SANTES Episode 02 Roberto Fatal

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[solemn acoustic guitar] ♪♪
[long exhalation]

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

STORMMIGUEL (SMF):
And I'm StormMiguel Florez.

LUNA: And today's guest is the amazing filmmaker, Roberto Fatal.

SMF: Roberto is a Meztize Chicana filmmaker and storyteller. Their work centers on humans who sit at the intersections of time, space, and culture. Survival, intersectional identity, perseverance, love, empathy, community, connection, and creation are all at the heart of their characters and films.

LUNA: And their films are truly iconic. Think Black Mirror, but with a QTPOC lens that both breaks your heart and inspires
you by the power of ancestry.

SMF: So we actually filmed this episode on the National Day of Mourning.

LUNA: Right. And it felt so appropriate given how Roberto talks about their identity as a Meztize indigenous person. For those unfamiliar, the first National Day of Mourning was a demonstration held in 1970 after Frank Wamsutta James was denied from speaking at a Thanksgiving Day celebration. He instead delivered his speech on Coles Hill in Plymouth, Massachusetts where he described Native American perspectives on thanksgiving celebrations. Just like this podcast episode, we have a few Native folks talking about our ancestors and spiritual practices carrying on the tradition of that first National Day of Mourning.

SMF: Yes. It's so important to keep our stories and practices alive. And you gotta make sure you listen through the end to hear Roberto's epic dream about debating a group of priests, conquistadores, and Charlie Kirk [laughs] about gender affirming care.

[Luna laughs]

LUNA: Yeah, you definitely don't wanna miss out on that. Without further ado, here's Roberto Fatal joining us on the Santes podcast.

SMF: Welcome, Roberto, it's so good to see you!

ROBERTO: Hello. Hello.

SMF: We're seeing Roberto, by the way. We see Roberto.

[Luna laughs]

SMF: Sadly, you don't, but you can in the pictures, that we post.

LUNA: Heyyyy!

ROBERTO: Hello, you two. Thank you so much for having me here. It's an honor, truly.

LUNA: Yes. Welcome to the Santes Podcast. I am so excited to talk to you, especially because we're all artists here, and artists have these brilliant minds. And today's conversation, just about ancestors, but also about art, I'm just looking forward to 'cause I love the work that you did. And when I watched your films, I felt some of those themes of ancestorhood coming through as well. So before we jump into all of that, I'm really curious for us to kind of call in some ancestors today if we all feel called to. So Roberto, we'd love to start off with you. Are there any ancestors that you would like to call into the space today?

[light-hearted sigh from Roberto]

ROBERTO: My first inclination is to call in my bisabuela, Francisca Flores who was my Rarámuri ancestor, who lived from the late 1800s to the 1940s. She's from the mountains kind near Parral, Chihuahua, Mexico and left our Rarámuri indigenous family to move to Parral, where she became like a curandera and like a medicine person working in that town, became pretty famous for that work in that town. And for the last like two, three generations, her story was kind of muddled and cut out of my family because she was indigenous, because she was dark, because she practiced, according to my grandma, brujería, and my grandma was trying to be a good, nice, white Catholic lady. [laughs] It kind of messed that up. And so I like bringing her with me everywhere because she didn't get her flowers in her lifetime, and I want her to have her flowers for the rest of eternity. So I wanna keep her with me today, especially on Thanksgiving, which is, like, such a problematic day for many indigenous people.

LUNA: Mhmm. Thank you for calling her in.

ROBERTO: Yeah.

LUNA: I'm also feeling called to call in someone who gave a lot during this time of year. Sylvia Rivera, she was known for feeding a lot of folks who were homeless, who were hungry and living in poverty. And I think of her around this holiday season just because I know she'd be out there feeding the folks, being in community, and that's something that, inspires me, reminds me to be doing the same around this time of year. So I really appreciate you calling them in, Roberto. I'll call in Sylvia. And StormMiguel, who would you like to call in?

SMF: Yeah, so I do wanna say we are recording on "Thanksgiving," "Thanks Taking," National Day of Mourning. I appreciate y'all bringing that here. And it's interesting that everybody's kind of thinking about it in terms of today. I'm thinking of JMax, who was my gay mother, but I didn't know it. So when I was a teenager, I met this short white woman from Milwaukee in Albuquerque. Like, I always say I was raised by a pack of wild lesbians, and that's because there were all these, like, 30-something-- late 20s, 30-something year old lesbians who were kinda taking me under their wing when I came out and kinda just showing me more than what I already knew. I already had a really strong resilient community, you know, teenager, queer, lesbian, Chicana community.

But so JMax got me into my first gig at a bar when I was 16. And she told the bartender that I was her daughter. And I remember thinking like, 'ooh, we pulled one over on him' because he was like, 'yeah, of course.'

And later it occurred to me 'cause I was like, she's-- we're-- this is clearly not my mother.' And then years later, was like, oh, shit! Like, she was saying 'this is my gay daughter,' and he was saying, 'okay, I see that.' And then we were the "mother and daughter deposit dyke team" at the Full Circle Books, which was the lesbian feminist bookstore in Albuquerque. And so, but JMax died by suicide 35 years ago. And right around-- just a couple days-- it was just a couple days before Thanksgiving. I remember I found out on Thanksgiving. I learned about it on Thanksgiving.

And so it only occurred to me recently that JMax was-- you know, in the past several years, probably, that JMax was my gay mother. And I've I kinda forgot about it. And then recently, I was like, I guess I don't really have the whole gay mother thing. I hear a lot of my friends talking about who their gay mother is. I was like, I guess I don't have that. And then a friend sent me, randomly, a picture of JMax. I haven't had a picture of JMax ever. And so now I have a picture of JMax over here next to my candle, and feel really happy that that picture reminded me of yes, you did have a gay mother, and you knew this few years ago. You just kinda forgot about it 'cause it's not in your body yet. And so I'm really trying to just, like, integrate that and integrate JMax into my ancestry in that way.

ROBERTO: Oh, I love that. I already feel like this idea of like... lifting up almost like family that's been made invisible or that we didn't know we had, you know? Or that... Yeah, or where those connections aren't as literal blood obvious for many different reasons. That's so cool.

LUNA: Absolutely.

SMF: So yeah. So welcome to all of our beautiful ancestors.

LUNA: Welcome. Welcome. I'm so happy they're here. They sound all like bad asses. I think they'd have fun together too, to be honest.

[laughing]

ROBERTO: That'd be really fun.

LUNA: So yeah, thank you all-- thank you both of you for welcoming in your ancestors today. You know, this time of year with winter and things are slowing down, I've been talking about the veil a lot lately, like this veil between the living and the dead. Dia de Muertos was not too long ago at the time of this recording. So I just feel like, okay, right now is this time of winter, of rest, of reaching over to the other side, of reflection as well. So Roberto, what experiences have you had with the veil or with the other side? Like what calls you to do ancestor work and connect with ancestors?

ROBERTO: So that's a great question. It actually ties in a lot with my art. I... (sighs) was raised a good Catholic Chicano boy for a very long time, even though I could feel so many things brewing in me that were the antithesis of that. And I was so scared of that for a very long time. And I think that was part of the reason I moved away from my hometown of Sacramento, California, like in the 2000s, is because I felt that boiling true self spilling over and I didn't want it to happen in front of my... (laughs) my family in my hometown.

And so I moved to the Bay Area to pursue a degree in fine arts at the California College of Art, and I wanted to find my queer community and my trans and non binary community. I didn't even know about my Two-Spirit community. I think I was, like, living in a lot of denial about being a mixed indigenous person. I like firmly was just like, I'm just Chicano, that's it. I don't-- I'm proud... La Raza, you know, whatever, like I'm just... I'm just Chicano, like I know who I am, that's my identity, that's my community. There's Catholicism, there's machismo, there's like all the shit that comes with that, right? And then-- but we also have like Yolanda Lopez.

But like I didn't I didn't conceptualize it in terms of like, that Chicano-ness is like a hybrid culture that comes from indigeneity and the clash with the Spanish, and that, like, Hadron Collider, like, [mimics explosion] explosion of culture produced a new culture.

So I think for me growing up, you know, I grew up in a family that even though that my dad is, like, super fucking dark and could never in a million years pass for anything other than, like, indigenous, I grew up in a family that really praised, like, wanted to be, like, Spanish royalty and wanted to have that ancestry. It was calling in, like, a very specific line of ancestry at all times while completely denying our other side, like, literally our other half, or in my dad's case, more than his other half, like, his other 60 to 70% of who he is. You know, and that was really weird.

So I could feel all this tension and I left Sac. And when I moved to the Bay, I found pretty quickly, like, a Two-Spirit community and was totally blown away and I felt like I was shown a glimpse past the veil into this world that had been, like, intentionally covered up. And that shook me.

And I had this whole-- I remember distinctly like in 2013, 2014 being like, I don't wanna identify as indigenous. Like, that's a whole fucking can of worms I gotta open. I don't wanna have to explore that shit. I don't wanna get thought of as, a 'pretendian' or some Chicano who's, like, wants to be more than I am or-- you know, like, whatever. I just-- you know—

And then I was worried. I was like am I a pretendian? And I took a DNA test early on, and I realized I'm, like, basically, 50% indigenous. And I'm like, oh my god, okay. And I thought-- I was at a cafe one time-- This is me ranting. But I was at a cafe one time and I ordered a pie for the table. And I was like, 'if 50% of the pie was missing when they ordered it, I would be like, I would want my money back.' You know what I'm saying--

[Luna laughs]

ROBERTO: Because that's not the fucking pie. That's half of the pie. That's bullshit. And I thought to myself, like, why am I kind of only honoring 50% of my ancestors and 50% of who I am? Like, that's horseshit. You know?

And at the time, I was dating this... super problematic (laughs) person in the Bay, but who I think was also a really gifted medicine person in some ways-- as much as I hate this person.

[laughter]

And they told me, like, "you need to be honoring those ancestors." You know, and this was around Dia de los Muertos. She was like, "You really need to be honoring these ancestors. That's so wrong that your lack of acknowledgment of them or your embarrassment to acknowledgement," you know, "your lack of embarrassment to embrace who you actually are as a person is now perpetuating that colonialism that helped make them invisible." And I was like, "Damn, that's so spot on. You're so right."

And for many years of my life, I would have these profoundly vivid dreams where, like, stories would come to me, dead relatives would come to me, and I just was like, 'that's just dreams.' You know? Like, that's nothing-- there's no significance to that. But as I started understanding my indigenous ancestry and where I came from, like, on my dad's side, my Abuela Francisca is, like, a Rarámuri woman from, you know, the Parral, Chihuahua area, and they are, in that culture specific medicine men who work just with dreams. Like, there's people who work just with peyote. There's people who work just with dreams. There's people who are more like physical practitioners, spiritual practitioners, but like there's people who just do dream work with you in that community. And like that's powerful. Like dreams, these dreams, I started to realize were more than just dreams, like they were probably messages.

And I did a film in 2016 that I had been working on for a year called "Class Order Family Tribe," and I took a bunch of 16-- or eight millimeter footage, from my mom's family who are like, Genízaro, like Meztizo indigenous people from the New Mexico area. So our ancestors are, like, probably Diné, probably Pueblo. I thought we were Ute for a long time until I realized that this birth certificate I found for my great great grandfather-- it said on his birth certificate he was a Ute child, I was like, 'oh, I'm Ute, Let me try to do some work and reconnect.'

And then I found out from this scholar who does a lot of work around New Mexican, indigenous, Genízaro culture and like, slavery and the indigenous cultures there, he

was like, "He probably wasn't actually a Ute person. The Utes probably sold him to his owner, and what you're seeing is a slave name or a slave record. And because slavery was illegal at that time, if the Utes were gonna gift him this child, it was probably a sale, and they needed to put that on the baptismal record so nobody would get in trouble for selling this indigenous child. And I was like, oh my god, so not only is Chacón not my family's last name, it's a slave name. And then on top of that, I'm not even this fucking type of indigenous that I thought I was. And I was like, oh my god. I felt so betrayed and so fucking angry.

But I made a first film about that essentially where I was talking about the tension between this detribalized indigenous side as my mom's side and my dad's, like, buried city Chicano side coming into clash told through this eight millimeter film. And it felt like the first time I really started looking at myself truly through my art, and it felt powerful. And I submitted it for distribution. I found out I got distribution. It was so exciting.

And in that film, I talk about my mom's father who's just a monster, like truly a monster in terms of sexual abuse, physical abuse, all the stuff. He was as close to a literal demon as I think any human can be. And he's been dead since 1991. And throughout my childhood, I would have moments where I felt his gigantic, terrifying body hovering over my bed as a shadow. And sadly enough, that was my first real experience with the veil or what I would come to know as the veil. And so the veil then, always felt so terrifying to me. There was never a positive place for it. So the day I... you know, I'd wake up and pray to Jesus, like, 'please, white Jesus, keep that thing away from me,' whatever that was.

And so fast forward many years later, it's 2016, I found out that this film that kind of exposes him and the tensions in our family has just gotten picked up for distribution. I, like, wake up, I roll over, turn on my phone, I'm half asleep, I see that "Congratulations! Roberto, know, you've been given distribution..." I'm like, holy shit, my film-- I was like, I have a first movie that got a distributor. I'm gonna be paid for my movie. This is fucking crazy. I was like... aaahh. And I like put my phone down, I kinda nodded off again, and I heard a rumbling coming from behind my blinds in my room, I had these thick plastic blinds in my apartment. And I looked and I saw a shadow behind the blinds, and when I noticed it, all of a sudden it ran out and it put its hand around my throat and started pressing me into the bed and I couldn't breathe. And I felt this hand, and I looked at this shadow body, and it was him. It was like my mom's dad. And I said to it, "No." I was like, "Get the fuck off of me. You're dead. You don't scare me anymore. You have no power over me, and everybody's gonna know what you did to our family." I was like, "Get the fuck off of me." And it took its hand off of me, and when I blinked, it was, like, frail and skinny and, like, malnourished, and it just walked away.

And I told this person I was dating about this, and she's like, "you have to start doing altar work, and you have to start talking to your ancestors 'cause they're trying to talk to you and you at this point, it's a one way conversation, you have zero control over this. Like you have to take control over how this works. Like you clearly have some kind of attunement to the veil that like maybe a lot of people don't have and you have to-- you can't neglect that. It's dangerous."

And so she kinda like showed me how to build an altar, and I was just thinking about ofrendas I saw when I was little, and I was like, oh, this is already all built into my culture. I should know how to do this. This is all there. You know? And it made me start going, 'oh, okay, that's why we do Dia de los Muertos. This is like altar building in the same way that my indigenous friends build altars. And, oh, wait. I'm an indigenous friend. I'm just mixed it and all started coming together.

So one night, I was able to go buy some sage-- ethically. And then I got some, like, candles and I remembered all the brujería my Abuela had warned me against. So I went and bought some white candles and some red candles. Like, I knew what the colors meant and everything 'cause I was, like, warned against not doing these things.

[laughter]

And then I had this abalone shell, and I just very instinctively did a ceremony. Like, lit these candles. I put pictures of some family up. I burned some sage, and I just felt like-- I remember when I smelled burning sage for the first time, I felt like hands on my shoulders. And I felt like my skin tingle from my, like, butthole all the way up to the top of my head. It was like some conduit had been activated, and I just was like, this is right.

How the fuck has this been taken away from me? Like, I should have been doing this my whole life. And to this day when I smell burning sage, I can like, hear people whispering to me. I can feel hands touching my body. Like, I feel... like I can feel my spirit inside moving. Like, I feel bigger than just my skin and my body. Like, it's fucking crazy to this day. And so when I did it for this first time, it humbled me and I did it right before bed and I was crying smelling this sage. And I was like, "I don't know how to do this, but if there are any really cool ancestors who like wanna come talk to me in my dreams. Come talk to me in my dreams, but don't come in my room. You're not welcome in the room or in the physical space, but

I think I understood even then before I really had words that the dream world is that fair space that both of us can occupy, that's not the land of the dead, and it's not the land of the living, but it's like a mutual place. You know? It's like a visitation room.

And so I invited anybody there. And when I went to bed, I had this profoundly vivid dream where-- at the time I was working at Kink.com and was really into like sex work activism, etcetera, stuff like that. And we were at Kink.com and... literally, like as soon as I went to bed, I woke up in my dream, I was at work, and then these two women, one was a Black woman, one was like a brown indigenous woman. They were like holding hands, and they were dressed as like 70s porn stars. It's like what people thought porn stars should look like.

They were so out of place, and I remember going, "Hey--" 'cause I was a PA at Kink, and was like, "Hey, can I help you guys, like, get to your shoot?" And they were like, "Are you Rob?" And I was like, "Yeah." "Well, we're your ancestors."

SMF: What!

ROBERTO: And I was "You are?!"

[laughter]

I was like, "Why are you dressed like this?" I was like, "Why are you dressed like this? And then the brown one said, "Well, we were sex workers in our lifetime too." And then the Black one gave her a dirty ass look and says, "Don't you dare call what I did sex work." And I'm, like, watching these two fight, and I'm like, "Uh..." And then the brown one who was, I think, more willing to be there was like, "Do you wanna come sit with us and talk?" I was like, "Yeah! Amazing!" And so then, I sat with them and they were like, "Well you called us here. What do you wanna ask us?" And I was like, "I don't have any-- I don't know."

[laughter]

And then the Black woman was just like, "Are you fucking kidding me?" And I was like, "I'm so sorry. I just didn't know if this would work or not." And she's like, "Well, it does." And then she got up and left. And I was like, "I'm so sorry!" And then the brown one was like, "Don't mind her. We're here for you, but, you know, you should have something to ask or talk about if you're gonna call us." And I was like, "I'm so sorry." And she's like, "It's okay." And then she got up and joined my other ancestor, and they walked away. And I woke up, and I was like, what the fuck just happened right now?

[SMF laughs]

SMF: Wow.

ROBERTO: So that was my first foray into, like, intentionally crossing the veil and understanding what it was. And that was, like, in about 2015-- or 2016.

SMF: That's powerful.

ROBERTO: Yeah.

LUNA: Mhmm.

ROBERTO: Thank you for hearing and holding space for it. And I'm sorry to use markers like 'brown one,' 'Black one.' It was just like, I just didn't know where these people came from or what their cultures were, like how they would identify. So I'm just like identifying them visually in the dream because I don't wanna make like assumptions about where they came from or how they fell into my bloodline or anything like that. So I apologize for using that-- It's like very crude language, but I just-- I was just like trying to visually describe like who they were as quickly as possible.

SMF: Mhmm.

LUNA: Mhmm. Absolutely. But you're working with limited information.

ROBERTO: Very much so. And I think... All I know is that they were powerful and that they were some kind of medicine people because... I think the one who was very upset, was upset that I didn't come prepared because clearly this is probably work she was extremely familiar with and probably had been going in her bloodline slash our bloodline for like, you know, 400,000 years since humans were first created. And she was like, how the fuck do you not know how to do this work? This is insane. And so I totally hear her frustration, and I feel so bad about that. You know? But it's really cool.

LUNA: Yeah. That's incredible to think 'cause I-- we've talked about how to call in ancestors before on the podcast 'cause I think everyone does it a little bit differently, there's different cultural practices, different respectful ways. And one of the things that StormMiguel and I talk about is thinking of ourselves as being future ancestors. How to call us in, right? And that while we're here, we can kind of give some information, some directions on how and when to call us in. So we invite every guest to kind of share a little bit about that, thinking of yourself as someone, and-- who's gonna live a very long time, who doesn't need to be called in as an ancestor anytime soon. But just thinking about like, if there were a time where someone's trying to reach you across the veil, what are some things that they can do to get your attention?

ROBERTO: I think first of all, it would be like lighting sage and a candle feels so important for me finding my way to them. Like I'll smell it from wherever I am and it'll pull me toward it. And so that feels really important. I would like to be called in in times of creativity. I want people to write when they want me there, or I want people to take a photo when they want me there, or to illustrate or sketch when they want me there. Like, I want there to be like a private moment you have with yourself, a candle and a bundle of sage, where you are trying to express yourself creatively, or maybe you're struggling with it, or maybe you have ideas, but that you just like call me in through your art, and I'll know how to find you.

LUNA: That's beautiful. I love that. (laughs softly) I don't personally have many ancestors I can call in for art, so it's such a beautiful thing. Yeah. I have one-- I have some for power. I have some for protection, but for art specifically, that's such a beautiful gift, especially because, yeah, I feel really tapped into spiritual energy when I create. So it's just good to know.

ROBERTO: Yeah. I mean, I think like... I'll say this, and Luna, I appreciate you saying that, because I don't need my ancestors to like, compose a sonnet for me or something for me to be able--

[laughter]

I'm not like a sphinx where you have to answer a riddle and then I'll show up or whatever.

[laughter]

Just, I think that creative urge or creativity in any way that it comes to them. Like, whether it be how they ornately build an altar. Like, that's artistic expression. Or if

they cook a mean-ass albondigas soup, I'll know to find them because there's art in that. You know? Or, like, the art in how they love their kids or the art in how they garden, you know, or, like, the way they design their gardens or, like, whatever. You know, like, there's I think art to be found in so many things that we do.

And I want them to know that when I say art, I don't mean it in the, like, art, capital-A western colonial like, industry of, like, a product that needs to be sold. I mean, like, true spiritual artistry. And that looks so different for everybody. Like... the way they hook up and do BDSM with their loved ones. The way, like, you know, there's artistry in everything. And I, like, I want them just in the moments where they realize that their artistry is happening. That's like a moment I can come in and be with them, you know.

SMF: So curious, is there a particular kind of sage that you respond to?

ROBERTO: Usually white sage.

SMF: Usually white sage.

ROBERTO: Yeah. I mean, that's like the only sage I've ever known. I did get gifted a bundle of sage from a Chamorro friend who's different-- it's like a different type of sage, and I actually-- I gotta ask them again what it is, but it smells really good. It just doesn't tingle me in a way like white sage does.

SMF: Yeah. Because like the first sage that I ever learned about was-- I don't know exactly. Like, it was from New Mexico. And it was more kind of like-- kinda weedy. It's was more--

ROBERTO: Mmm.. Interesting.

SMF: Like the white sage leaves are not even as dry. You can almost feel like there's almost a-- they feel moist to touch even though they're not. And then with the New Mexico, they're bundles, and it's just looks like bundles of almost kinda sticks, with, like, weeds. I don't know how to describe it. But and it's a very... it's a very earthy-- it's kinda pungent. There's a pungency to it for me. I don't know.

ROBERTO: I'll have to ask some of my New Mex-- Like, I have a bunch of Diné and Pueblo friends, and I'll ask maybe if they could donate that 'cause I would be curious to smell that to see if that stimulates anything for me because that's where, my mom's side's from.

SMF: I love that you talk-- I have so much to ask you probably beyond the podcast. Like, I'm probably gonna be checking back with you, being from New Mexico. And, like, you were talking about-- Do you happen to know if most, like, Genízaro people were kind of given that false kind of information around-- potentially false information around being Ute? Like, is that something--

ROBERTO: It's pretty common. I mean, the biggest indigenous slave traders in that era were the Utes and the Comanches.

SMF: Mm. Okay.

ROBERTO: So you probably find those-- So my relative was baptized, slash, exchanged at the... Santo-- it's like Tomas de Abiquiu... Abiquiu-u Church or something. It's still there, which is like wild. But it's like the Apostle of Saint Tomas Church near Abiquiu-u or I don't know how to say it exactly.

SMF: Abiquiu. Yeah.

ROBERTO: Abiquiu. Thank you. I'm so sorry. Clearly, I've never lived in New Mexico. My mom and her-- My mom's parents and their older aunties, those are the ones who were born in Colorado, 'cause they were kind of in back and forth between Colorado and New Mexico. And they were like the first generation to move out here. So my mom was like one of the first to be born in California.

SMF: Oh, okay.

ROBERTO: But yeah, I... I don't know. I know those two tribes were like the bigger slave traders, so I'm sure if you looked up a lot of these birth certificates you'd find a lot of stuff about this. Yeah, but I just know that that's my family's story, is--

SMF: Yeah. Thanks. Yeah. Just side note, it just piqued my curiosity 'cause, yeah, there's just so much erasure of— Yeah. You know, in general, I think BIPOC communities experience that, especially Black and indigenous in this country.

ROBERTO: It's like really complicated, too, that the Utes and the Comanches-- 'cause I think the Utes, for example, the more research I did on this, slavery was very different to them than, like, the chattel slavery that was characteristic of, like, the transatlantic slave trade and American slavery. For them, the Utes would-- 'cause they would-- they were so nomadic, they would come out to California in the spring and kidnap Pomo people because in the spring it was right after winter, they were weak, they hadn't eaten super well, and so they were easy to pick off. And so they'd come and kidnap like people out here and then take them back for slave trade in New Mexico when they were kind of, like, doing their migration. And then some they would keep and they would raise to be good productive citizens of the Ute nation. You know? And then you would be a Ute person, and your kids would be a Ute person, and it was like, yeah. It's interesting. It's like a lot more complicated than I thought. They were never seen fully as like second class citizens. It was like they were for a little bit, but you could prove yourself and work your way into being, culturally, as Ute as somebody who was-- whatever, genetically Ute or-- I don't even know what the fuck that means 'cause culture and genes are-- that's a whole thing. I don't know what I'm trying to say right now. It's just I think when they were selling people to the Spanish and the Mexicans, they didn't fully-- I'm guessing maybe, they didn't understand the differences in how we see the sale of people or the moving of people or what that meant for their personhood or their ancestors or something like that. You know? I'm guessing. I have no fucking idea.

SMF: Yeah. I have some research to do there. And then it makes me wonder, like-- so that practice is also, like, a part of colonization. Right? Like, that was how, unfortunately, peoples survived, was to get in bed with the colonizers on some level.

And act like them, right, without maybe even thinking of it that way.

ROBERTO: Yeah. There's a really incredible book that I read called The Other Slavery, and it's about specifically the experiences of indigenous enslaved people in The United States, and the indigenous slavers that sold those slaved people to colonists, you know? And it was a really fascinating book. It helped-- I mean, I'm remembering it probably, off, a little bit, but it really-- I thought it was pretty fascinating.

SMF: Mhmm. Yeah, I've heard stories similar in my own-- my own my own kind of weirdly veiled... kind of... shrouded. Like, our histories are shrouded. And, like, when I talk to my family and they talk about the history, they say so many different things. Like, I have lyrics in a song that basically say, it says "Some say Apache, some say Comanche. I don't remember. Leave me alone." In my broken Spanish is how it goes in the song. Like, it's sung in kind of broken Spanish. And but then I remember hearing stories about, like-- about one of my grandpas or great grandpas almost getting kidnapped. Of course, it's always by Geronimo.

[laughter]

ROBERTO: Yeah. Geronimo or Pancho Villa or somebody.

[crosstalk and laughter]

SMF: And had him by the collar, was riding by on a horse grabbed him, but somehow fought hard enough to where he was released. But that was a kidnapping that almost happened. And that's all I've heard of that. There's nothing else I've heard around it. What that meant? Was that happening a lot? Nobody knows. They just remember these little bits and pieces sometimes. And that's thing around this region, especially, I think. There's just these, like, these little bits of memory, and then they go away, and then they come back. I'll ask one relative, they'll tell me one thing. I'll talk to them again, they don't remember telling me that. It's wild. Like, I feel like there's this spell put on our memory.

ROBERTO: Yeah, 100%.

SMF: The spell of colonization, but also the spell of survival. Right? Like, I think the surviving colonization required some kind of-- I think our ancestors had to put, I think of it as a spell. I don't know that it necessarily means some kind of brujería, but I think it's more just like... our words are magic. Our lack of words are magic. Our lack of passing on stories are magic. Not good magic, right, but, like, harmful magic. And so that it affects-- it even affects people's memories like, of the stories that they've been told. Like, we can't quite hold them. Like, we can't hold these things even in our head even after we've been told and talked about it.
So, yeah, that's a lot of what I think of when I'm thinking about this particular region and the history and ancestry of it.

ROBERTO: What you just said right now about ancestral memory and how sometimes forgetting can protect us or shield us in a way, I mean, is exactly where my film, En Memoria came from, is like talking about how this mother-- for those

people who haven't seen En Memoria, it's basically set in the near future and it's like if you default on your student loans, the loan companies can come repossess your memories of college as a way to protect you from bankruptcy, prosecution, etcetera. Like, you just let go of the memory, and you're safe. You know? That's the deal.

And that's so much of where this came from, and I thought about my grandmother, you know, coming from Mexico in the 20s to California via Texas with her mom, and it was basically like, if you let go and forget all the Mexican shit, we'll let you survive in America. Like, we'll let you be a good American citizen, and you won't get hassled, etcetera, etcetera. And she took that deal, you know? And it created so much tension between her and my dad who was this very visibly, like my grandma could sometimes pass as white even though Spanish was her first language and she was illegal until she was like 70. Or I hate to use the term illegal. She, according to The United States, was illegal until she was in her 70s.

Pero my dad was like dark as fuck because his dad was super dark. And so my dad became this really intense reminder to my abuela about who she is, about everything she was trying to forget, and she really didn't like my dad because of that. And they couldn't move into certain neighborhoods in Sacramento because my dad and his sisters were really dark. And she saw him as this horrible reminder of something she had, the contract she had made where she chose to give up all this shit, yet here she is with this super brown indigenous little boy and his sisters. And it was a constant reminder of what she had been trying to forget, and she really resented him for a very long time.

But I think the idea of us giving away these memories, I mean, it's what boarding schools feel like, you know, historically. It's like this fucked up terrifying social contract is like forget or we're gonna fucking kill you. And it's like, well, okay, if those are my choices, then I get why some ancestors were like, okay, then I'm gonna cut my hair, and I'm gonna act this way and I'm gonna hate on people who are darker than me or I'm gonna join ICE or I'm gonna whatever the fuck. It's like... like all the same thing. It's these contracts we make for our survival. And I wanted to talk about that, but in a Black Mirror dystopian way with En Memoria. You know?

SMF: I just love that short so much. And... I've thought about-- I don't wanna give it away,

ROBERTO: It's okay. I'm not one of those people who like is like, hell bent on protecting endings or, like plot twists because I'm like, movies should function out of plot. I think-- This is my tangent, but, like, I love my students so much, but I think they grew up in an era where everything has to have a twist. And I'm trying to tell them the twist should be an organic part of the story. Like 'the story can't be told without the twist,' and I think a lot of them think of a twist and then try to think of how to shoe horn it into a story. So when we're talking about En Memoria or any other of my films, it's like, I hope we all just talk about it as such and, you know, like yeah. So don't worry about it.

SMF: Thank you.

ROBERTO: I give you

spoiler permission.

SMF: I appreciate it. And it might not be too much spoiler because the way I remember things, is always just so funny. It takes me, like, four or five times to watch something before I really-- like, it clicks in the where I remember things. I'll know how something made me feel, there will be a couple things that I can remember and talk about. But the question I had was-- and again, this might be because I'm not fully remembering things. But is the person having to give up their memories in order to kind of have that loan forgiveness or that debt forgiveness, are they forgetting what they learned in college, or are they forgetting everything that happened during that period?

ROBERTO: Everything in college. Everything that has to do with college and everything that, stemmed from that-- I don't know, it's not real.

SMF (laughing): I know, but I just wanna know what's in your mind about this. Like, relationships, or--

ROBERTO: You tell me what you interpreted as.

SMF: Well, I had a couple things. First, I was like, okay, it's tragic, but at least you're not forgetting the people, you're not forgetting the relationships.
You're not forgetting-- so my mind is like, oh, you're forgetting the knowledge, you're forgetting that education. You don't get that anymore. That's really fucked up and tragic. But are you forgetting those relationships?

Then the second part that I really loved was that even though those memories of college-- It was like fashion design, are gone, like, all those things we learn from the institutions, there's a reason we wanted to learn those things. Right? And so where does that come from? And so I love that, like, this person starts to kind of have this instinctual, like, we'll get this made, we know how to make this. I know how to do this. I may not have all the things I was taught in college and the academia and the, you know, again, Western way of doing things. But, you know, what I do have is I have my ancestors. I have what my abuela taught me, you know, how to sew, the way that that I was taught there, how to construct from what I was learned or what's even what's in my kind of ancestral lineage that I don't even know. Like, that that can't be taken away.

ROBERTO: Yeah. And then also what tell our kids, too. Like, I think the kind of funny thing is, like, Luna, the protagonist, has clearly already shown her daughter how to do a bunch of shit. And that's like, what are gonna go take her daughter's memories away? Like, you don't-- 'cause now it's Luna's. It's been synthesized and made her own and it's now living in her daughter. There's like no way to-- it's such a dumb technology. But it's something that some capitalist techie would pat themselves on the back for, but it's something that the three of us know is just totally stupid.

But in terms of what-- I guess my version of what I thought of, and me and my partner might even have different versions, 'cause we co-wrote it together, but like works in my mind. It takes away any memory that directly has to do with college. And when like Luna definitely remembers being married to their partner, but when the

loan agent asks where'd you first meet your partner Miyoshi, Luna can't remember because they met in school, right? And so it's like ripping out chunks of your love narrative with your partner, right? And so that's like tragic. Or if you had a really good friend who you just knew in school but didn't like really hang out with outside or continue to have a relationship with after school, that person would be gone.

Yeah, so it's like clunky, but you know, I feel like that's also tech. [crosstalk]
It makes promises and it doesn't even know what it's promising. Like there's a stupid company, like a eugenics company right now who's like, we'll map out your baby's DNA and chromosomes and all this shit and genome, and we'll do several embryos and we'll rate each embryo's like potential IQ, its potential for, like-- it rates all these things about the embryo, which is, like, total fucking bullshit. And tontos are paying, like, $50,000 to get these, like, embryos genetically read, and it's just, like, so fucking dumb. So, anyways, that's why I'm like, this doesn't seem that far off of what with their BS tech crap. So yeah.

SMF: I mean, it's such a metaphor though too of, like, these outside forces trying to tell us who we are, trying to take away the gains that we have gotten, right, as trans and queer people. Like, actually going in and taking them away, taking away any little bits of rights and safety measures that undocumented people have, like doing these things, but they can't ever take away who we are and where we come from and who we know we are. Right? They might-- and so to me, that's what the metaphor is of your film.

ROBERTO: And I think about that with, like, how I find my way back to the veil and, like, my medicine practices that I'm trying to now cultivate for myself and wanna give back to my kids. I mean, if you think about that, I had my grandmother and her mom, so two generations, three with my dad, who stepped away from these dream practices and curanderisma medicine practices that have been a part of my family since time en memoria, right, and they've been gone for three generations, which in the big picture is nothing. That's absolutely nothing. It's not enough time to really forget anything, you know? I mean, generational trauma tells us that much.

[bitter laughter]

Right? But... How easily did I find my way back to these things? And I don't even know the full language around them. I don't even know if I'm doing the practices the way that my abuela did the practices, but they lived on in the memory of my primo Ricky, who is like my dad's age. He's in his seventies and is the only out queer person in our family besides me. And somehow this bitch managed to keep all this chisme from the last hundred years in our family and was like, "and you know your bisabuela, Francisca is buried in Sacramento in the Mexican area of the of the cemetery, and did not get allowed to get buried in the white part of the cemetery where your grandmother's buried?" And I was like, what?! And he gave me all this fucking chisme about the indigenous hatred in our family and all this shit, and it was just fascinating.

It's like, of course, he kept that story, you know, 'cause that's-- the Two-Spirit folks, the queer folks, the trans folks, like, we all keep these stories.

Like, that's our magic. You know? I don't know. Anyways, that's great. I'm rambling.

[soft laughter]

LUNA: Love it. It's welcome. This is oral history storytelling. That's how I'm taking this. Okay. This is our ancestral practice—

ROBERTO: Yeah!

LUNA: in real time. No, I love hearing about these stories because I think that that's how we keep each other's stories alive. Like, every time we talk about an ancestor, a piece of chisme, the good and the bad, all of us are taking a piece of that story and carrying it for you. 'Cause at some point you might forget a little detail and you'll talk about it and someone will chime in and like remind you of what you said before, right? So I love, love, love hearing about people's family histories just because I think that that's how we keep our memories and we keep that ancestry alive. Also really deeply resonating with like our evolving practices as someone who like very similar to you, Roberto, like came into spirituality like later in my adult years, I don't think I'm doing it like my ancestors did. And our ancestors evolve, you know, like we move through time, we change, like they weren't using lighters to light their sage, I'm sure, but like now we are. (laughs)

So... You know, like there's ways that we're doing-- I remember I went to a powwow recently and I was really confused 'cause I was hearing this beautiful drum and then all these drums, and I'm looking around in the circle and I'm like, I don't see any people playing drums-- because they had 'em on speakers and they were playing a track. And I was like, oh my god, we're in the 2025, we're playing over the speakers now. And it was great and I loved it. And it, like, it still activated that part of me that, like, was moving to the music and the space was still activated. Like, our elders are still there holding ceremony and technology is evolving, right, so I love love seeing us, in this generation and this century, like, taking what we know and then adapting it to what we can do now to make it more accessible and just more, approachable to folks.

ROBERTO: And I think, Luna, you bring up a good point, is there's technology that honors our ancestors and technology that erases and annihilates and rebukes our ancestors. Like, if those were AI drums that had been automated in some kind of bullshit like-- you know, you go into whatever and you're like, "do a track that represents like Native American drums." You're getting some soulless bullshit fucking AI produced thing that's like replicating this white perspective of like what native drums sound like or whatever, but a recording of people who are choosing to allow their drum and the spirit in that drum and the medicine in that drum to be recorded so that it can go out to more people, that to me is like Ancestor honoring technology.

And I think like we're being given a lot of tool-- and that's again why I like love diving into sci fi with my films is like I'm asking, especially I'm doing this in my new feature Electric Homies right now, when we talk about the conversation of artificial intelligence and ancestry, like which technology honors our ancestors and which technology is actually like erasing them and harming our cultures. As we think about

becoming ancestors, I think maybe the caveat is like which technology you do not want working with me as an ancestor?

And I'll say this, is like I don't, I'm saying this so fucking explicitly, I do not want to be reproduced as, like, an artificial intelligence entity by my ancestors. It's like, mijo, mija, mije, if you like, miss me, look at a fucking picture of me or read my scripts. Don't try to generate a thing that looks like and talks like me. Once I'm gone, I want the privilege of my voice being moved on. I don't wanna be reproduced or represented. I'm copywriting my ancestry, like, me the fuck alone. Like, if you miss me, go talk to somebody who knew me or read my shit. Like, that's how you'll know me,

LUNA: Burn some sage and have a dream. Right?

ROBERTO (enthusiastic): Mm!

SMF: In our form, we talk a lot about what people want, how they want to be remembered, but I also think it's really important, and there's space for this in the Santes Future Ancestors form to talk about how you don't want to be interacted with and even who you don't want to have interact with you. Like, if you have a real specific group of people that are allowed to interact with you as ancestors, say it. So, you know, folks who haven't heard of the Ancestor Form check out our website, SantesProject.com, and it's a place where folks can go and talk about these things, talk about the ways that you want to be remembered. What are the things that you wanna support people with? What can they ask for? How can they get your attention? And, Roberto, you so beautifully demonstrated that in this, conversation. So I really appreciate that.

And I wanna know if you can tell us how current-you, the current-future-ancestor-you can be reached can be reached out to. Are there any particular projects you want people to be following right now? Like, what are you what are you up to?

ROBERTO: Yeah. So I'm, in the process, I mean, obviously my short films, like when I pass, I want to make those publicly available. And they'll probably be publicly available way before I pass, but I wanna make those available for everybody 'cause I feel like there's a lot of medicine. I'm just still on a contract right now with my distributor. Once that contract is over, I don't think I'll renew it, I just wanna have that work out there for free, so that'll be there. I know this is really weird, but I'm very proud of being a teacher. I'm a professor as the other half of my life, and I would want people to look at my curriculum and the words I've written and the essays I've written and stuff like that. I would love photo archives that people can like look at with me in all my different eras, like my nerdy ska era when I was, like, 19, and, like, my slutty era when I was, like, in my 20s and 30s in the Bay, and like my wholesome brujería era now, and, like, whatever.

I think I want definitely, my feature film, Electric Homies, which is about the singularity, it's about artificial intelligence, ancestors, lowriders, and curanderisma. You know, that script is really important. Whether that film ever gets made or not, and I do think it'll get made. I have a really good feeling that that's where the creator and the ancestors are like, heading me right now. But it's on their own time. It'll come

when it needs to come. But... that film, both the script and the film, I think that's gonna be something I'm gonna be very proud to leave on this earth and that will hopefully be available for everybody.

Also this is really random too but I just started a Substack 'cause I have all this writing and I like don't know what to do with it. It's like my old academic writing, it's like weird kind-of poems, weird short fiction, like horny fan fiction about Star Trek the Next Generation. I'm just like, where does all this shit go? My friends were telling me about Substack. So I finally just started a Substack that I hope that becomes like some kind of archive.

SMF: Yes!

ROBERTO: Whether that platform survives the next forty years or not, I doubt it, but you know, there will be a collection of written works that I think are fun.

SMF: Well, how can folks find any of your work now?

ROBERTO: Oh, yeah. I don't know. Let me-- [laughter]

SMF: Like Instagram, socials, websites, whatnot, Substack.

ROBERTO: So okay, my socials, just for, like, I kinda use it for announcements and stuff, is, Instagram, and that is @... oh my god, I changed it... Roberto underscore Fatal: F-A-T-A-L. That's my Insta. My new little Substack that I'm so excited about, how cool I get to promote it on here is um... Oh god, it looks so old. How do I know what my link is to my Substack? Aye! Oh, it's @RobertoFatal on Substack. All one word. And then, yeah, my website RobertoFatal.com, that just has like links to all my films and shit like that. And like honestly, if you don't wanna go through my distributor, if you're like just a single person who like doesn't have a lot of money, just email me and I'll send you the fucking movie. Just you know.

SMF: Noted.

ROBERTO: Noted. I just actually am in the process, my Thanks Taking treat today is... I had a dream last night that I was in the land of the dead, and I was in an auditorium with a bunch of, like, priests and conquistadors and all these fucked up people.

SMF: Wow.

ROBERTO: And Charlie Kirk was speaking to them,

[laughter]

and he had a he had a bullet hole in his neck. And he kept drinking water, and water kept coming out of this bullet hole. And he was, like, talking in this microphone that wasn't plugged into anything.

[Luna & SMF cracking up]

His manager was like, "We're gonna open it up for questions like we always do." And so I knew I had to go up to talk. I was there for some reason and I was expected to go talk. And so I went up to the mic and I was like, "Hi Charlie. Today, I feel like I can convince you that you actually support transgender care." And he's like, "That's false, but go ahead." And basically, go on this, like, giant diatribe where I talk to him about intersex people and how I believe that there are actually more than two physical sexes in the human race, which is so fucking obvious to anybody, including scientists. But like they're like, "No. There's just male and female, XX, XY." And I'm like trying to break down chromosomes and body and secondary sex characteristics and other stuff to him. And I was like, so my thing is that there are actually three genders, and that you take intersex kids, you and people like you, take intersex kids and you give them essentially gender affirming care to make them into a gender that they're not because it makes you feel more comfortable and you do this because you realize gender is malleable but sex is not. And so therefore, I think you support trans people, but just not in the way that trans people need to be supported. And then he, like, leaves the stage. And I was like, wow, that was pretty cool.

SMF: Oh my god! I-- [laughter]

Okay, thank you for that exclamation point at the end of this already amazing conversation.

[laughter]

I mean, what else is there to say that is--

ROBERTO (busts out laughing): I don't know.

SMF: That's epic.

ROBERTO: It was intense. It was like a fucking very intense weird dream, so that was fun.

LUNA: I love that. I hope all of your dreams end up on Substack if they're as great that one.

ROBERTO: Ohhh! I love that. That's-- Luna, you very much inspired me right now. I think I might have to make that a area of my Substack.

SMF: Dreams are material. Dreams are-- I'm always like, oh, my dreams are free material. When I was really writing songs, my dreams were always like telling me what to write. Well, Roberto, thank you. This has been so wonderful to talk to you. Such a treat. And again, we are talking on this day, November 27, 2025. And I really feel like in the spirit-- we really touched a lot about just kind of what this day really is about. Right? And so I really appreciate that we brought that here. And this is something I'll always be thinking about. We always need to be thinking about how this particular country came to be, and our traditions, our very colonized, colonizing traditions exist--

ROBERTO: In the spirit of this day, the last things I'll say is thank you in a couple of different languages, like my, you know, Mexican and Spanish ancestry language, my Rarámuri language, and then, of course, because I grew up in America, I'll say thank you in English. Matétera ba, muchimas gracias, and thank you.

LUNA: Thank you, Roberto.

SMF: Thank you, Roberto.

[dreamy acoustic guitar interlude]

LUNA: I love that Roberto wrapped us up with that truly bonkers and beautiful dream.

SMF: Yes. Y'all follow Roberto. We'll link to them in our post. Their work is truly speaking to this moment we're in of AI and the colonizing of memory and truth.

LUNA: Exactly. And as we're heading into this holigay season, we hope that you get exactly what you need and desire in these final dark days before the winter solstice.

SMF: Yes. This year, I'm really feeling that cold and darkness, but, like, in a good way. Like, it feels like a really good time to bundle up and be still and listen. I'm especially listening for my friend Pat Spano, who died last December. We used to make epic lesbian mixtapes for each other in the 80s. So I'll probably be listening to a lot of Melissa Etheridge and Joan Armatrading.

LUNA: Awww. That sounds so cozy, StormMiguel. I'll definitely be joining you as I'm all bundled up in wintery spirit with my cup of lactose free hot chocolate and a big fuzzy blanket. And don't forget, y'all, while you're staying warm this season, please check out the SANTES form if you haven't already. You can go ahead and share how you wanna be remembered and interacted with when you become an ancestor. You can find the form at www.SantesProject.com.

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

See you on the other side!

LUNA: And this one too!
[melodic acoustic guitar] ♪♪

END