SANTES Episode 6: Lazarus Letcher

Chapter 1: Intro

[match strikes]

[solemn acoustic guitar]

♪♪

[flame flickers]

♪♪

[long exhalation]

LUNA: Hi, everyone. Welcome to episode 6 of Santes, a podcast for future ancestors. I'm Luna Merbruja.

SMF: And I'm StormMiguel Florez. Before we get into this episode, we want to talk a little bit about the Santes Project, which is where this podcast idea came from. First, we chose the name Santes Project as a continuation of the syncretism that was practiced by our ancestors whose temples and shrines to their gods were buried and destroyed by Spanish colonizers. With Catholicism forced on us, indigenous peoples of Latin America covertly brought in our own deities and archetypes to fit into the Catholic practice of praying to and venerating saints. Some of the most prominent Mexican saints, for example, are Santa Muerte and Our Lady of Guadalupe. This feels very queer to me. As trans and queer people, we've always found ways to covert language and reclaim practices for our survival. We also have archetypes who are venerated in our communities too, like the fierce queen, the mother, the high femme, the baby dyke, the dapper zaddy, and more than I can possibly list here. I like to think that when we become ancestors, the barriers and structures that keep us in human form go away, and our connection to source or power is so much stronger, which is why people reach to the ancestors for support.

LUNA: Exactly. And in the case of the Santes Project, we're inviting queer and trans BIPOC to canonize ourselves as the beautiful, messy, miraculous beings that we are. And we get to decide for ourselves if and how we will support the living when we become ancestors. We do this through the Santes form. You can find it on our website at www.SantesProject.com.

Chapter 2: The Saint of Lucky Chaos

SMF: Since we're asking people to answer questions about someday becoming an ancestor, we figure it's only fair if we share some of our answers with you. This episode, I wanna start with a question to you, Luna. What are you the saint of, or what gifts do you want to offer people when you become an ancestor?

LUNA: I want to be the saint of many things, but I also want to be the saint of lucky chaos. Think the Wheel of Fortune tarot card. I want people to invoke me when

they're at their lowest low point in life. I'm talking homeless, heartbroken, hurt, or going through those heavy life shenanigans that weigh you down and you literally have nowhere to go. I wanna be the ancestor that gives you something unexpected, something wild, whether that's assisting with a new career or housing situation or giving you an unexpected lover that makes you question everything you thought you knew about yourself. Like, please, please, please pray to me when your life feels stagnant, out of control, or just plain boring and you want something to spice it up, and I'll give you the gift of chaos.

SMF: Oh my gosh. So like basically a continuation of what you do now times what, 10, 20, 100...

[both laugh]

LUNA: Call me out, StormMiguel. Yes.

[both laughing]

SMF: No, I love it! And so okay. So take it or leave it, but for this episode, at least, I canonize you Sante Caosite— Okay. I'm gonna have to say this like a million times. Sante Caosite de la Fortuna. If I'm canonizing you this, I need to know how to say it. My Spanish, I never said it was anything, so Sante Caosite de la Fortuna. That is what I canonize you for at least this episode. LUNA (laughing): I will take it. I have been anointed and it will not be the last time.

SMF: It will not be the last time. In fact, I think we should just do this every time we have an episode.

LUNA: Hell, yeah, I'm so down.

[laughter]

SMF: A tradition is born— or not. We'll see. We will see. Time will tell.

Chapter 3: Welcome Lazarus Letcher!

So I'm so excited to introduce today's guest, someone who I've admired deeply from the moment we met when we did a virtual folk show together early in the pandemic. Lazarus Nance Letcher is a brilliant artist and writer from the Midwest now living in the ancestral and unceded Tiwa land in New Mexico. Lazarus is a string instrument player, primarily plays the viola, and a singer songwriter. You'll hear some of their gorgeous music in this episode. Lazarus is also a PhD candidate in American Studies with a focus on Black and indigenous liberation and queer and trans studies. To learn more about their work, check out the description of this episode wherever you are listening.

LUNA: In this episode, Lazarus talks about the current erasure of trans history, how house decor turned out to be protective wards, and an ancestor's story involving a horseback break for freedom. Without further ado, let's welcome Lazarus Letcher to the podcast.

SMF: And welcome all of you to Santes.

[chill lo-fi music]

LUNA: Welcome, Laz! Welcome to the Santes Podcast. We're so happy to have you here.

LAZARUS: Thank you.

SMF: Hi, Laz.

LAZARUS: Happy to be here.

Chapter 4: Calling In the Ancestors

LUNA: One of the things we like to do when we start our podcast is to open the space, invite our ancestors in. Right now I'm burning some incense actually that StormMiguel gave me last Sunday. They smell really fucking good. And it's just filling the air with some smoke right now. But yeah, to kick it off, Lazarus, is there anyone that you would like to call in? Any ancestors that might be visiting with you today or that you're thinking about?

LAZARUS: Yeah, I was just making some music and I wanna call in my ancestor, Carol Nance, who was my great grandma. I am a many-generations musician and it's mostly because of her. And I also want to call in my ancestor Dempsey Spencer, whose name I just learned this summer, who was— he self-emancipated in 1861. And his daughter Susie, who then tried to sue the US government, who is now my phone background. I don't know if you can see that very stern looking Black woman in the front.

LUNA: Yes.

LAZARUS: She integrated a Kansas high school in the 1800s. Whenever I'm feeling a little... little something about working on my PhD, she... gives me some ancestral side eye to keep me going.

[laughter]

LUNA: That's amazing. I'm so glad you know those ancestors, and you have their photos. That's such a treasure.

LAZARUS: Yeah.

LUNA: That's incredible. How about you, StormMiguel? Who are you calling in today?

SMF: Well, today would have been— and I've called him in before, but today would have been my dad's 93rd birthday. So I'm calling in my dad, Joe— Joe Florez in again. I really didn't say much about him last time. So like I just want to say, you

know, he was a complicated person like the rest of us, and he would have been the first to say that he was far from being a saint. And he loved rancheras and huapengos— huapangos. Sorry— sorry, Dad. I know I mispronounced that. And one of his favorite albums was Linda Ronstadt, Canciones de Mi Padre. But he also loved like Willie Nelson and Marty Robbins. He loved jazz music like I got turned on to some really cool stuff because of him, but I was a teenager, so I didn't appreciate it that much. Like he'd come into my room and be like, "Check out this Ray Charles album!" And I'd be like "Okay, cool, Dad. Just leave it there." And then I wouldn't listen to it.

[laughter]
And he died when I was 19, so I didn't really get to be an adult and have that appreciation. So I've definitely had the appreciation of it as an adult and want to be able to share that with him, I've been thinking. I've been talking about making a mixtape for him for a very long time, I just haven't done it But I think that would be a really nice way for me to connect with him and be like "Dad, check this out!" and listen for anything that maybe I'll be inspired to check out in the middle of that. So yeah, I just wanna... say, hey, Dad! Welcome and happy birthday.

LAZARUS: Mmm.

LUNA: Awww. Happy birthday.

SMF: What about you Luna?

LUNA: Yeah, I've been watching (chuckles) a lot of Drag Race lately and it's helping me connect with queer culture, but it's also— I had a drag mom back in Oakland and they passed away. It's been a number of years now, maybe ten years or so. But I've been thinking about them a lot the past few weeks because they were super creative. And I remember one of my last memories with them was like, I was at their house and they were sewing popcorn to this like corset. And then we went out to a drag show and they like pulled out all this popcorn and threw it at the audience and it was just so fun and very like memorable and they were just like very like loud and femme and just really really such a sweet person. So yeah, they've been on my mind lately in terms of just like creativity and being a queer artist.

SMF: Welcome to all our ancestors.

LAZARUS: Welcome.

Chapter 5: "You have to go to Ghana."

SMF: And, you know, any of the others that show up that are here to support us and be loved by us. And you know, you've already mentioned you kinda get the side-eye from your ancestor.

[Lazarus laughs]

What is— overall what is your relationship to ancestor practice and then moving into like how— well we can get into it— but of course, you know, this goes into how do

you envision yourself? What kind of ancestor do you want to be? But starting with just like, what is your relationship to ancestors and ancestral practices?

LAZARUS: Yeah. I didn't grow up with ancestral practices, which I think is pretty common for a lot of Black Americans. And then my sophomore year in college— I grew up in small town Indiana, which is like a very character-building place to grow up Black and trans. And then I was like, let me go to Minnesota. (laughing) Let me go somewhere colder and whiter. And I was in a music school, I was playing viola, I was living my dreams, but... also really struggling, and my sophomore year, I got just a very strong, strong message that was like, "You have to go to Ghana." And I was like, okay, I don't know anything about Ghana. And I applied for this program, the McNair program. It's an incredible thing for BIPOC scholars, first gen students, and got accepted even though I shouldn't have.
[laughs]

And that funded my trip to Ghana. I got on a plane at 20 by myself, I... met a guy who played the gyile, his name was Bernard Woma. He's another ancestor I wanna bring into this space, this incredible gyile player which is like the ancestor to the xylophone. It kinda rattles your bones as you play it. It's just such a deep, lovely resonance. And I just got on a plane at 20 and I was like, (laughing) "I really hope this guy I met at a concert is at this airport to pick me up."

But yeah, that's where my ancestral practice really took off was being the first person in my family to go back to West Africa since enslavement. And just like... learning the music and the dances that my ancestors might have learned, the heaviness of going to Cape Coast Castle and just... I mean, I... I've tried to put words to it many times. That's the only place for sure I will ever know, like, this is where my ancestors stepped foot in Africa, and standing at the door of no return and being like, okay, for some reason I was the one that was called back. So yeah, I talk to them every day. I've got an altar for them. I feel like they've gotten a lot louder in my life since I had a brush with death.

But yeah. And I do like a lot of— I don't know, there's some very deeply personal practices, but... Yeah, I like to chat with them. The side-eyes are loving. I know that for sure. (laughs) The side-eyes are loving. I'm just like, my job is largely to write, and it was illegal for them to read or write, and what an absolute gift. So I feel like they keep me humble. And... Yeah, I feel like they rejoice in me and see my queerness, see my transness, see my wholeness. And sometimes I do exhaust them, but... (laughs) You know—

LUNA: What a gift. I think you're also their gift. You know? Like, I think that if I were thinking of my ancestors and, like, generations in the future, I would want them to have everything. You know? Like, this is what we survive for. This is what we're paving the road for. And for you to be able to write when they couldn't and to travel back home when they couldn't. I think all of that is like kind of the culmination of their dreams coming true, you know? So that's amazing that you get to live that life and that they're being loud and it sounds like celebratory of, like what you're able to do for your lineage.

LAZARUS: Thank you. Yeah. I— when you said that, I heard my grandma Thelma, very loudly, who was, like, 4-foot-8 on a good day, just, like, fearless as hell. And just whenever my parents would try to, like, gently correct me, like, was very spoiled, but with grandma, it was, next level. It'd always be, (sternly) "You leave my baby alone."

[laughter and vocalizations of deep appreciation]

Chapter 6: “I am still here because my ancestor said ‘Not today.’”

SMF: You know, before we spoke with you today, like before this conversation, I've been thinking a lot about what you've mentioned— your brush with death that happened not too long ago. And it really didn't... It wasn't lost on me that we're sitting here talking about— we're asking people— in a way that oftentimes is kind of— thinking of it in a fun way or in a kind of joyous way, like, (jovial) "Oh, what kind of ancestor do you want to be?" And I gotta tell you how grateful I am that I get to have this conversation with you because I know that that was— there was a moment where that might not have been. And knowing that you are here doing this work, and I've gotten to know you more in the past, what, six months? I don't remember when you did the first article and we had the biggest conversation we've had, but that was just really wonderful and lovely. So I just want to say it's not lost to me that we're asking this— kind of like... It can feel like a heavy question when you're like, 'No, this shit just like— this could happen any time.'

LAZARUS: Yeah.

SMF: And that's also why we want to be having these conversations, because it could happen at any time, and we wanna know— we wanna know what all of us want and need, not only while we're here, but after.

LAZARUS: Yeah. Thank you. Yeah. I have... Hmm... I've always thought about death a lot. I was a weird little kid. (laughs)

LUNA: Same.

LAZARUS: Right? And... Little goth trans babies, but...

[laughter]

Yeah. My master's thesis was specifically on transgender murder memorials and how do we... honor trans people well when they're gone, especially when they're taken by violence. And that's what my dissertation is on. It's called Chasing Ghosts: Memorializing Queer and Trans Lives in a Time of Spectacular Erasure. And I was working on this when I, you know, survived my own murder attempt. And it's definitely changed my perspective on a lot of things, but very much feel like I am still here because my ancestor said "Not today."

SMF: Mmhm.

LAZARUS: Or said, like, 'You got a little more marinating to do before you can join our ranks. You know.

LUNA: Mmhm.

[ethereal string music]

♪♪

Chapter 7: The Patron Saint of Fierce Protection and Respite

SMF: So how do you envision yourself as an ancestor? What kind of ancestor do you want to be when the time comes, in hopefully the very far-off future when we're all just like old and cranky and all the good stuff.

LAZARUS: Yeah. I'm definitely— I've got my sights set on triple digits.

SMF: Yeah...

LUNA: Heck yes!

LAZARUS: I'm very excited to be like an ornery old Black man. That sounds really nice.

LUNA: Yeah!

[laughter]

LAZARUS: Yeah. I... envision myself being the like, 'Come here, baby.' The, like, respite... and also the fierce protector. Like, I know I've got a lot of protectors in my bloodline. That's why I'm still here. But like, a cheerleader that will also shank the enemies if necessary.

LUNA: Yes. Yeah, you got some power— the ancestors, and what they've accomplished. Like, you definitely have a lot of power in you, which is amazing to know, like as an ancestor, you'll only get stronger.

LAZARUS: Thank you. Yeah.

LUNA: One of my favorite things about working with ancestors is kind of like messages we get from them. Like you mentioned, you kinda heard your grandma a moment ago and it also sounds like maybe they come through with music as well. But yeah, I'm curious, what are some moments or like, messages you've received with your ancestors?

LAZARUS: Yeah, I feel like a lot of my ancestor practice, I've stumbled into and then gotten like, verification later talking to people that are initiated in specific African traditional religions of like, 'Oh, that's why I do that.' Like there's this giant snake plant behind me, for instance. And I have those all around my house. I've always been really drawn to them. I've always wanted them by my entrances and then found out after like a decade of having them around my home that in West Africa, in Nigeria, they're seen as protection. They're called Oya swords. And Oya's an Orisha

that I've worked with a lot, and it's like, 'oh, I just always felt so drawn to do that.' Or... right before the shooting I survived— these are indigo water jars, and I... put these around my house and I felt really drawn to put one [jar clinks] on my fence, on my front fence. And then a week later, my neighbor shot a gun at me eight times. The area around the jar was completely riddled with the bullets. The jar was untouched... and the jar lined up with where I jumped my back fence to get away. And so just these little moments of like, I don't know why I'm doing this. So far, it sounds like my ancestors really come through with home decor, which is very gay.

[laughs]

Like, 'wouldn't this look cute here?' And it's like, 'Oh!' And I'm still alive. Thank you.

SMF: They know your language.

Chapter 8: The Viola: “The trans boy of the orchestra”

LAZARUS: Yes, they know my language. And then definitely through music. Yeah. I play the viola, which is in between the violin and the cello. I joke it's like the trans boy of the orchestra. Like, it exists in all the orchestras. No one knows we're there. It's got a voice that sometimes cracks, this little in between voice. But we're an essential part of the community. Gosh darn it.

[laughter]

But it's really— since I started T, it's really close to my own voice. So... I can resonate my instrument with my voice. And if I hit the right note, it resonates my body. And the music I do, especially with Stages of Tectonic Blackness, where we do these eight-hour long ritual performances, connecting being these Black bodies, the descendants of a stolen people on the stolen land, just like the absolute trance states I get into playing music for eight hours and communing with nature and deciding which notes to hit and which spirituals to draw from. Like, I get just such loud ancestor messages when I get to do that work.

LUNA: That's incredible. I just had images of... oh my gosh. I forgot his name. I think it might be Victor now in Umbrella Academy, but there's this epic scene where he's playing the violin and there's all power happening around him. But it's like this culminating scene— sorry to spoil it— but it's just this amazing— and the character transitions too. So just everything you're talking about, this instrument and this character... Elliot Page plays him. And, yeah, it's just a really powerful moment. And that was coming to mind as you were describing that. There's something about art and music specifically that just like transcends time and generations. Like even some chords that we play that end up like being ancestral, like there's just something in our bodies that knows it. It's passed from generation to generation, so that's amazing that that note is still resonating with you as you're activating it for other people too.

Chapter 9: “Folklore is why I’m still here”

LAZARUS: Yeah. And that's what blew me away when I went to Ghana. So I was in a very classical music scene. I was the fly in the buttermilk, like, I was the only Black

kid in that orchestra, you know, playing Shostakovich and Beethoven and like, playing this music by dead white dudes, you know, and it's still just making me weep and just still activating something in me. And then going to Ghana, I mean like, my first gyile lesson, I sat there and I was like, "Okay. So like, what's the tuning of this?" "Where's my sheet music?" They're like, "No. Repeat after me." I was like, "Oh, what?"

It was just, it completely transforms my art life to learn the way my ancestors learned and to also not be the fly and the buttermilk anymore.

But the thing that blew me away learning the songs is just like, oh, right, and then that's how we get gospel music, and that's where the blues comes from, and that's where hip hop comes from. It's just such a beautiful throughline. Like, my ancestors could not write down these things for me. They could not leave me— We were talking before we started recording, how frustrating the, you know, traditional archives are and especially for Black Americans. Like, it's a miracle I know some of their names. I actually have some of the writings of my first born free ancestor, which is incredible.

But through music, like, I think that scene in Sinners where all of the ancestors and all of the future generations come in through music, I lost it. Like, I understand that feeling so, so clearly. Like, shout out to Ryan Coogler for capturing that so perfectly. But like, yeah, I think one of the greatest sins of the transatlantic slave trade especially in The United States, was how much they tried to erase our connection to the ancestors. Because what was really unique about The United States was that we were forcibly separated by tribe and ethnicities. So our languages would die within a generation on the plantation. It was illegal for us to read or write, so we couldn't capture what had happened. And, you know, we're still fucking here, and I still am able to know these things. I'm still able to know these songs, to find these names. Yeah.

LUNA: Yeah, I think that was one of my favorite things I learned about different types of revolutionary history, was that songs became ways of sending messages and letting people know that there were like slave catchers out on the patrol. And like, there's all these ways that they like subtly and like brilliantly crafted revolution without getting caught or being, you know, just like underground about it and how we're still echoing that today. You know, like as we're living in this era of like tech watching everything we're doing, monitoring things, like we're still finding ways to circumvent these systems to get the information we need to our people to keep them safe. So yeah, it's incredible to think that no matter what happens, we'll always be creative and innovative and like ten steps ahead and that they can't— They'll keep trying, but there's no way for them to take us out. And I think that is also just a huge testament of just ancestry in general of like, we have this innate ability to survive and like, I think also beautifully, like to collaborate. And another part of like revolutionary history I love is like learning about how communities who are oppressed, joined together and like had to learn each other's languages and cultures and like how to bridge these communities together to like fight a common enemy. All that to say, love it. Here for it. Music that makes you move, music that makes you like survive, but just empowering as well.

SMF: And I love the like— the oral history of it. 'I'm gonna tell you how to do this— Show you how to do this.' 'And then you're gonna learn it.' And we've talked about archives before. We were talking about it earlier, and you and I've talked about it also before, Lazarus, just about how— who has access to archives. And when we've been trying to do research, I know you've been doing research on a project recently where it was really hard to find particular archives, like when I was doing research on The Whistle, when we were making the film, MAJOR!, like, there's so many things that aren't there. And it's often about who has the stability and the means to hold on to those things safely and take them from place to place... and then to have them left somewhere, to have someone who's in another stable position to pass them down to or have them put somewhere safe. And I also like, it got me thinking I've been thinking a lot lately about the trans archives and studies that were destroyed in the Holocaust.

LAZARUS: Yeah.

SMF: And how when we depend on— These things are really important. Like, documents are important. I'm all about saving documents. But when we rely on that, things get lost. And when we are passing things down to the people that are coming after us, to younger people or to people who come to us and want to learn, whether it be in our family lineage or like in our trans lineage, that those things, they cannot be— they can't be destroyed. Like those are gonna go on and they might be changed over time. But that's how— that's how it works. Like nothing is truly— even if it's on a piece of paper or even if it's photographed, you're still gonna tell that story differently over time or interpret it differently over time. So I don't think it's any less relevant when you don't have, like, the physical proof that something existed or how it was done.

LAZARUS: A thousand percent. And that's just like the white anthropologists just being like, 'and then everything else is folklore.' And it's like, the folklore is why I'm still here—

Yeah. I I'm working on a project right now looking at, like, the queer and trans history of Route 66. And StormMiguel, I was in this group specifically for queer and trans New Mexicans, and where the official archive has been just so gnarly to navigate because what we're really missing is photographs. And I'm like, "Does anyone have photographs from life in these gay bars on Central Avenue—" which is Route 66— "from like 1970 to the early 2000s?" Like, that's what we're really needing. And half of the comments were like, "There's this incredible documentary called The Whistle. It is exactly what you're looking for."

[laughter]

And I was like, "Yes. Thank you so much. I love it. Also, here's an article I wrote about it—"

[crosstalk and laughter]

I was very excited to share that with you on mic of just like, everyone was so excited to recommend it. I was like, "Yes! Thank you."

SMF: I have a confession to make. I saw that post and I didn't comment because I was like, too damn shy. I was like, what— 'I'm just gonna enjoy that from here.' I meant to mention to you. But I was lurking in that whole thread.

LAZARUS: Good. I'm glad you got your flowers.

[laughter]

LAZARUS: But yeah, like the magic of folklore and... one of the things that's helped my work, especially with Stages of Tectonic Blackness, is the Federal Writers Project, where they drove around the South and just interviewed Black people on their porch and were like, "What was enslavement like?" "What songs did you sing?"

And I just did some sound scaping for Nikesha Breeze, who's a brilliant Black artist based in Taos. She was, like one of the headliners for the Sydney Biennale. I don't know how to say that word because I'm not fancy enough in the artwork, 'biennial' 'biennale.' But for that one, I centered around— it was a recording I found that was Zora Neale Hurston, who is an ancestor I love and adore, just brilliant writer, brilliant researcher, turned anthropology on its head in a way that needed to happen. And it was her singing. And it was just such a gift of, she was explaining how this folk song was passed from West Africa to The Bahamas. And then when it came to The US, how it got reinterpreted, it's called, "Dat Crow" or "Crow dance." And as you unravel it, it's like, oh, the crow was actually maybe a vulture when it was in Africa, and the vulture is actually a symbol of Oshun. And as it goes through all of these iterations, all the different, you know, stops of the diaspora, and to hear Zora Neale Hurston's voice through my computer speakers a hundred years later, was just like such immense gratitude for that archive.

So Nikesha has been working with those closely with their project, Living Histories Project. They took over a warehouse in Sydney. They built a giant white tree. They recreated a slave shack and filled it with images of people that were formerly enslaved. And we scouted for people to read their stories out loud, to literally breathe life into it. And it was such a beautiful process going through those applications. And we're like, "Okay, maybe we can get 25!" And we got almost a thousand applications.

SMF: Oh my god.

LUNA: Oh, wow.

LAZARUS: And the questions were like, what is your relationship to— to Blackness? Like, what's your family's story? And it was such an honor to read just all of these different threads of Blackness in America and like what it means for them to like breathe life into these ancestor's stories. So it's kind of this— I don't know, like... these archives exist and there's something about like, blowing the dust off them and trying to keep them alive. Like, one of the things I'm struggling with, with my dissertation is things keep disappearing off the Internet as I'm trying to document them—

LUNA: Yep.

LAZARUS: Which is terrifying. But part of me is also like, well, that's a new chapter to the dissertation now.

[laughs]

Chapter 10: Seedkeeping In a Digital Age

But, like, the things that are controlled by the federal government just disappearing. Or there's a beautiful project that Mic.com did that in my master's thesis about trans murder memorials, I was like, this is the way you do it. It was like beautiful pictures, beautiful write ups, infographics explaining you know, who in the trans community is most vulnerable. We know it's our Black and brown femme sisters, and it's just completely gone. And I'm grateful I took screenshots for my master's thesis. And then, you know, the Stonewall Memorial, which is awful, you know, it's just four fucking white people. It's a literal whitewashed statue— like the critique writes itself. But, you know, it lost its status as, like, a National Park. And then every time I went to the website, things kept changing of like, first they took the T off, then they took the B off. So just, we're in this really strange fucking age of like, trying to write everything down and a giant eraser is kind of coming behind it.

SMF: Yeah. Yeah.

SMF: I've been thinking a lot about that in terms of film and how— you know, like all the things that we go to the Internet to find and like, how do we download those things? How do we get them on drives? But also how do we get those drives to safe places outside of The United States? Or how do we get— and the backup— the cloud backup in another country? Right? Like, I've really been thinking about, and talking to folks about how do we start to build that network of safekeeping for our digital material and some physical material as well, copies of it.

LAZARUS: It reminds me of the tradition of seed keeping in like, indigenous and Black communities. Like, I order my seeds from this incredible organization. I believe it's called Truelove Seeds, but like, the watermelons I grow can be traced back to like, someone who ran away from their plantation and stuck them in their pocket. And the way we can trace these lineages, but there is like this temperature-controlled doomsday bunker with seeds from like, as many plants as possible. But the predecessor to that is every strain of okra you have in The United States was braided into an African woman's hair before she was forced on a ship. Same thing with indigo. So many of these plants that we have in The Americas, like... my ancestors knew this might be the end of the world. 'I don't know what we're gonna need. Let me put my food and my medicine on my person.' And I feel that way with— I'm like web pages might not, you know, sustain— (laughing) sustain future generations in certain ways—

SMF: But it's information.

LAZARUS: Yeah. Information. There was a website that was dedicated to like, alternative ways to get your hormones. It was just blasted off the Internet this week.

[StormMiguel groans]

So, yeah, let's get back to making zines. Let's— if you're living in another country and you are looking for a energetic short Black violist to marry, um, I'm poly. I'll just put it out there.

[laughter]

LUNA: Oh my gosh. Okay, as a Libra, I'm here for this message. I'm endorse this, please. We'll have our first Santes marriage. I'm very excited about that.

SMF: Oh my gosh.

[laughter]

Chapter 11: “Spite-Self-Care”

LUNA: I love how— I just I'm enjoying this conversation. I'm like feeling so inspired about the ways that like everything we're doing right now has a purpose. Like whether or not we're documenting or we're creating or reading like— In this moment, like I feel like ten years ago, I was just like queer and living my life and was like, not thinking about it too much. Right? Of course, there's always been queerphobia and things happening, but I feel like now in this very moment I'm like anything we do for our community means so much more and it has such a huge impact.

I'm meeting like younger trans people who are growing up in a time where they're being told they're not real or valid or their rights are being taken away. The things that like I took for granted ten years ago are now like lifesaving for them today. So I think it's just incredible, like, you know, the archival work of showing young queer and trans people like we've been here for decades, like do not forget that this happened. I know when I learned about like the earliest SRS surgery was in like 1920s or so, like, that was documented and still documented. That blew my mind. I thought it was something from the 60s that was new with like Christina Jorgensen or whatnot, but like, no, it was the 1920s and I'm sure there was someone before that too, right? But like all of this history where like, when I found that out, I really felt confident that like being trans is something that's not new, it's been around for a hundred years and it's been medically documented, but they won't let you know that. Right?

They wanna like erase all of this history. And they did try to, but like we keep holding onto it. And we are living examples of it still happening. That like we are the example that like you can be trans at 5, 10, 50, 100 years old and like it's not going to change. So it's just, yeah, I'm loving how like we are also the seeds, like the things that we create, but like we as people are the seeds showing that like we will persist no matter what the culture is like.

SMF: Yeah. I think we have like our Black and indigenous ancestors to thank for that, right? We have been shown how to do this like long before we were convening as trans people in the way that we are now, even in the way that we were in the 60s.

like we are seeing how language and stories and resources and seeds are passed on. And those have not necessarily had to have been through blood lineage, right? Some of us don't have any connection to our blood lineage, but we do have connection to ancestors and we do have connection to our... I don't know, our source— those seeds and where we come from. And that goes for— I think that goes for being trans as well. And, you know—

LAZARUS: Yeah. Think about that a lot. Like, I learned how to be Black and how to be Irish from my family. And like, very clear lineage. But, like, as queer and trans people, it's like, oh, I have to go outside usually your blood family for this folklore, for this strength. And I have a comb in here somewhere. I'll find it later, I'm sure. But I got it when I was in Ghana, and it's of Sankofa, which is a bird placing an egg on its back. And I'm wearing a very cool bird t shirt right now. I'm very much in my birding era. My thirties hit me like a truck.

[laughter]

But like theory of Sankofa is she's placing this egg on her back, and it's looking to the past to help the future. And I get so much strength from working with the youth and, like, meeting young trans kids. I used to facilitate this camp called Queer Oriented Radical Days of Summer, QORDS, and meeting a Black trans kid who got hormone blockers. And it's like, oh, like top surgery is just not even the cards for you because you'll just never grow that tissue. It blew my mind. And also seeing how much fear they have and reminding them these fights aren't new, these tactics aren't new, there's so much to learn, especially from our Black and indigenous ancestors.

Like I mentioned— we've survived the end of the world so many times, and it's happening again. And, like, we've got the tools. We've got the technologies. And what I'm really trying to focus on is not being all-consumed by my despair. Luna, what you were saying, whatever I can do for my community counts right now. Like, I can't always be on the front lines. I don't do great in crowds, but, like, I can volunteer with mutual aid and drop off food places.

Or one of the things we're doing now is I finally moved out of the house that I was almost murdered in. I'm a very stubborn Taurus and I was like, 'You can't make me!' But now I live— I have acreage, which is something I never thought I'd have. And so we planted an orchard, which is something Harriet Tubman did when she got free. She had an orchard up North, and Black folks could just come every weekend and pick whatever they wanted, whatever they needed. And that's the goal for planting these trees. Just any way you give back counts. And like... I don't know, some days I can't show up for self care for myself, myself, but I can show up to take care of myself as like a fuck you to the systems that want me dead. (laughing) I call it 'spite self care.' I encourage everyone to try it. Take that transphobia. I took my meds.

[laughter]

LUNA: Aggressively living out of spite. I'm here for it.

[laughter]

Chapter 12: “Equanimity”

[Lazarus singing with acoustic guitar]

♪ I am more than fine ♪
♪ I am quite alright ♪
♪ Equanimity ♪
♪ Sweet serenity ♪
♪ Nothing lasts forever ♪
♪ You just learn weather this one wild life ♪
♪ Beauty and the stri—i-i-ife... ♪

Chapter 13: How to get Ancestor Lazarus’s attention 75 or so years from now

SMF: Well, thinking— Okay, so you're talking about youth that you've been working with. And I think about this way, way in the future. But like they're gonna want to give back and then they're gonna want to reach out to you for guidance when you become an ancestor. And I'm wondering how do they get your attention? Or how does anyone get your attention when you become an ancestor? Thinking about, you know, what kind of smells? What kind of foods? What goes on the altar to get ancestor Lazarus's attention?

LAZARUS: I yeah, I really loved reflecting on this. Hmmmm... I love the scent of roses. Florida water will do. I live out where there's just so many junipers, and I love those so much. I've been trying to connect more with my Irish ancestors, and that's something they really like. Um... Pizza. I'm a simple guy.

[laughter]

My entire my entire food pyramid is just a slice of pizza.

[laughter]

And just like anything gathered from a garden with love or like, swiped from a fancy botanical garden.

[laughter]

Yeah. And lavender.

SMF: That's a good smelling altar.

LAZARUS: It is. Right? I'm a Taurus, there's so many things burning in my house right now (laughing) to set the mood.

SMF: Okay, so let's say we're having a potluck for the dead, and this is, again years later. Luna and I are old as hell, and we're needing to go and bring something for you

for the altar. And we are running late. And the only place that is open for some reason is the flea market over at the State Fair in Albuquerque. And so that's the only place. And, you know, that's a big flea market. So we need to kind of know exactly which booth we're going to, to pick up the thing that is gonna do you right. What would that be?

LAZARUS: Mmmm... Any sort of like, exotic popcorn. Not to name drop. I mentioned I'm from Indiana, but I grew up in the place where Orville Redenbacher had his first factory. (laughing) So every year we'd have this huge popcorn festival. That was all that was going on in this town.

SMF: Look at you name dropping Orville.

LAZARUS: Not to name drop celebrities. I'm kind of a big deal.

[laughter]

But, yeah, I'm, like, very much like a popcorn purist because of that, but I do love, like a flea market, neon dyed kettle corn.

SMF: Okay.

LAZARUS: I will come flying in to help.

SMF: Okay. Okay. That is so good to know.

LUNA: I was put onto popcorn like way too late in life. Like, I only had the microwavable ones for the longest, but then like—

LAZARUS: Welcome.

LUNA: Yeah. (laughing)

SMF: I remember it was such a treat when they started having the whole stores that would serve pop— it was just a store for popcorn, and I remember that just seemed so fancy when I was a youth.

LAZARUS: Yeah. I was from a city for popcorn, baby. Like, that was—

[laughter]

It was the popcorn and the clan. That was kind of all that was going on in that town, but...

[laughter]

Yeah.

Chapter 14: “Birdseed”

[Lazarus sings with acoustic guitar]
♪ My clever pops ♪
♪ snuck to the pond
♪ Loving pops got Mother Goose to play along
♪ With a helping hand from nature ♪
♪ he wrecked their lawn ♪
♪ Fuck you, we don't care where we belong ♪

Chapter 15: Hot Goss

LUNA: I wanna ask you a silly question.

LAZARUS: Ooh! Okay.

LUNA: What is the hottest gossip you ever heard about one of your ancestors?

SMF: Ooh!

LAZARUS: Oh, shit.

SMF: That is such a good question.

LAZARUS: I love that so much.

SMF: That was a curveball.

[Luna laughs]

LUNA: Or even rumor.

LAZARUS: Yeah. I... think it's hot gossip that is in the Library of Congress, like, documented. Like, this is rare, like, I know we were just talking about like 'formal archives, blah blah blah,' but the ancestor whose picture I showed you, Susie Spencer, she was my first ancestor born free. And her dad, Dempsey Spencer, who stole a horse from the plantation, rode it, he crossed a river that he shouldn't have survived, and rivers are very important to my spirituality, crossed a river he shouldn't have survived and made it to, a union army base camp, and so, was free. The thing that always stuck with me is he sent the horse back. Like, he was being chased by his owner's son, and he sent the horse back. He's like, I'm not a thief. But, anyways--

LUNA: Wow.

LAZARUS: Something wild that happens if you escape the bondage of enslavement, get free, and fight and die for your country is that your former enslaver can get your fucking union pension, which is what happened in my family. And so my Aunt Susie was, like, writing the government and trying to provide documentation of, like, 'we should be getting, like— my daddy died for this fucking country that hated him. Least I can do is get some money.' And they interviewed people that were on the plantation with them, talking about their ceremony of jumping the broom because what they were arguing is that it wasn't an official wedding. But I have I still haven't gone

through all of them. Like, it just— I don't know about y'all— when I work with archive materials, sometimes I get, like, woozy or I get woozy in museums if there's just, like, too much—

LUNA: Yeah.

LAZARUS:...energy. And it's just like, wild, reading the words of my ancestor from the 1800s being like, 'Fuck you, pay me' (laughing) to the US government!

LUNA: Yes!

LAZARUS: Which is why she lives in my office, and whenever I'm like, 'I can be a big boy and send that email, if this woman that was like twenty years removed from enslavement was like, 'Hey, fuck you, Uncle Sam.'

[laughter]

I don't if that counts as gossip, but it's something I'm still pissed about. (laughs)

LUNA: Absolutely counts. That's incredible. That's incredible. And your owed a pension, is what I'm hearing.

LAZARUS: Yeah. They interviewed the enslaver's son, like, depicting my ancestor's escape from the plantation. So like a dream of mine is to try to retrace that path. I think I can figure it out based on the county where the plantation was in Missouri and then my family. They're called Exodusters— people that came to like, Kansas or New Mexico instead of doing the Great Migration north. But I'd love to trace that path back, or leave an offering at that river or... sue the US government for that civil war pension. (laughing)

LUNA: I hope you get all of it.

LAZARUS: Thank you.

SMF: All of it.

LUNA: All of it. You deserve it all.

LAZARUS: Here's your 2 silver dollars.

[laughter]

SMF: You know, with the interest, of course.

LAZARUS: Yes. Yeah.

SMF: Interest, back pay...

[laughter]

LAZ: I've I'm wearing furs in the next interview, you know what happened.

[cracking up]

SMF: 'I signed a nondisclosure. I can't tell you what why I'm wearing these furs, but you know.'

LAZARUS: Yeah. 'I'm so sorry.' I'm just kidding, PETA. I'm a vegetarian. I would not—

[still laughing]

SMF: Very fancy faux furs— They exist.

LAZARUS: Yes. Yes.

Chapter 16: Follow Lazarus

SMF: So okay. So in your pre-ancestor state, what are you up to? What are you doing? What do you want folks to know about?

LAZARUS: Yeah. I'm living my best life, which... I'm taking a lot of naps. I'm less than a month post op, so I'm just a very sleepy bear. I'm playing around town with the leftist folk band, Eileen & the In-Betweens. I am writing various things.

I'm allegedly working on my dissertation, which I mentioned before. And I think the part that I'm most excited about with my dissertation— oh, another ancestor I'd like to invite into this space, is my ancestor, Trigger Slim, who, if you have an ancestor named Trigger Slim, I've, of course, written a country song for him, but he was locally famous in Kansas for shooting a sawed off shotgun at the Klan, and then he had to go into hiding for a very long time. But he was a very short and angry man, and I find a lot of (laughing) kinship with him. But, you know, he survived a lynching attempt. I consider myself a lynching survivor.

So kind of looking at these two attempts a hundred years apart and like what does that mean for... (sighs) being Black in 'Americorps,' and I think what I'm really trying to do with that dissertation is rethinking violence that Black trans people face under this long arc of lynching in America, that lynching has always been about race and gender and that it's kind of that Sankofa I was talking about a lot earlier, of like reaching back and looking at those lynching activists like Ida B. Wells and the way that we came together as a community when Black cis men are getting lynched across America and rising up for our Black trans sisters right now. Like, we don't have to reinvent the wheel. Yeah.

And it's not easy to write. And it's also like... ending my dissertation with my own murder attempt is kind of like, daring my committee. 'Do you really wanna fail me?' 'Really? Poor old me?' (laughs) But I think there's good arguments in addition to me, maybe begging for sympathy to pass my dissertation. But I'm hoping that that might be a book someday. And then, yeah, making weird little viola loops in the deserts with my homies in Stages of Tectonic Blackness. That's showing in a lot of

museums. The one that we did in Blackdom, which is a Black ghost town close to Roswell— shout out to StormMiguel. We love Roswell. But, yeah, that's playing at the Tacoma Museum and a few other museums around the country that I can't remember. But that was a very cool project.

SMF: Do you think it'll show up in any museums in New Mexico at any time?

LAZARUS: Oh, yeah. It was at the National Hispanic Cultural Center for a year, and then it's gonna be playing in Santa Fe— Oh! It'll be playing in Santa Fe in April.

SMF: (gasps) Ooh, I wonder when I'm— if I'll be there because my secret hope was that I'll be able to go while I'm there if there's something, but I had no— Yeah! Yeah, keep me posted.

LAZARUS: I will. Yeah.

SMF: Does your band have anything coming up? LAZARUS (exhausted): I think we have a show every weekend of pride.

SMF: Okay. LAZARUS (laughing): Follow Eileen & the In-Betweens on Instagram for more. I'm just the pretty boy fiddler that shows up what I'm told.

[laughter]

SMF: That's a dream gig!

LAZARUS: It really is. Yeah.

[crosstalk]

(tired) Just point to where my stool is and let me play.

SMF: Love. And then, is there anywhere that folks can find you that you would like to be found? Yeah. My website, www.LazarusLetcher.com. I post all of my articles there and any speaking engagements that I have or shows with the band. And then you can also find me on Instagram at @L.Nuzzles, like how you would nuzzle a beloved cat. SMF (cute): Nuzzles.

LUNA (chuckling): Yes... Everyone, I really encourage you to check out Lazarus's website. They have amazing music and film up there. So check it out if you have a chance. Otherwise Lazarus, it's been so great to have you on our podcast! I'm so glad you're able to join us.

LAZARUS: Thanks for having me.

SMF: So dreamy. Thank you Lazarus.

[dreamy viola/string music]

♪♪

Chapter 17: Luna and StormMiguel Outro

LUNA: Wow, wow, WOW! This conversation blew me away. I am so impressed by the amount of research and history that Lazarus holds, not only for their own ancestry, but for that of all trans people. I'm feeling particularly grateful that they're documenting trans history as it is literally being erased before our eyes right now.

SMF: Exactly. It is so important that we keep archives of our literature, music, art, and movements so that future generations can remember where the resistance has been and what they can learn from it. Thank you so much, Lazarus, for all of the ways you're contributing to this act of love and resistance.

LUNA: Speaking of being remembered, we encourage all of our listeners to give instructions on how to be honored when they pass. If you feel so compelled to do so, please check out our Santes form on our website at www.SantesProject.com.

SMF: And when you're done filling out the form, let us know what you think of this episode by commenting on our Instagram page @SantesProject.

LUNA: Thanks for listening. See you on the other side.

SMF: And this one too!

Chapter 18: End Credits

LUNA: Santes is written and produced by Luna Merbruja and StormMiguel Florez. Editing and theme music by StormMiguel Florez.

SMF: The three song segments in this episode, "Equanimity," "Birdseed," and "Anything" are written and performed by Lazarus Letcher.

[acoustic guitar instrumental ends in a solemn strum]

END