Jua's mother, Brenda's parents also played with and reconfigured the social codes of the day. When she was barely out of the cradle, they were hosting big disco parties where the vibe was wide open and the guest list numbered in the hundreds. "I remember being four and five years old and everything was sexy around me, it was the sexy '70s," she recalls. "I saw pictures of myself where my mother had dyed my hair fire engine red because she would have hair-coloring parties with her girlfriends, and I would be included." At the time Brenda did not think that her family's lifestyle was out of the ordinary. "I was raised in a predominantly Mexican family, but everything around me was predominantly white."

Brenda's life changed when her parents split up. She and her mother moved to Michigan, went on welfare and moved in with her grandmother. Her mother went back to school and eventually got a full-time job as a caseworker for the Michigan Department of Social Services.

When Brenda graduated from high school, she left Michigan to live in Las Vegas. She worked at a potpourri of jobs, including bartending, waitressing and stripping, until she took a full-time job as a topless dancer. "My getting into the topless dancer's business was an act of desperation," she explains. "I needed money and I knew that those girls were making money." She claims she got involved because the girls who were her roommates at the time decided it would be a lucrative gig. "So they sent me and one of the other girls as guinea pigs to see what would happen. I worked that night and every week after that for the next three and a half years. Needless to say, we got the whole crew in on it." Brenda managed to save \$25,000 in cash as a topless dancer by the time she was 23 years old. She had a brand new car, a deluxe apartment and new furniture—she was living the life! Brenda eventually



AFTER HER PARENTS' DIVORCE, MICHELLE WAS RAISED BY HER MOTHER AND HER MOTHER'S GIRLFRIEND.



MICHELLE AND HER SISTER AT THE "LITTLE MISS BIG" PAGEANT.



BRENDA AT HOME IN NEW YORK CITY.



BRENDA GREW UP WITH PARENTS WHO WERE SWINGERS. SHE IS NOW PRESIDENT AND CEO OF HER OWN COMPANY.



BRENDA WITH A CHILDHOOD FRIEND

**"MY MOTHER DIDN'T FIT IN
WITH THE OTHER BLONDE,
PTA, STAY-AT-HOME, CUP-
CAKE-MAKING MOTHERS."**



FOUR-YEAR-OLD MICHELLE AT DANCING SCHOOL

moved to NYC with her boyfriend at the time and started a massage school called the Swedish Institute for Massage. She is now the proud owner and CEO of her company, Massage NYC.

MICHELLE: Michelle was raised in Long Island, on the border of Nassau and Queens, by a Puerto Rican mother and a Puerto Rican and Cuban father. "When my parents first bought and moved into the house I grew up in, I was 3 years old. The white, working class neighbors signed a petition so that we wouldn't move in. I was the darkest person on the school bus and in my classes. I was teased a lot because I wasn't white. I was called "brownie," "shit," "chocolate ice cream," "spic," "dirty Puerto Rican" and many other derogatory names for people of color. No one wanted to play with me and even the teachers had a sour expression on their face when interacting with me."

Michelle's parents divorced when she was five years old. Her father quickly remarried, and her mother, surprisingly, got together with a woman. In a very short period of time, Michelle had two lesbian Puerto Rican mothers in Queens. "We were like any other family, only we had two moms," Michelle remembers. "My mother is the more feminine one. She wears makeup, high heels, and dresses. She paints her nails and is more into 'girly' things. Her girlfriend, at the time, didn't like to wear makeup, wouldn't be caught dead in a skirt and wore men's clothing." Neither of Michelle's parents ever went to college and her mother worked in a factory, often holding down two jobs. "There were times when things were really bad financially for my family," Michelle says. "We had to boil water to take a bath because there was no heat, eat eggs for dinner because that's all there was to eat and walk to the payphone because there was no house phone." But Michelle's home life was close and very nurturing. In her neighborhood there was a lot of prejudice towards Puerto Ricans, let alone lesbians, but her mother provided the necessary love and personal involvement to ease the burden of being an "outsider." "My mother didn't fit in with the other blonde, PTA, stay-at-home, cup-

cake-making mothers."

After high school Michelle enrolled briefly in college, but then became a professional dancer, performing in New York and all over the world. She used her dancing income to self-finance a return to college and, since graduating, has survived six years as a professional producer for television in NYC. She is now pursuing a career as an actress during her television production's seasonal hiatus.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

I love telling these little stories. More and more, people let me know that they resonate with these accounts of my friends' nontraditional upbringings, as well as my own experience adjusting to American culture after growing up in the alternative world created by Synanon. In order to survive in the modern world, I found that surrounding myself with friends who were raised in similar circumstances as myself was the best protection. Each of them came out of cultural or racial settings that made their transition into mainstream America difficult. All of them ended up in entertainment, television, or creative occupations. The clash between their home cultures and their American experiences became the strong motivational force that propelled them into meaningful careers.

My life in New York literally embodies an ambition that many young urbanites share—to use the media, any media—to publicly paint images of their personal urban culture. I see my friends as living examples of this growing movement that is necessary to our cultural and emotional survival.

The stories of each of these women parallel the tale of my own life. Each of our personalities has been shaped by the rich racial and cultural experiences of our early home lives. Our parents were idealistic pioneers with their hearts set on raising us to be conscious and unique individuals. Our values were severely tested when we encountered mainstream American society, but our struggle to survive, to maintain those values, and to speak out in our own personal voices made us who we are today.