

Como Ser Afro-Latino/a? – Expressing Afro- and Latino/a Identities in the United States

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**Preface**

*“...I think for my generation, it’s really a struggle for claiming and owning and being able to control your identity. It’s about finding a balance between feeling very very American and feeling very very Latino/a, and trying to understand and reconcile the tension points that exist between those two things.”—Javier*

*“I think that...we’re identifying in ways that are more specific and in ways that are more detailed that are more classified, that are individual than ever before.”—Sydney*

*“For me [identifying] as an Afro-Latina means that I identify my Latina roots, being from the Caribbean, being Puerto Rican and Dominican and it also identifies my Afro-Latino side which would be African, Indigenous, and at the end of the day my Black roots, especially because I am dark-skinned and I have curly hair, I think it’s important for people to know who I am.”—Paula*

***Abstract***

*I argue that in the United States, Afro-Latino/as are identifying with their African heritage more often and in a greater number of social and political contexts. I further argue that there has been a substantial intergenerational shift in attitudes towards Afro-Latino/a (AFRLAT) identity between the age group of the present study and previous generations. I focus on AFRLAT identity expression among Afro-Latino/as between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five. Seven interviews with AFRLATs provide the primary source of data for my qualitative analysis.*

*This study provides an analysis of various political and cultural impacts of the term 'Afro-Latino/a' in the US as well as how certain social, cultural and political contexts affect AFRLAT identity expression. Particular attention is given to issues such as colorism, how Spanish language use relates to cultural identity, and differences between racial schemas in the US as compared to racial schemas in Latin America.*

## ***Introduction***

The purpose of this study is to provide an ethnographic analysis of the political and cultural impacts of an ‘Afro-Latino/a’ (AFRLAT) identity in the United States. AFRLAT identity itself is not a new phenomena but the specific term of ‘Afro-Latino/a’ has only recently become more widely used in academic and social contexts (Jiménez Román, Flores 2010).

I begin with the basic argument that in the United States, Latino/as are identifying with their Afro- heritage on a more frequent basis and in a greater number of social and political contexts (Nieves 1995, Jiménez Román 2010; Roth 2012). Through analyzing research focused on older generations of AFRLATs and data from seven interviews I conducted with AFRLATs between ages 18-35 I further argue that there is a substantial intergenerational shift in attitudes toward AFRLAT identity between the age group of the present study and previous generations.

The research for this study was guided by four questions that investigated social and cultural functions of AFRLAT identity expression. Factors such as colorism, how Spanish language use relates to cultural identity, and differences in racial categorization within a United States context as compared to racial categorization in a Latin American context are analyzed for their impact.

- Who is considered Afro-Latino/a?
- In what situations are AFRLATs identifying with the specific term of ‘Afro-Latino/a’?
- What role does culture play in AFRLAT identity expression?

- What will be the impact of younger AFRLATs on the political and cultural ways racial-ethnic identities are considered in an increasingly multiracial United States?

These questions emerged as particularly layered and challenging inquiries. My research addresses this complexity and demonstrates the incredible importance of context in almost every aspect of AFRLAT identity. This analysis of respondents' experiences also reveals exciting patterns of the role of college experiences on how AFRLATs consider their identities.

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The term 'AFRLAT' is used by someone of "Afro<sup>1</sup>- and Latino/a heritage to self-identify themselves<sup>2</sup> as well as individuals who identify as Black Latino/as, or as Black and Latino/a (among others). Within this study I employ the general definition offered by Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores, co-editors of "The Afro-Latin@ Reader" (2010), of AFRLATs as being "people of African descent in Mexico, Central and South America, and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, and by extension those of African descent in the United States whose origins are in Latin America and the Caribbean."<sup>3</sup>

In deconstructing motivation for using the Afro- prefix in AFRLAT identity, Jiménez Román explains that "...as in Latin America, where the prefix Afro has been critical in challenging the homogenizing effects of national and regional constructs, so in the United

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this study the prefix 'Afro-' will indicate association with African heritage unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> "First and most obviously Afro-Latin@ refers to those Latin@s of visible or self-proclaimed African descent..." (p 4, Jiménez Román, Flores 2010)

<sup>3</sup> (Jiménez Román 1, 2010)

States the term “Afro-Latin@” has surfaced as a way to signal racial, cultural, and socioeconomic contradictions within the overly vague idea of “Latin@.” (2)<sup>4</sup>

The term ‘AFRLAT’ is becoming more common as a way to self-identify primarily among younger Latino/as. This argument is echoed by Jiménez Román and Flores, “As with any new field of group identity, it is the youth and the young adults who have been the first to embrace Afrolatinidad.” (371)

In discussing AFRLAT identity it is important to recognize that AFRLAT is not the exclusive term<sup>5</sup> used to identify an individual who is of Afro- and Latino/a heritage. For some, including the Afro- identifier is a political statement<sup>6</sup>, a conscious effort to make their African heritage a more visible part of the conversations about race in their communities. However there are others who identify with their African heritage but feel the Afro- identifier is unnecessary, even divisive as one of my respondents did, explaining:

“The term ‘Afro-Latino/a’ to me is...I find it problematic, to be honest. I think that in some cases, at least for me and my knowledge and understanding of the issue and the people I’ve been raised around, to signify Afro-Latino/a is almost demarcating a line where you don’t need a line.” (*Javier*)

The present account also examines underlying reasons behind younger AFRLATs’ increasing sense of dissatisfaction with current options for racial identification as well as

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<sup>4</sup> Source: “The Afro-Latin@ Reader” (2010)

<sup>5</sup> “Along with the terms “Negro”, “afrodescendiente,” and “afrolatino-americano,” the name Afro-Latin@ has served to identify the constituency of the main vibrant anti-racist movements and causes that have been gaining momentum...” (2)

<sup>6</sup> Respondent Alicia

how they are identifying in a number of specific, unorthodox and personal ways when it comes to their racial-ethnic identities. Additional observations indicate that social interactions within digital contexts via online social media are emerging as an important situation of identity expression not only for AFRLATs but for other marginalized racial-ethnic identities as well.

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In the last decade the relationship between Latino/as and their Afro- heritage has undergone significant changes. However, even with the many important global developments surrounding AFRLAT identity, many Latino/as still often deny or experience difficulty in recognizing their Afro- heritage. Fernando, one of the seven AFRLATs interviewed, highlights this tendency to deny Afro- heritage within his own family:

“...It’s more hidden and it’s not really spoken of ...I still see myself as the only person in my family that really identifies as Afro-Latino. Most of my family still see themselves as just Latino/a even though the color of their skin says otherwise.” (*Fernando*)

As the 2010 US Census shows<sup>7</sup>, larger numbers of Latino/as are responding with “Some Other Race” or “Two or More Races” yet there is still a strong tendency to homogenize and oversimplify the ‘Latino/a’ identity in political discourse.

In understanding how race is viewed in the United States among Latino/as, a broader transnational lens of migration must be used. In the US attitudes surrounding Blackness and Afro- heritage are often brought from countries of origin (Roth 2012,

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<sup>7</sup> For a report of the 2010 US Census Bureau report on ‘the Hispanic Population’ please see: [www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-04.pdf](http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-04.pdf)



Oboler 1995). Attitudes that largely *reject* Blackness and avoid identification with an Afro- heritage are held by many immigrants coming to the United States from Latin American countries. (Roth 2012) In my interview with Paula, one of the respondents, we discussed her experiences with these attitudes as a child:

*Jordan: You say you identify as Afro-Latina. Has there been an evolution in how you identify? Were there some specific events or experiences that affected how you chose to identify?*

Paula: “[in Puerto Rico] ...either you were light skinned or you were dark or you were *indio* which was like you were in the middle or more Indian, and that was my early experience with separation within my own family. You were either White or you were Indian or you were Black and it was really when I came to NYC that I really started to see more the lines of White and Black.”

*Jordan: How old were you when you moved?*

Paula: I was about five or six years old when I came to NYC.

So even though it was, I was around people that were dark skinned Puerto Ricans or dark skinned Dominicans and they would consider themselves, you know, they would say ‘negrito’ or “I’m dark skinned”. It wasn’t like a big deal but you were aware that they were dark. But when we came to New York, it was either you were Black or you were White, and for a lot of folks that I was around ‘Black’

meant African American and they didn't want to be considered African American or African so it was sort of like "We're not Black at all".

My research, particularly the qualitative interview data, indicates that younger generations of AFRLATs have a more positive attitude surrounding AFRLAT identity and 'Blackness' than their parents and older family members. Within my interviews this question of intergenerational change is explored in greater detail.

### *1.0 Brief Historical Background of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in the Americas*

A brief background of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade in the Americas—South America, Central America, the Caribbean, and North America—is important in understanding the scale of the African Diaspora in Latin America. While exact figures vary, most estimates state that of the approximately 12 million Africans brought from Africa, between 9.6 and 10.8 million arrived in the Americas. Of those 9.6 to 10.8 million Africans brought to the Americas, roughly 500,000 were brought to the United States with the remaining 90-95 percent brought to the Caribbean and South America.<sup>8</sup>

Even with strong documentation of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade's impact in Latin America, there remains a certain amount of *mis-education*<sup>9</sup> in the United States and many Latin American countries about the history of their African heritage. This mis-education is critically connected to the construction of AFRLAT identity as the educational system,

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<sup>8</sup> Source: <http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/slavery-and-anti-slavery/resources/facts-about-slave-trade-and-slavery> , <http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/assessment/estimates.faces>

<sup>9</sup> Dr. Marta Moreno Vega, lecture. (Ann Arbor, MI 2/11/2013)

according to Dr. Marta Moreno Vega, a self-identified Afro-Boricua Nuyorican,<sup>10</sup> is “...[t]he primary vehicle for affirming racist and discriminatory theories and practices...” (Vega 83, 2012) Furthermore, Dr. Vega argues that for AFRLATs, “[t]he historical narratives that generally frame our experience start solely with our enslavement. The general absence of our pre-enslavement and post-enslavement history is a major factor in determining the information we use to define our individual and group identities” (Vega 94, 2012). Within my own research I observed the ways that this absence of history impacted the identity construction of my interview subjects.

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The remainder of this study is divided into four sections. I have already presented key research questions and the historical background that informs my analysis. The first section includes a brief survey of existing research on dominant racial schemas found in Latin America and the United States. The second section continues with a brief historical background of Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic followed by a survey of the theoretical background of racial-ethnic identity as well as key social, cultural, and political factors informing racial-ethnic identity in US AFRLATs. The third section describes the research methodology used in data collection and analysis.

The final section is divided into two parts. The first part presents results and observations of my interview transcripts and a selection of five interview questions analyzed in greater detail. I conclude by re-asserting that AFRLAT identity is highly

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<sup>10</sup> the term ‘Boricua’ referring to being of Puerto Rican descent, the term ‘Nuyorican’ referring to someone of Puerto Rican descent raised in New York City

dependent on social contexts and that through greater use of social media platforms, AFRLATs have an increasing amount of control over the representation of their racial-ethnic identities in digital situations.

The second part subsequently analyzes the context-specific nature of respondents' experiences and briefly discusses preliminary patterns and observations. Then I will shift to analysis of the interview data and present a critical discussion of preliminary trends in the responses. The conclusion briefly revisits questions that guided my study and offers questions for future research.

### ***Literature Review***

#### *Historical backgrounds of Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic*

Of my 7 interview respondents, five were of Dominican and/or Puerto Rican heritage thus brief historical backgrounds are provided in the following section.

As previously stated, over 90% of Africans brought as slaves to the Americas came to Central America, South America and the Caribbean and as a result, their cultures bear strong African influences. Cultural contributions of enslaved Africans can be seen in the language, music, food, dance and religion—to name a few of the more salient examples, yet these decidedly African influences are oftentimes not openly acknowledged.

#### *Puerto Rico*

The indigenous Taíno people originally inhabited the island of Puerto Rico with Christopher Columbus reaching the island in 1493. By 1820 Puerto Rico's slave

population had reached roughly 20,000. With the Treaty of Paris in 1898, Puerto Rico was ceded (along with Cuba, the Philippines and Guam) to the United States and in 1917 Puerto Rico officially became a commonwealth of the United States.

Following the end of World War II in 1945 the US implemented what is now known as Operation Bootstrap.<sup>11</sup> This led to a considerable decrease in available jobs and prompted the most significant mass migration of Puerto Ricans from the island to the continental United States with approximately 43,000 Puerto Ricans migrating per year between 1950 and 1959, dwarfing the average rate of 1,800 recorded between 1930 and 1939.<sup>12</sup>

Puerto Rico's history as a colony of the United States is a point of tension for many Puerto Ricans both on the island and in the United States itself. The struggle for independence on the island also has a long and difficult history with those in favor of full independence arguing that Puerto Ricans have managed to maintain their own culture, traditions and customs in spite of the United States' exploitation of many of the natural resources.

Within this pride in the distinct culture and customs in Puerto Rico people will often acknowledge *tres razas*—Spaniard, Taíno and African, yet these three races do not share equal political or cultural prestige. As my interview transcripts reflect, there remains a tendency to place greater emphasis on Spanish and Taíno heritage and to deny or minimize African heritage. This tendency extends beyond Puerto Ricans to other Caribbean countries such as the Dominican Republic.

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<sup>11</sup> a number of tax breaks and other economic incentives with the objective of increasing the amount of private United States investment on the island.

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<http://lcw.lehman.edu/lehman/depts/latinampuertorican/latinoweb/PuertoRico/1950s.htm>

### *Dominican Republic*

In 1804, Haiti gained its independence and the remainder of the island made a bid for its own independence in 1821. This attempt failed and the Dominican Republic was ruled by Haiti for the next 22 years and although the Dominican Republic gained independence in 1844, much of the historic prejudice against Haitians stems from this 22-year period preceding independence.

There is no single individual who has been more influential in how Dominicans view their own Blackness than General Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. During his approximately thirty year dictatorship beginning in 1930 and ending with his assassination in 1961, Rafael Trujillo and his regime orchestrated numerous policies and propaganda campaigns that had tremendous and long-lasting effects on how Dominicans viewed race, Blackness, and their own African heritage. Government propaganda and policies such as *blanquismo* or “whitening” and public encouragement of white European immigration to the Dominican Republic reinforced the association of Whiteness as desirable and Blackness as something to be avoided.

In 1937 the massacre of roughly 20,000 Haitians drove home the negativity of Blackness in a horrific and violent way. Through blatant propaganda from Trujillo’s administration Haitians were vilified as “Black” and ‘other’ and Dominicans were told to view Haitians as beneath them. Even now anti-Haitian sentiment persists in the Dominican Republic.

This anti-Haitian attitude extends to many of the Dominican immigrants in the United States and is highly prevalent among Dominican immigrants living in New York City

(Roth 2012). It is not uncommon for the negative sentiments towards Haitians to be extended to include Blacks from non-Spanish speaking parts of the Caribbean and other Afro-Diasporic communities, notably African American Blacks. Many of my Dominican respondents confirmed this, discussing various experiences with the conservative attitudes of their parents and other older family members against not only Haitians but against people they knew or perceived to be African American (US Black).

In my interview with Paula, a NYC respondent, she described an experience that highlights these attitudes:

“...when I was in Junior high school that I befriended a girl that actually lived in my neighborhood and she actually was from Trinidad and we walked home and my brother saw us and didn’t say anything when he saw us, and then told my mom “Hey she was walking with this girl” and I couldn’t believe that it was even a problem, because it was never a problem in Puerto Rico but suddenly it was like I was with someone that was Black and not Latino/a Black but Black Black, in that degree, like African American Black or African to their conception. They didn’t even understand that she was Trinidadian, and I’m (as a kid) like “But she’s from the Caribbean, and we’re from the Caribbean.” I didn’t get what their separation of her was because to me she was just like us; she was just from another island. But to them it was like she was African American, she was Black.” (*Paula*)

However, while anti-Black attitudes are held by many of the Dominican immigrant generation, they are not exclusive to Dominicans but are common among various other Latino/a communities.

*Brief Background of Racial Schemas in the United States and Latin America*

The United States has a racial structure that has historically clung to the rule of hypo-descent, also known as the “one-drop rule” where people with as little as “one drop” of Black blood were considered Black by society.<sup>13</sup> This system of racialization relied on segregation and a strict legal prohibition of miscegenation with the divisive binary not accounting for the intricacies of mixed heritage, phenotype, etc as in Latin America.

In Latin America, the dominant racial schema follows a color continuum. This is to say that in contrast to the United States, racial categorization in Latin America is determined according to a complex and highly contextual system that considers factors such as hair texture, phenotype and skin color as well as racial history of one’s family. The existence of hundreds of different racial terms speaks to the nature of specificity of racial schemas in Latin America. Underlying this ‘color continuum’ is societal preference for European features and lighter skin. Deftly summarizing this complex intersectionality, Dr. Marta Cruz-Janzen writes, “In the United States Blacks are usually identified as African American, and are often considered the most discriminated against. For Latinos, to be Black in the United States is a perceived liability. Regardless of skin color and physical appearance, in the United States one drop of non-White blood makes the person 100 percent non-White, while in Latin America one drop of White blood makes the person whiter, or at least no longer Black or Indian.” (“The Afro-Latin@ Reader, 286) In the US, exposure to these different racial schemas can have interesting implications for younger AFRLATs interpreting their own racial-ethnic identities.

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<sup>13</sup> I say Black here but throughout history the terms have changed dramatically. What has remained consistent is the Black association as inferior to Whiteness within society.



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In many respects the results of the 2000 US Census and the outcome of the 2001 World Conference Against Racism represented a turning point in the conversation of AFRLAT identity. More specifically, the results of the 2000 Census revealed a United States with rapidly shifting racial demographics and predicted an increase in the amount of political and cultural influence of the Latino/a demographic. These two important events acted as a catalyst for research focusing on Latino/as in the US. Of the existing research of AFRLATs in the United States, the focus is primarily on the various waves of migration and the Latin American immigrant experience (Hoffnung-Garskof 2008; Roth 2012) and although a considerable body of literature exists for defining Black and Latino/a identities respectively, there remains a void in literature that explores a definition where the two identities are not treated as mutually exclusive.

## ***THEORETICAL BACKGROUND***

### *1.1 Social Identity Theory*

This account makes use of a number of theories that have been significant in the study of ethnic and racial identity. In analyzing my qualitative data, I draw heavily on the theoretical work of Daphna Oyserman and Suzanne Oboler.

Drawing on social identity theory, Oyserman proposes that social identities are constructed from the following three components:

- Information about membership in a group

- Information of the “nature of group boundaries”
- Information about what group membership implies.

Oyserman’s analysis of how social context shapes racial-ethnic identity is particularly useful for my own analysis with Oyserman identifying self-concept as being highly contextual and social interactions as critically important to shaping personal and social identities.

Building on the importance of social context in racial-ethnic identity, Oyserman proposes that *self and identity*<sup>14</sup> are both stable and context-sensitive.<sup>15</sup>(79, 81 2012) The stability of identity is established through repeatedly experiencing the same types of social situations and over time becoming ‘automatized’ to express the identity in a certain way.

“The effect of an identity will be stable over time to the extent that individuals repeatedly encounter psychologically isomorphic situations because in each instance the situation will engender readiness to take the same actions (for a related discussion of the stability of attitudes see Schwarz, 2007). Once a choice becomes identity linked, it is automatized.” (Oyserman 93, 2012)

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<sup>14</sup> *self and identity*: To accommodate this heterogeneity and still move forward in considering how self and identity may matter, in the rest of this chapter we use the phrase *self and identity* when this more general and vague usage is a better fit with the literature we are citing, and specific terms (e.g., identities) where relevant.” (75)

<sup>15</sup> Article: Oyserman, Elmore, Smith (2012). Self, self-concept, and identity. M.Leary & J. Tangney (Eds). Handbook of self and Identity, 2nd Edition (pp 69-104). New York, NY: Guilford Press

The context-sensitive aspect of *self and identity* indicates, “self-concepts and identities are not only malleable but actually dynamically constructed with each use” (Oyserman, 88, 2012).

### *1.2 Racial Terminology and Labels*

Although racial terms and schemas can vary widely from region to region and between cultural groups, it is possible to identify certain trends of usage and context. (Oboler 1995; Roth 2012) In examining the specific racial-ethnic terms used by respondents in my own interviews, I found Suzanne Oboler’s work examining racial terms in the US to be particularly helpful.

The evolution of labeling racial and ethnic experience among Latino/as in the United States brings to light the highly fluid nature of socially constructed racial categories in respect to minoritized<sup>16</sup> groups. Demonstrating this point, Oboler focuses on the history and evolving social and political implications of the term ‘Hispanic’. Establishing a historical framework for her analysis Oboler asserts that, in the United States, “the term Hispanic began to be disseminated as early as 1970 by government agencies” (p.vii-viii). Further demonstrating the political nature of the term she further asserts that “the ethnic designator Hispanic *officially* identifies people of Latin American and Spanish descent living in the United States.”

Additionally, Oboler asserts that the term ‘Hispanic’ is frequently used *ahistorically* in society. In using terms without knowledge of their origins and motives

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<sup>16</sup> Here I use the term ‘minoritized’ rather than minority populations. Specifically the term ‘minority’ is increasingly inaccurate from a demographic perspective as the 2010 US Census shows ‘Whites’ becoming the minority. I first heard the term used by Michael Benitez Jr. in his presentation at the University of Michigan, Sept 18, 2012.

for creation, these terms take on a second life, often perpetuating some of the issues that their creation was intended to eliminate.

When analyzing the political importance of using the Afro- prefix as an *AFRLAT*, it is important to recognize that in the context of political dynamics, “ethnicity, more particularly ethnic labeling, is directly related to the distribution of resources and opportunities” (xvii). Therefore, use of the term *AFRLAT* is a political decision as well as a personal one. Additionally Oboler argues that “It is important to recognize that self-identification with and use of a particular term also depends on the alternatives available in each context” (102) with the alternatives in a given context depending on the individual.

According to Oboler, the discussion over appropriate terminology (Hispanic vs. Latino) “becomes a false debate—insofar as, like the label Hispanic, the term Latino or Latina, or even Latin American, does not solve the problems raised by existing national and linguistic, class and racial differences in the U.S. context.” (165)

Oboler proposes “...the names adopted by different groups or imposed on them by others emerge as a result of particular historical and political contexts.” This argument underlies the importance of understanding the meanings of these “ethnic labels” in society and the meanings and values they carry in different contexts. (167)

## *2.0 Racial Schemas*

In her ethnographic study “Race Migrations: Latinos and the Cultural Transformation of Race” (2012) Wendy Roth indicates that “Latinos are largely viewed

and treated as a separate racial group that falls between Whites and Blacks in the racial hierarchy” (189) and that many Latino/as see themselves as part of a distinct racial group that “tries to differentiate itself from Blacks and is not accepted into the realm of Whiteness.” (Roth 189) However, when examining my interview transcripts I found that my responses differed from Roth’s in several ways, notably the openness of my respondents in discussing the presence of colorism within their communities. While my interview responses share similarities with many of the patterns and behaviors observed by Roth, there are key differences that I argue can be largely attributed to intergenerational shifts in attitude.

Roth focused much of her work and interviews on the different racial and color schemas operating in the United States.<sup>17</sup> Her in-depth study of Dominican and Puerto Rican immigrants to the US is exceptionally useful for analyzing my own interview transcripts as the majority of material in the present account concerns AFRLATs of Dominican and Puerto Rican descent.

### *2.1 Use of Experiential Data*

In discussing existing qualitative data on AFRLATs, the work of Juan Flores provides a useful reference point for incorporating my interview data into the theoretical frameworks of Oyserman and Oboler. In “The Diaspora Strikes Back”(2008) Flores proposes a reconsideration of the role of qualitative data within larger research frameworks and addresses what he sees as an imbalanced focus of research on Latino/as.

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<sup>17</sup> Her in-depth study of Dominican and Puerto Rican immigrants to the United States is exceptionally useful as the majority of analysis in the present account concerns Afro-Latino/as of Dominican and Puerto Rican descent.

“I have also found that previous study...has tended to focus inordinately on political and economic, or more broadly sociological, aspects, and to treat the cultural dimensions in minimal or marginal ways.” (Flores 8)

He continues, “With these theoretical and historical bearings in view, I then seek to ground my ideas by providing evidence in the form of personal life-stories and instances of expressive creativity.” (Flores 9)

### *3.0 Thematic Studies of Identity Expression in the United States*

Most AFRLAT research has focused on populations within Latin America rather than populations within a US-context. Therefore I will analyze literature on multiracial individuals in the US in order to discuss within a US-specific context. As multiracial individuals of non-Latino/a backgrounds frequently experience similar issues of identity denial, the research is comparable in discussing AFRLATs’ experiences with identity denial in institutional situations such as the Census, standardized tests and job applications.

In order to provide a background on the wide range of issues considered in the present account, particularly those of identity denial, I will briefly discuss the findings of these three thematically focused articles.

#### *3.1: Afro-Latinos: Bridging Two Cultures—Blanca Nieves*

In her article “Afro-Latinos: Bridging Two Cultures” (1995), Blanca Nieves argues that in the United States, Latino/a youth are identifying more frequently with their Afro- heritage. Through a number of interviews with several AFRLAT college students

and professionals<sup>18</sup>, Nieves describes the societal pressure felt by AFRLATs “to choose one race over the other” but asserts, “a growing number of Hispanics...are discovering their African roots.” (1) Nieves argues that “[t]he movement is reaching college campuses throughout the nation, where Hispanic students are increasingly studying their history and culture through multicultural curricula and African-American and Latin American studies.” (Nieves 1)

Nieves also addresses the presence of anti-Haitian sentiment in the Dominican Republic and among Dominicans in the US. This resistance to embrace Blackness is, Nieves argues, less prevalent among second generation Hispanics<sup>19</sup> who “*tend to have different attitudes about race than do their parents...*” (Nieves 3) This observation largely mirrors my own findings, supporting the previously stated argument for intergenerational changes in attitude.

3.2: *My Choice, Your Categories: The Denial of Multiracial Identities*—Sarah S.M. Townsend, Hazel R. Markus, Hilary B. Bergsieker

In “My Choice, Your Categories: The Denial of Multiracial Identities”, co-authors Sarah S.M. Townsend, Hazel R. Markus, Hilary B. Bergsieker argue that although claiming a multi-racial identity is “increasingly...pervasive” in the United States, the option to choose more than one racial group when registering for school or healthcare or applying for admission or employment is frequently not available. (186) Instead

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<sup>18</sup> Nieves interviewed several professors who taught courses on African history, the Dominican Republic and topics of the African Diaspora

<sup>19</sup> *Hispanic* and *Latino* are used interchangeably in the article

multiracial individuals must often choose a single category and thus are forced to exclude one or more of their racial identities.

The authors then turn to the example of the SAT and how it conducts the “SAT Questionnaire” to demonstrate how the inability of students to represent all possible racial identities represents a form of identity denial.<sup>20</sup> Prior to taking the SAT, students are asked a series of 42 questions; regarding the question<sup>21</sup> of “How do you describe yourself? (Mark only one)” students are given the choice of eight categories.<sup>22</sup> For the growing number of students identifying as mixed-raced, answering a question of this nature can be a source of stress and negatively impact test performance (186).

Historically, people of multiracial heritage have been assigned the monoracial identity of the “minority or lower-status group” (187). What is unique about mixed-race individuals currently, the authors propose, is the importance of context as a factor in identity assertion and that multiracial individuals are choosing to assert a number of different racial identities: “biracial, multiracial, monoracial, or variable” based on their present social context. This is consistent with my interview transcriptions where respondents described identifying with both their Afro- and Latino/a identities when responding to racial history questionnaires.

Townsend, Markus, & Bergsieker also credit the Internet as helping to provide “a wealth of resources from organizations aiming to scaffold and encourage multiracial

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<sup>20</sup> the general experience of having one’s group membership challenged by others (Cheryan and Monin (2005)

<sup>21</sup> Question 35 on the 2006-2007 academic year version. (The College Board, 2006, p. 12).

<sup>22</sup> “(a) American Indian or Alaska Native; (b) Asian, Asian American, or Pacific Islander; (c) Black or African American; (d) Mexican or Mexican American; (e) Puerto Rican; (f) Other Hispanic, Latino, or Latin American; (g) White; or (h) Other”



identities.” (187) Yet the authors argue the lack of institutional practices to promote or accommodate these growing assertions of multiracial identities poses a substantial challenge. To be miscategorized by others, in social contexts or in test settings, the authors contend that there is a huge risk for multiracial individuals to experience a categorization threat, one form of identity denial (188).

Additional conclusions made in the article support my own arguments that the functioning of multiracial identities highlights the importance of social interactions and contexts as a factor in the formation and maintenance of identity (Townsend, Markus, & Bergsieker 2009). It is this ‘right’ to self-identify in both public and private contexts that I propose is being more frequently asserted by AFRLATs in the United States.

3.3: “Too Black to be Latino/a: Blackness and Blacks as Foreigners in Latino Studies.”  
(2003)—Tanya Katerí Hernández

Tanya Katerí Hernández, in “Too Black to be Latino/a: Blackness and Blacks as Foreigners in Latino Studies” (2003) argues against the claim made by Silvio Torres-Saillant in his article “Inventing the Race: Latinos and the Ethnoracial Pentagon”(2003). Hernández asserts that the ‘racial mestizaje’(racial mixture) mindset described in Torres-Saillant’s article is in fact not the “enlightened space” that many Latino Studies scholars have touted it to be and that an examination of the AFRLAT context reveals a racialized approach toward AFRLAT identity as foreign (Hernández 152).

However Hernández *is* in agreement with Torres-Saillant that an often-overlooked area in Latino Studies is how AFRLATs are viewed within the Latino/a community.

Further advancing this point, she argues that the frequent perception of AFRLATs as foreign within their own Latino/a communities is demonstrative of “the foreignness of Blackness to Latinos.” (153) As discussed by Townsend, Markus, & Bergsieker (2009) this treatment of Blackness as outside the bounds of a Latino/a identity often leads AFRLATs to experience various forms of identity denial.

Framing her argument in a political context, Hernández concludes that she “simply wish[es] to emphasize that the structural inequalities of racial hierarchy that harm Latino/as and other racial minorities will never be eviscerated so long as Latino/as and the scholars that discuss their realities ignore the existence of racial prejudice within the community and treat the concept of Blackness as foreign to Latino/a identity.” (157)

### ***Methodology***

My interview data focus predominantly on the New York City area<sup>23</sup> and consequently on the Dominicans and Puerto Rican populations as well. Therefore while much of the research and observations made in this study may be applicable to Latino/as as a larger group, certain patterns and issues appear more frequently among these two cultural-ethnic groups.

In the early stages of my research I thought my goal would be explaining AFRLAT identity to a non-Latino/a audience but as my research progressed, my question evolved. The levels of complexity that developed within my research extended not only

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<sup>23</sup> Due to the geographic limitations of my area of research (New York City) Latino/a groups which are historically much more dominant in other regions of the United States were not analyzed.

to an exploration of the term but also to issues of racial-ethnic identity expression among a group that is often made invisible by different cultural and political forces.

In designing my study I critically considered the ways in which my multiple and intersecting identities of researcher, student and often, cultural foreigner—among others—would dictate the course of my research. I knew that my identities as White, non-native Spanish speaker (and non-Latina) would impact the course of my research, namely how I viewed the issues and not having experience with a number of the situations my interview respondents described.

### *1.0 Designing the Study*<sup>24</sup>

I designed the study with a particular interest in whether experiences in a US-specific environment affected how AFRLATs construct and express their racial and cultural identities

The interviews focused on respondents' views and attitudes on racial identification and their perception of racial categories and schemas in the United States, as well as their experiences regarding specific issues of race and identity such as the concept of “adelantar la raza”<sup>25</sup> (bettering the race).

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<sup>24</sup> The University of Michigan's Institutional Board of Review (IRB) approved the research study and its procedures and informed consent was obtained from all interview subjects prior to their participation.

<sup>25</sup> Other terms such as *avanzar la raza*, (*advance the race*) *mejorar la raza* (*better the race*) and *arreglar la familia* (*fix the family*) all convey this concept.

### *2.1 Finding Respondents*

I used a combination of snowball sampling and referrals of individuals by personal contacts not participating in the study. Given my inability to recruit in person in New York City I relied heavily on the generosity of those I contacted in providing referrals of potential respondents. This distance was mediated by the use of forwarded emails about the project. Individuals I contacted for referrals typically passed my request on to other people who they knew and thought might fit my criteria. I was referred to potential NYC respondents via several contacts based in NYC. In recruiting the two respondents outside of the NYC area I relied mostly on referrals from personal contacts in the Ann Arbor area.

### *2.2 Respondents*

Between November 15 and December 31, 2012 I conducted seven interviews. The principal selection criteria for respondents were that they were between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five and had spent the majority of their formative years in or near New York City. There were two exceptions to the criteria of living in or near NYC with one respondent spending the majority of their formative years in West Palm Beach, Florida and the other in Savannah, Georgia. These respondents were included to provide a manner of comparing the observations and preliminary patterns identified in the transcriptions of the NYC respondents.

The age range was chosen for the purposes of including the upper limit of people born after most of the immigration from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico had

taken place. These individuals are often the children of immigration waves of the 1960s and 1970s and have grown up being exposed to both a US concept of race and ethnicity as well as the concepts of race and ethnicity held by their parents, which share similarities between their respective countries of origin.

Variation in respondents' educational, professional and language backgrounds was not selected for beforehand. Additionally, information regarding the socio-economic status of respondents was not sought. In determining what background information to ask respondents to provide I made the decision not to ask for their socio-economic status as I was already asking for a number of other highly personal information; respondents' SES status as well as that of their immediate families were established during the course of the interview via informal comments.

### Selected Background Information

	Sydney	Fernando	Gina	Paula	Javier	Alicia	Julia
Age	26	23	21	33	26	26	22
Sex	F	M	F	F	M	F	F
City/State (of formative years)	NYC, NY	NYC, NY	West Palm Beach, FL	NYC, NY	NYC, NY	Savannah, GA	NYC, NY
Racial Identification	Black	Black	Bi-racial	Afro-Latina	Mixed	Mixed race, Black	Latina
Ethnicity	Dominican-American	Dominican	Guatemalan American and Black	Puerto Rican and Dominican	Latino-American	Colombian and Black U.S. American	Latina
Mother's nation of origin	Dominican Republic	Dominican Republic	United States	Dominican Republic	United States	Colombia	Dominican Republic
Father's nation of origin	Dominican Republic	Dominican Republic	United States	Dominican Republic	Dominican Republic	United States	Dominican Republic
Mother's Ethnic or Racial Identification	Not Known	Dominican	Guatemalan American	Latina	Puerto Rican	Colombian, Hispanic	Latina
Father's Ethnic or Racial Identification	Black	Dominican	African American	Not Known	Dominican	African American, Black	Latino

A roughly equal amount of men and women were contacted about participating in the study yet more women agreed. Potential reasons for this result are unclear and in future research I will address the gender discrepancy through an expanded number of male respondents.

Regarding Spanish-speaking ability, while all seven respondents reported they were comfortable in English and Spanish linguistic contexts, Spanish-language ability was not a requirement for participation in the study. Additionally no attempt was made to seek out respondents with a certain level of Spanish-English bilingual ability. Information regarding levels of fluency in Spanish in reading, writing and speaking was self-reported by respondents.

### *Self-Reported Spanish Fluency Levels*

	Sydney	Fernando	Gina	Paula	Javier	Alicia	Julia
Raised speaking Spanish?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y
Speak Spanish now?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
(Current) Level of Fluency (Speaking)	100% Fluent	Proficient	Fluent, Spanish Major	Very fluent	Moderate	Advanced Intermediate level	Very fluent
Writing ability	75%	Proficient	Spanish Major	Pretty good	Very poor	Better than I speak	Pretty well
Reading ability	100% well	Proficient	Spanish Major	Very well	Moderate	Good	Pretty well

### *3.0 Designing the Questions*

Given my argument of context as critical in AFRLAT identity expression, I included a number of questions about different social, political and cultural context-sensitive situations.

Dr. Teresa Satterfield reviewed my interview questions and provided helpful clarification in the wording of certain questions. In addition I consulted via email with Dash Harris, a journalist and creator of “Negro: a docu-series about Latino identity”. I modeled several of my core interview questions on questions asked by Harris in the interviews appearing in the documentary-series. Harris was particularly helpful in providing guidance about conducting ethnographic interviews where issues of race and ethnicity are the focus. As Harris also interviewed a number of AFRLATs in NYC, I found a number of similarities between the issues addressed in her interviews and my own. Example 1 shows an original question and then my adapted question, Example 2 shows a question I used without adaptation.

*Example 1:* “How do you identify?” [Dash Harris]<sup>26</sup>

“You say you identify as X. Has there been an evolution in how you identify?” [Jordan Kifer]<sup>27</sup>

*Example 2:* “Can you describe your family’s outlook on color?” [Dash Harris]

I established a list of general interview questions—questions that were applicable to all of the interview subjects given their pre-determined eligibility for participation in the study and the first part of each interview I collected demographic data as well as how respondents identified racially and ethnically. This information guided which questions were appropriate to ask in the rest of the interview. I attempted to maintain the wording and order of my primary questions as much as possible while allowing flexibility for subsequent prompts and follow-up questions.

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<sup>26</sup> Email correspondence, 11/19/2012

<sup>27</sup> For an extended list of general interview questions please reference Appendix A

#### *4.0 Conducting the Interviews*

The interviews ranged in length from twenty minutes to ninety minutes. I recorded audio for all of the interviews using the Voice Memos application on my iPhone. I then transferred the audio files to my laptop and stored them in a protected location and deleted the original files. Interviews were transcribed verbatim in order to preserve speech patterns and word choice tendencies.

Concerning the questions to be covered in the interviews, I was clear about the nature of the questions and of the project. The project was explained in my initial email<sup>28</sup> contact with potential respondents and attached a file of my thesis abstract as well as clarifying when needed.

Respondents were able to decide when the interviews would take place. In the case of my single in-person interview, the respondent was given the option of deciding the time and location of the interview.<sup>29</sup> Six of the 7 interviews were conducted via telephone with the exception of one interview conducted in person.

During the interviews I found that being referred through a mutual contact greatly facilitated establishing a basic level of trust with a respondent. Given the sensitive nature of the interview questions I was aware of my identities as researcher and White non-Latina. I also observed my own hesitation in asking certain questions. For example, in my

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<sup>28</sup> For an example, please see Appendix B

<sup>29</sup> No compensation, monetary or other, was offered to respondents in exchange for their participation in the project. I did not want to add the additional component of monetary compensation to the project and the decision to do so was in no way tied to how greatly I appreciated each individual's time and willingness to share often deeply personal experiences with me.



interview with Javier, a 26-year-old NYC respondent I did not ask him if he had experienced colorism until later on in the interview.

I used a series of open-ended questions and follow-up questions with my interview respondents to gain a more complete perspective of their life experiences pertaining to their identities as AFRLATs. Experiences relating to other identities such as sexual orientation, gender and socio-economic status were also discussed in many of the interview transcriptions.

In each interview I varied the timing and order of certain questions. Additionally I asked respondents to identify their own race in open-ended terms. This was for both the purposes of allowing self-identification as well as observing any similarities in racial terms used among the respondents. Below is an excerpt of my interview with Alicia, a 26-year old non-NYC respondent.

*Jordan Kifer: You said that you identify as mixed race and Black, as well as Afro-Latina on occasion. Has there been an evolution in how you identify? Was there anything that really shaped how you identified?*

Alicia: I think that, you know, I've identified as Black longer than I have Latina, or more fully I guess. And maybe that's because I grew up in Georgia and was surrounded by a lot of White people, actually. But there were also a lot of Black people, Black Americans, like US Americans in the South and there weren't that many Latino/as of any kind. And then there were some Mexicans that started moving in to Savannah and so I didn't quite identify with them,..."

In this excerpt, the open-ended nature of the question allowed for a number of different racial-ethnic terms to be used in her response.

### ***Analysis and Discussion of Results***

This section is divided into two parts. First I discuss results and observations of my interviews transcripts. Then I shift to analysis of the interview data and present a critical discussion of what I see as preliminary trends in the responses.

In my analysis I treat racial-ethnic identity as both stable and context-sensitive and examine transcripts for responses including context-sensitive experiences.

#### *1.0 Preliminary Results and Observations*

In the interviews, I included questions to directly address respondents' attitudes of how Blackness and Latinidad are defined within society, identity denial, and colorism with the importance of context central to all interview questions. The following questions will be briefly discussed with a focus on the role of context:

- What does the term “Afro-Latino/a” mean to you? (Do you ever use it for yourself? In what contexts?)
- How did where you grew up shape your identity?
- Has speaking Spanish affected your identity?
- Have you ever experienced colorism?
- How do you decide how you respond to the race/ethnicity categories on standardized tests/job applications/Census,etc?

*1.1 What does the term “Afro-Latino/a” mean to you? (Have you heard it before? Do you ever use it for yourself? In what contexts?)*

There was a wide range of responses to this question with greater variety than I had initially anticipated with one point of consistency being that the term ‘Afro-Latino/a’ was not heard during their formative years.<sup>30</sup> Several respondents explained that while they had been aware of their Blackness/Afro- descent, the term itself was not used.

“I never actually heard the term ‘Afro-Latino/a’ when I was growing up. There wasn’t necessarily a talk about being Latina; it was more an idea of color” (*Paula*)

Beyond this there was considerable variance in familiarity with the specific term of ‘Afro-Latino/a’. One respondent replied that prior to being asked to participate in the study, she had not heard the term. Other respondents told me that they were familiar with the term but explained that ‘Afro-Latino/a’ was not the first way they chose to identify themselves, with one respondent describing how she saw using the term as a highly political choice. Of the 7 respondents, three used AFRLAT as the primary term when referring to their racial-ethnic identity, three indicated that they were comfortable with being identified as AFRLAT but did not prefer it as their primary way of self-identifying and one respondent did not use the term AFRLAT stating that as she did not know “where any of [her] family was from in Africa” she did not use the Afro- prefix.<sup>31</sup>

### *1.2 Has speaking Spanish affected your identity?*

In analyzing AFRLAT identity, the factor of language use is of particular importance. As indicated by the social identity theoretical framework advanced by

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<sup>30</sup> Age 0-18 years

<sup>31</sup> Gina also said she did not see ‘African-American’ as a term that properly identified her and preferred ‘Black’ instead.

Oyserman, a critical aspect of social identities is the “information about what it means to be a group member” (Oyserman 129), I therefore included questions about respondents’ use of language, specifically Spanish in the interviews.

Levels of fluency in speaking, reading and writing were self-reported. All but one of the respondents reported that they were raised speaking Spanish and indicated a strong level of fluency in both Spanish and English in their lives now. In confirming a sense of group identity, speaking Spanish was a significant way to do so with some respondents explaining they saw Spanish as a way to assert their Latino/a identity. Gina, a 21-year old respondent of Guatemalan–American descent felt that “speaking Spanish has confirmed [her] identity and given [her] a vehicle to reinforce it” continuing that “...speaking Spanish has been a way to externally exhibit my identity and I think that in a lot of situations where my identity has been questioned or challenged I’ve been able to take comfort in the fact that I do speak Spanish...”

Additional respondents echoed Gina’s statement of using Spanish as a way to defend their group membership as Latino/as.<sup>32</sup>

“It [speaking Spanish] makes me feel closer to my nationality, makes me feel closer to my family... Because I feel connected to a people through language and through culture so it’s definitely important to me and to my identity.” (*Sydney*)

“I think Spanish has definitely been an outlet for me to be true to my culture, and to know more about my culture.” (*Fernando*)

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<sup>32</sup> Respondents often specified specific nationalities or countries of origin such as Dominican or Colombian.

### *1.3 How did where you grew up shape your identity?*

In addressing the highly contextual nature of self-identification, I asked interview respondents if they felt the area they had grown up in affected how they viewed their identities. The responses were split with the 5 NYC respondents indicating that growing up in NYC had affected how they viewed their Afro- and Latino/a identities. Sydney, a NYC respondent discussed her experience growing up in NYC and explained its impact on her identity as an AFRLAT:

“Being raised in New York made it difficult for me to understand my own Blackness anywhere else, because here it made so much sense and I didn’t have to explain it. I could say “Oh I’m a Dominican American first-generation New York Latina”, I could say that and it’s understood because there’s so many other women like me, there’s so many other people that fall into those same categories and you can really narrow it down to that population and still have it be a lot of us that form this group, you know? But not anywhere else. It’s like anywhere else- I’m Black and that wasn’t enough for me. I wasn’t prepared to have my identity reduced to just one thing.” (*Sydney*)

Returning to the theory of identity as stable, my interviews with the NYC-based respondents established a pattern of understanding one’s racial-ethnic identity within the geographic context of NYC. A separate question inquiring about respondents’ identity evolution revealed a secondary pattern of transitioning to college as a particularly significant event. This corresponded with the other part of the previously stated theory that identity is also context-sensitive.

*1.4 How do you decide how you respond to the race/ethnicity categories on standardized tests/job applications/Census, etc?*

When presented with situations of answering race and ethnicity questionnaires, AFRLATs frequently experience *identity denial* (Hernández). This observation was repeated in the interviews with respondents offering different experiences of responding to these situations. Respondents expressed frustration at what they considered to be limited and exclusionary categories. As previously mentioned, the use of racial-ethnic terms is closely linked to distribution of different political and economic resources (Oboler). Thus how AFRLATs respond in these situations is a political as well as a personal decision. During my interview with Alicia, she discussed the political nature of responding to a racial history questionnaire:

“I really try to answer as many of those questions as I can. So usually, with these I see you can pick ‘Black, White or Asian’ and it’s like, “Is that it?”...It’s all a little iffy [the categories] I usually try to make sure that I check ‘Black’ and I try to write ‘Latina or Hispanic’ but also if they give the option of country of origin then I also try to write Colombian....And whenever they only give me one option I usually have to decide what’s tactful in a situation so it depends on what population of people’s underrepresented in that thing that I’m applying for or whatever, just to make sure that statistically I’m helping out somebody else eventually down the line. It’s a process.” (Alicia)

In examining how respondents viewed these situations, during my interview with Sydney I included a follow-up question asking if she felt it was important to participate in this kind of information collection. She replied:

“I do respond... it’s interesting because...I’m applying for jobs and looking for jobs and I’m checking the box almost on a daily basis. So now the boxes are, or what I see lately, like “Black OR Latino/a” is one category and “Other” is another category. So I could check, I check that box even though it really bothers me that it’s just Black OR Latino/a... for me it’s like, “yeah I’m here and I’m also this and I’m also this”. It’s more a statement of “I’m in here, like I’m competitive too” even though I think that the perception is that I’m not. So yeah, I check the box, as many options as I have when checking the box, I check the box.” (*Sydney*)

### *1.5 Have you ever experienced colorism?*

Within Latino/a communities, while there is a pride in the “rainbow” of Latino/a skin colors, there remains a preference for lighter/Whiter.<sup>33</sup> Colorism, the prejudice expressed towards someone with darker skin, frequently extends beyond skin color to hair texture and phenotype. In order to discuss the concept of colorism with my respondents I included several interview questions relating to the issue. Six of the 7 respondents felt that there was colorism within their communities and five described personally experiencing it. Many of the experiences with colorism that were shared with me had taken place within respondents’ immediate families and I was somewhat surprised at the

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<sup>33</sup> This preference is reflected in much of the Spanish-language mainstream media programming such as Telemundo and Univision.

explicit negativity of some of the comments made. In my interview with Paula, a NYC-based respondent with Puerto Rican and Dominican heritage, she described a difference in treatment based on color within her own family:

“...even within the Latino/a culture, there is this hiding of the darker ones, the hiding of the ones that have curlier hair or wider noses or bigger lips, you know... A lot of those things have just been playing throughout my lifetime just because I happen to be the darkest one in my family...and to see how I was treated, because I was the darkest one, and my sister being lighter how she was treated,...I was always aware that I was the darker one.” (Paula)

*Table of responses*

	Sydney	Fernando	Gina	Paula	Javier	Alicia	Julia
Do you identify with the term AFRLAT?	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Use AFRLAT as a primary term to self-identify?	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No
Did where you grew up impact your identity?	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Has speaking Spanish affected your identity?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Speaking Spanish to connect with 'Latino/a' culture?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Experienced colorism?	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Responding to race/ethnicity categories?	Black and Latina	Other'- Afro-Latino	Hispanic/ Latina and Black	N/A	Other'- Latino Mixed Heritage	Black, Latina/Hispanic Colombian	Hispanic or Latina

Framing my data analysis around my secondary argument that a greater number of younger<sup>34</sup> AFRLATs are identifying with their Afro-<sup>35</sup> heritage, I identified a number

<sup>34</sup> Within this study I am defining ‘younger’ as AFRLATs between ages 18-35 unless otherwise stated)

<sup>35</sup> Within the interview transcripts, respondents used the terms of Black and Afro-



of context-specific experiences described in the interviews. In reviewing the transcripts I noticed that five of the 7 respondents had indicated their transition to and time in college as hugely significant in how their AFRLAT identities shifted/evolved.

These respondents described their racial-ethnic identities as relatively stable prior to attending college<sup>36</sup> with the social situations and larger contexts they experienced helping to establish a sense of self that was consistent. During my interview with Gina, she explained how “before college I just said I was mixed, but not half Black, half White but half Black half Spanish or half Black half Hispanic...I guess I got more focused with my identity in college.”

When I asked respondents “Was there a specific event or experience that affected how you chose to identify?” they described how their college experience had served as a catalyst for changing how they identified. To demonstrate the strong similarity among responses, I include three excerpted responses here:

“Well I think it was in the first year at Michigan that I had to confront my social identity as being Black and then also as Latino, because I always just self-identified as Dominican not as Black, but [in college] I had to also redefine myself by the color of my skin.” (*Fernando*)

“I think college was the main point in which I kind of transitioned in my identification of myself.” (*Gina*)

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<sup>36</sup> In this case I am including the experiences of Sydney, who moved to Connecticut to attend boarding school at age 13. (Due to the similarities of her pre-boarding school and boarding school experiences with the pre-college and college experiences of the other respondents.)

“...as I moved to New York for college when I was 18,...I was able to more identify with that Latino/a side of me, just because there were other people to sort of bounce that identity off of. And then probably at the time I realized that [being Black and Latina] could really coincide.” (*Alicia*)

Among these 5 respondents, two attended colleges located in the Midwest and three in NYC. Thus I argue that the location of the college is not the most important factor prompting the changes in self-identification. Rather, the changes in social contexts and situations (including different political and cultural sub-contexts) exist in relation/contrast to their pre-college environment. It is also worth noting that the two non-NYC respondents are included among the five discussed here. This suggests that, similar to the location of college, the ‘pre-college’ environment outside of NYC is not the decisive factor either.

## *Conclusion*

In conclusion I will briefly revisit the questions that guided my research and offer questions for future research. I chose these questions for the reason that while they speak to different issues—racial terminology, group membership, cultural boundaries, and political impact—each one addresses the importance of context in constructing and expressing AFRLAT identity in the US.

- Who is considered Afro-Latino/a?
- In what situations are AFRLATs identifying with the specific term of ‘AFRLAT’?
- What role does culture play in AFRLAT identity expression?
- What will be the impact of younger AFRLATs on the political and cultural ways racial-ethnic identities are considered in an increasingly multiracial United States?

### *1.0 Who is considered Afro-Latino/a?*

Moving beyond the definition of AFRLAT, *who* is considered AFRLAT has proved more difficult to answer than I initially expected. In one respect, it is relatively ‘easy’ to say who *can* be considered AFRLAT but much more difficult to determine who actually identifies with the term.

While others may consider someone AFRLAT, that individual may not use the term to self-identify. In other words, just because I say someone is AFRLAT does not mean *they* use that term. For example, in my recruitment of interview participants I was

referred to a woman who I was told identified as AFRLAT; however, she declined to participate in the study, explaining that she identified as Latin American and only used AFRLAT when the ‘Hispanic’ option was absent on race and ethnicity questionnaires.

As my interview transcripts demonstrate, to be considered AFRLAT does not necessitate identifying with the specific term. What is most important when addressing this question is identification with an Afro- heritage. While just three of my seven respondents used AFRLAT to as the primary term to indicate their racial-ethnic identity, all respondents positively identified with their Black/Afro-/African heritage. I therefore offer the basic definition that “First and most obviously Afro-Latin@ refers to those Latin@s of visible or self-proclaimed African descent”(Jiménez Román).

### *1.2 In what situations are AFRLATs identifying with the specific term of ‘Afro-Latino/a’?*

Answering this question largely involves a qualitative analysis of my interview transcripts. Drawing on responses to open-ended questions, I have argued that AFRLATs are asserting their Afro- heritage in a wider variety of situations. As my interview transcripts show, the majority of these situations are based in social exchanges with friends, family members and classmates to name a few of the most common examples. During several interviews, respondents described a number of social situations occurring in digital contexts. I generally defined ‘digital context’ as situations occurring online and more specifically, via social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. My interview with Alicia revealed an interesting observation about the microblog<sup>37</sup> site

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<sup>37</sup> *Microblogging* is generally defined as: “the act or practice of posting brief entries on a blog or social-networking Web site”.

Tumblr. When I asked her “Do you feel like people are using sites like Tumblr as a way to create their own space?” she replied

“Yea for sure. I mean I think that we can never rely on anyone else, we can never really rely on people who don’t understand yet create media representations of us and I don’t know why we would because, everyone has their own talents amongst their communities so...” (*Alicia*)

She continued, explaining, “...I think that it’s crucial for us to make our own representations of ourselves. It’s crucial just for us to imagine who we are and what we want to be so, it’s necessary. I love Tumblr because it’s simple and democratized in a certain kind of way. It’s a good way to be accessible. These [Afro-Latino/a] Tumblrs especially, are like places of resistance and of creation and...they’re important.” (*Alicia*)

In my research, race and ethnicity questionnaires emerged as another kind of situation where AFRLATs are employing the term. However, the ability to identify with the term ‘AFRLAT’ is sometimes hindered by a lack of adequate and/or open-ended categories that do not always allow for selection of multiple categories. Within my larger research I found the term being used in a number of social and political situations. Organizations such as ‘the afrolatin@ forum’ highlight the contextual intersectionality of ‘AFRLAT’ through their strong digital/online presence, various politically-oriented initiatives<sup>38</sup> and different academically focused conferences such as the recent conference “Refashioning Blackness: Contesting Racism in the Afro-Americas”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> “Check Both! ¡Chequea las dos!” campaign

Source: <http://www.afrolatinoforum.org/check-both-campaign.html>

<sup>39</sup> Source: <http://www.afrolatinoforum.org/past-events.html>

### *1.3 What role does culture play in AFRLAT identity expression?*

When I began my research I ambitiously posed this question. Yet rather than trying to answer the role of “culture” as a whole, I want to highlight some of the cultural elements that emerged in the study, namely how Latino/a cultural ‘group boundaries’ are delineated.

I begin with how linguistic ability establishes an important cultural link for AFRLATs whose Blackness often equates them to ‘foreignness’ (Hernández) within Latino/a communities. For AFRLATs an ability to speak Spanish often serves as a way to assert their cultural identity and maintain cultural ties to a larger community.

Conversely, while linguistic ability can *positively* reinforce AFRLAT cultural identity, perceived cultural boundaries can also be points of conflict. Of the two cultural groups respondents predominantly belonged to (Dominican and Puerto Rican) the collective group tendency to negate African heritage often places AFRLATs in a difficult position, particularly for those of visibly Afro- heritage.<sup>40</sup> These individuals may be both helped and hurt by the culture boundaries; on the one hand, their ‘Latino/a’<sup>41</sup> culture provides a sense of belonging or unity—shaped by such factors as family histories and cultural traditions. On the other hand, these perceived cultural boundaries may result in group membership of AFRLATs being called into question. This cultural tension emerged during my interviews and respondents described numerous situations where, based on their physical appearance, they were seen as non-Latino/a and had their Latino/a identity questioned.

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<sup>40</sup> Hair texture, phenotype and skin tone being three examples/visible ‘markers’

<sup>41</sup> Or more specifically, nationality, ex: Dominican, Ecuadorian

*1.4 What will be the impact of younger AFRLATs on the political and cultural ways racial-ethnic identities are considered in an increasingly multiracial United States?*

The future impact of younger AFRLATs on how racial-ethnic identities are seen in the US is something that ultimately remains to be seen. What is known is that the demographics in the United States will become increasingly multi-racial and that non-Hispanic<sup>42</sup> White-identifying individuals are rapidly becoming the minority. From a numerical perspective, younger AFRLATs will grow up in society where there are more people of multiracial backgrounds than not. Thus I conclude that being AFRLAT and *identifying* as such will become less marginal and invisible and more fully supported in different institutional settings, such as racial history questionnaires on college admissions forms and standardized tests). Drawing on my interview responses I further conclude that younger AFRLATs' refusal to exclude their Afro- heritage has the possibility of serving as an example for other marginalized or invisible-ized racial-ethnic identities.

In the end, this is a study of a term still in the process of definition and about a specific group of people shaped by unique life experiences.

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<sup>42</sup> Hispanic being the term used on the 2010 Census.

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## *Appendices*

### Appendix A: Selected General Interview Questions

#### COMO SER AFRO-LATINO/A

#### GENERAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

\*Questions taken/adapted from Dash Harris= DH

1. You say you identify as X. Has there been an evolution in how you identify?
  - a. Was there a specific event/experience that affected how you chose to identify?
2. What does the term “Afro-Latino/a” mean to you?
  - a. (Have you heard it before?)
  - b. (Do you ever use it for yourself? In what contexts?)
3. How were you raised to see your Latino/a identity?
4. How do you personally identify (as a Latino/a)? (DH)
  - a. What does being Latino/a mean to you?
5. Has speaking Spanish affected your identity?
  - a. (How so?)
6. Growing up, do you remember having to explain being both Black and Latino/a to other people/other kids?
7. How did where you grew up shape your identity?
8. How do you decide how you respond to the race/ethnicity categories on standardized tests/job applications/Census,etc?
9. Can you describe your family’s outlook on color? (DH)
10. What is ‘pelo malo’? (DH)
11. Have you experienced colorism?
12. Growing up did you feel you had to choose (Black or Latino/a)?
13. Do you think the media perpetuates a certain ‘Latino/a look’/image? (DH)
  - a. What is the stereotype? (in your opinion)
14. Have you ever heard the term “mejorar la raza” or “adelantar la raza”?

- a. What does it mean to you?
  - b. Have you had any experiences/heard comments relating to it?
15. (When applicable) Do you see/have you seen a prejudice (among Dominicans) against Haitians (in your experiences)?
16. (What do you think Trujillo's effect has been on how Dominicans in the US identify?)
17. Do you think people of your generation are self-identifying differently than older generations?

#### Appendix B: Sample Email to Potential Respondent

Hello [NAME],

I got your name from [NAME] and they said you'd be a good person to contact regarding my thesis.

I am currently a 4th year at the University of Michigan and am working on a senior thesis centering around Afro-Latin@s in the US from age 18-35. I am examining how Afro-Latin@s of this age group/generation are exploring and expressing their multiple identities, and how certain ways of their identity expression/exploration are distinctly different from past generations of Afro-Latin@s. I am structuring my overall research around 4-6 in-depth interviews/profiles of Afro-Latin@s between the ages of 18-35.

I would be so appreciative if we could discuss including your voice in my project. One file is a series of questions that you'd complete if you chose to participate and another

Attached is an abstract of the project.

Best,  
Jordan Kifer

#### Appendix C: Selected Interview Transcripts

*a. Sydney Interview Transcript*

Jordan Kifer: You say you identify as Black and Latina. Has there been an evolution in how you identify?

S: I talked about how when I was growing up I grew up in a neighborhood that was predominantly African-American/Black and Latino/a (Puerto Rican and Dominican mostly) so I grew up around Black culture, whatever that meant, African-American Black or Black culture, Black Latino/a Black. Then I went away to boarding school when I was 13 and I went to preparatory school in Connecticut, like I got an academic scholarship to go and all of a sudden I was in New England. And it was just a very shocking encounter I think with my Blackness and my 'otherness' and a lot of other ways too. Being Latina, being queer, being Black, all in the same place where you finally had to confront it, you know? So, it was this realization that everyone else around you was White and that you'd never really had to think about your Blackness [before], at least that's how it was for me. So that was a really interesting time for me I think I really had to reflect on how my Blackness was, had shaped me up to that point, how that was part of my identity and whether or not I had embraced that and if I would continue to and you know, how that made me different from everyone around me. I mean when you're a teenager I guess that's important.

JK: Was there a (specific) time that you remember at boarding school where someone was confused by your identity?

S: I think that's happened to me a lot of times, not just necessarily at boarding school. But yeah there were encounters where people didn't know where to place me or they didn't get me or...because Dominicans can look like anything so...

JK: Was it more through their behavior or did they explicitly ask you "What are you?"

S: Most people would ask me at that point, I think. I was really involved in starting a Diversity committee and being part of the dialogue or, starting a dialogue about something that nobody had really talked about at the school before. So, people were curious openly, especially adults like faculty members and people that you would expect to know about this kind of stuff, did ask and have some questions. And students my age, some of them asked, some of them just assumed that I was Black like African-American Black and didn't really have any more classification of what that meant, so they didn't ask me like, where my parents were from and what it meant to be Latina and Black. I mean at that point I wasn't really identifying (outwardly) as such, even though I felt like I was both I wasn't talking about it. So I guess other people weren't asking me about it either, in that great detail.

And then NYU was a curious place to go to school..

JK: Did you do your undergrad there?

S: I did my undergrad and my grad at NYU. I wanted to go to NYU since I was 8 years old so when I got in I was hype, like hype hype. I didn't know what that meant in terms

of going back home, like going back to my home city but I wasn't thinking about that, I was just like this is the school I've always wanted to go to and I need to do this. And it's interesting because I guess my expectations were to come back to a place where I had the same experiences with my Blackness as I did before I had gone to boarding school, that I would be exposed to the same people and that my city would be just like it was before I left. But it wasn't like that at all. I think that probably had to do with the Black population at NYU and the Latino/a population at NYU and just constructing community around identity and how difficult and challenging that can be sometimes for us at that type of school.

So I think I looked to study abroad in order to...I looked to travel in order to find opportunities to see something else. Because I was so submerged in this predominantly White university setting, it was just, it was very difficult to think about and have conversations about all this stuff. And it did happen, there were forums for us created by us and I definitely participated in that, but at that point I was so self-reflective and I was so into figuring out who I was and what that was about and it was a very personal journey of discovery in terms of my identity that I didn't, I don't think I was very involved in the group work part of it.

I mean I was there, I wanted to be there and I knew how important it was and I was at the protests and I was doing Latino/a social justice work and I was working at women's organizations and doing public policy work. I was definitely getting my hands dirty in terms of the issue. But I wasn't, I think for me, in terms of my own identity and discovering what that meant to me, it was very personal. I wasn't prepared to come to some Q&A with some guys and talk about my own Blackness, I wasn't prepared to do that in college when I was an undergrad. And that could be a reaction to how much, like how different, how much I stuck out in high school and how much I had to deal with that and so it was just time to come down from that, to think about it and digest it.

I think that was happening for me at a time when everybody else wanted to really be vocal about it and I was kind of opting out of the group thing and had to just do it by myself. And it's good, I think that that really helped me, and I'm such an independent person and at the same time I'm so involved with people on a day to day basis and I have a really strong and wide friend circle so it doesn't seem like something that I would opt into (self-reflection).

JK: What does the term 'Afro-Latino/a' mean to you? Have you heard it before? In what contexts would you use it?

S: I mostly have heard the term in an academic setting, like more in journals and...I guess that I haven't had the conversations and I've been so reflective of the different processes. I'm reading and researching on my own so that's where I'm going to see it because I'm not having the dialogue. I mean I have a lot of friends who are Afro-Latinas, who are Black and Latina but don't necessarily refer to themselves as such so even within my own experiences I haven't heard it.

JK: Would your friends identify as Latina or would they say 'I'm a Black Latina' or do you not really know how they identify?

S: They say 'Latina' mostly. I mean I just think it's one of those things that sometimes you're not even thinking about or that people haven't really taken the time to think about, (at least the people I know). It's not an important part of their day-to-day activities, they don't confront it [their Blackness] often enough to really think about it or it doesn't affect them in a way that makes it necessary for them to really take a stance. And maybe I'm wrong, maybe that is true and they think about it. And there's all these other issues of rejecting Blackness and accepting Whiteness, or believing that Latino/a is better than Black and so by only identifying with that [Latino/a]. I mean I definitely have experience with people that are like that so I know that that's real.

JK: How were you raised to see your Latina identity? Or I guess what does being Latina mean to you (now)?

S: Now...man that's loaded. I guess I don't think about it because it's such a...

JK: How did you see it before you went to boarding school?

SB: So before boarding school and even during it I think I was just... I would say that a lot of the customs and traditions and speaking the language, those aspects are really important to us in terms of, you know, being a family that...being raised by a woman who really values her culture. I think my mom was very Americanized too, I can compare how much more 'Dominican' some of my friends were raised than me. There's a difference so...When we were growing up we learned Spanish and learned about culture and history of DR and heard stories and stuff like that. But it wasn't, we weren't submerged to...maybe I'm just doing this by comparison and that's not fair because there were a lot of things that we did that were very Dominican and very Latino/a. Like, my mom is an event planner and I remember she would organize these festivals in the Heights, so when I was younger I spent a lot of time in the Heights around a lot of Dominicans, speaking Spanish and doing really Dominican things; the things that we would eat or the way that I would dress, I was very influenced by that culture. And that's a very Dominican-New York culture and it's Latino/a in the sense that it's Latino/a in the US but it's different from the culture that my mother was a part of and that she grew up with in DR. And all the same, I think it's like a first generation Latino/a experience. New York is very unique so that was important. I had a lot of Latino/a friends I went to school with, like Dominicans and Puerto Ricans and a lot of other Latino/as too so they helped to shape who I was.

JK: How did where you grew up shape your identity?

S: Hmm, well I love New York, I want to do something about how much I love New York, there's something I need to do I feel like, creatively, that speaks to my love of New York, because it runs very deep. I think that travelling helped me see that, helped me see how much of who I am is reflective of where I'm from, and I love it. It [NYC] did, I



think it confused me. I think it set up expectations for me that were unrealistic because it is so diverse, because it's such a unique place that lets you believe that this is what it's like everywhere. So when I went to Connecticut I was not prepared, New York didn't prepare me for that. I had a bunch of friends from everywhere here and when I got there I was like 'Wait, wha? It's not like that everywhere?' so I think it just, it made it difficult for me. Being raised in New York made it difficult for me to understand my own Blackness anywhere else, because here it made so much sense and I didn't have to explain it. I could say "Oh I'm a Dominican American first-generation New York Latina", I could say that and it's understood because there's so many other women like me, there's so many other people that fall into those same categories and you can really narrow it down to that population and still have it be a lot of us that form this group, you know? But not anywhere else. It's like anywhere else-I'm Black and that wasn't enough for me. I wasn't prepared to have my identity reduced to just one thing.

So I think growing up in New York really set up some false expectations for me but it also gave me such backbone that I could defend myself. A lot of my ability to talk about it and defend who I am and be good with that comes from this place, from a place that's so tough that it doesn't really allow you to just sit back and be called anything, you know? So I love that about New York, it really did influence who I was. It influenced my preferences too. I mean, I grew up in Black culture so it,... I don't know, if I would've grown up in Texas or whatever would I like country music? I don't know. Because a lot of the things that I love and feel passionate about I can attest to where I grew up and who I grew up around.

JK: When you have to respond to the race/ethnicity categories on things like job applications, or the Census, how do you decide to respond?

S: I do respond, and I respond to the category questions as Black. And right now I haven't, it's interesting because I am in the job application process-I'm applying for jobs and looking for jobs and I'm checking the box almost on a daily basis. So now the boxes are, or what I see lately, like "Black OR Latino/a" is one category and "Other" is another category. So I could check, I check that box even though it really bothers me that it's just Black OR Latino/a. So I check that box in order to, especially since, I mean any job or opportunity that I'm really looking into now, it's just important that we're in the space at all, you know? So, for me it's like, 'yeah I'm here and I'm also this and I'm also this'. It's more a statement of I'm in here, like I'm competitive too, even though I think that the perception is that I'm not. So yeah, I check the box, as many options as I have when checking the box, I check the box.

JK: Can you describe your family's outlook on color?

S: You would've loved this, I have a good one for you. So, there's always a really big divide between my mother's idea on Blackness and my dad's idea on Blackness and it was always a stark difference. I mean, it was understood that my father really embraced his Blackness and encouraged it and it was really obvious that my mother didn't, that she was on the other side of that spectrum. So, yesterday my phone was on the table and my

girlfriend called, (she's Black, like all of my girlfriends have been) and her picture comes up on my phone when she calls. So my mom saw it, for the first time, or she saw the picture for the first. She doesn't really like to talk to me about who I'm dating because she has such a problem with queerness, and she rejects it so much that I'm unable to talk to her about it at all. So I think her encounters with it in terms of me are very, few and far between but they're also very heated. When they come up they're like episodes, you know. So the first thing she said was "That's such a disgusting picture" and then the second thing she said was "And she's Black".

So I kind of went crazy, like I had to really... I had to think about so many things, I had to pull up so many archives to calm myself down because I don't have,... I understand [her] coming from a very traditionally Dominican and very straight-edge and, you know, traditional in the sense of our culture does not accept this, in general it does not accept queerness so it was very challenging for me to say, to defend myself, and her and our relationship at the same time, when it was on the basis of race. I couldn't understand... It just made me see more clearly how this is always going to be a problem, you know, and it's always been a problem. So it was a very difficult conversation to have and she was like "Oh why can't you"... And I was like "What do you want me to do? Date somebody who's White like you?" Her husband's not White but he's from Venezuela. He's a Latino but he's racially White, he's not Black and for her she thinks that's better. She said "How do you think you're going to forward the race if you date someone that's Black?" I've had so many conversations like this with her that I have, I'm almost at the point where I've given up. It's like, you have your opinions and I have my opinions but we're going to have to continue on in very different lanes because we obviously don't agree about this and I'm tired of talking about it. And so the next solution to whiteness was "Oh why don't you date a Latina?" but the last rung on the ladder was Black, you know, that's her opinion. And we talked about a lot of things, I was like "I've seen the world, I've traveled a lot and I've seen a lot of things and I've seen a lot of women and this is the one that I want."

So to her it's difficult to understand why I would, in her opinion, take steps back by dating someone who's Black. So you can see her opinion. And I'm not sure if that carries across every relationship that I've had because I have friends that are Black, that are around that she embraces and that she respects and accepts like her own children. But when it comes to me dating someone, that's not acceptable. It can happen as acquaintances but you know, they can't be *involved* with you, you know because, dating someone who's Black is... that's considered lowly (to her). With her it's not something that's specific to her. It is something that is true for a lot of old school Dominicans who think that they're better than anybody who's Black. So it's just something that's always been true for her, with us. And my dad on the other hand, I can vividly remember I would be like "Dad come on! Buy me some M&Ms, you have to buy me M&Ms, you have to!" and he'd say "All I have to do is stay Black and die". He used to say that all the time and I think that the only positive views of Blackness we ever got was from my dad. We would watch Soul Train in the morning with him and like, I mean, and we still do that kind of shit. Me and my brother grew up seeing people who were Black, people were Black and Latino/a, we didn't see that as problematic. But my mother did.

And then she was asking me about the photo of the girl and was like, “So do you, are you dating both of them now?” and I was like “No I’m only dating one person” and she said “Oh so you left that Black girl to be with this Black girl?” And then she showed me a picture of her white husband and I was like “Ew, that’s not...that doesn’t do anything for me”. She touts herself to be this incredible person but she’s vicious, I mean she does so many things to drive the knife in. And that’s personal but her views on Blackness are through the roof, they’re very very negative and they’ll never change. Me and my brother have given her lots of opportunities to change that and it just doesn’t happen.

So our positivity [on Blackness] definitely doesn’t come from my mom’s side of the family.

JK: What is ‘pelo malo’?

S: Pelo malo—that’s my hair. Pelo malo is hair that’s not straight, it’s hair that’s wild and that you can’t tame and that you don’t relax and it’s natural hair. Your hair comes out of your head the way it is and it’s nappy or it’s kinky or it’s curly—that’s pelo malo. Hair that’s not straight (to a traditional Dominican woman) is, to my mother for example, that’s pelo malo. And to me that’s such an important conversation, the hair conversation. I’m tired of having it because I’ve been like the spokesperson for Dominican women and hair and I’m just tired because I don’t *want* it to be a conversation anymore. It is, it just is what it is! Like I don’t want to talk about it, I don’t want to tell you what products I use. I don’t want to have the conversation, I just want it to be. And when it is I’m gonna be happy because everybody can just chill about it. Hair is a super special part of my identity but it also is a part of Latina identity, Latino/a culture—the representation of our hair on TV...it’s all multi-layered but...

JK: Did you ever relax your hair?

S: I never did but I straightened my hair. I would blow dry my hair so when I was little my hair was curly, like my hair was curly my whole life. I remember my mom would always want my hair straight and when I would go to my dad’s house, he would make me wet it so that it would be curly and I would be so happy, it was liberating. I remember that, you know, I remember in my dad’s house I had gel and stuff for curly hair and then here [mother’s house] I would have to go to the salon. I would have to go to the salon every week and spend \$20 dollars and it was straight and I was too cool for school with my straight hair but it wasn’t liberating for me. As soon as the weekend came I would go to my dad’s house and I would wet it and it would be curly and I would be like “Oh it’s so cool.” I remember I felt so fly with my curly hair. But it was sad now that I think about that, you know. I wasn’t really thinking about it as a reflection of how I could embrace my Blackness in one space and totally have to reject it in another space.

When I first started to wear my hair exclusively curly, like 2004,...yeah I would say 2004 I was like, “I’m not blow drying my hair anymore, like, I’m going on a full-out war” I was feeling rebellious and I was like, this is gonna be the way that I’m telling you that I’m Black and I’m Latina. Yeah I was on a rampage. So I stopped blow-drying my hair

and I remember she [my mother] was really not feeling it. Then like a month later she was like “Actually I like it” and now she loves it. Now she says “Oh I wish I had hair like that” you know?

JK: Does she have hair closer to “pelo bueno”?

S: Not even, she relaxes it and so that’s the thing that now she has ‘pelo bueno’ because she’s always relaxed her hair. She doesn’t wear her hair curly or natural, she just blow dries it every week.

I straightened my hair like a week ago just because now I feel so free that I ...like I feel like I don’t need to make a statement anymore, everybody knows about my hair and everybody’s cool with it and everybody’s chillin. There’s actually an article about my hair online, so when I finally did that article, that was the last thing. I was like now I can do whatever I want because now I care so little about what everybody thinks about it. When I blow dried it last week my mother’s husband was like “This is how you’re supposed to look, this is the way you look beautiful. Not with that crazy hair.”

JK: Do you think the media perpetuates a certain ‘Latin@ look’/image and what is the stereotype? (in your opinion)

S: Yeah I definitely think that...I think the interesting part is that I see a little peek these days of a different Latina. I’m seeing maybe like a curvier Latina or maybe she’s a little darker skinned, but there’s definitely women, all the women that are in the media right now that are Latina have very...they all fit a mold, you know? Like even Sofia Vergara or Penelope Cruz. I mean I love these women, these women are hilarious and that’s just who they are but that’s not who we all are, so that’s what’s frustrating. Latinas are not all six-foot models with this Coca-Cola bottle shape body and this straight flowy\* hair and these little accents. We’re not like that, you know, so there’s so many misconceptions with using one person as the model. And we’re not in the space enough yet to be able to have varied representations of us.

White people, you can find any array of White person on TV, any channel you can find like, Honey Boo Boo to like, blonde people...you can find anything, any representation of a White person that you would like to see, you can probably find it on TV right now. But that’s not true for Latino/as and especially Latinas, and especially true for Black Latinas, like I don’t know any Black Latinas in TV, you know? So you know, the whole Zoë Saldana thing being in this movie and being cast in a Black role and ‘oh she’s not Black’, but she is Black, she’s a self-identified Black Latina. That whole conversation is ludicrous to me and that’s going to keep happening because we’re not able to understand how someone can be Black and Latino/a. We’re not understanding why saying that someone is Black is not limited to just being Black African American Black. You and I have talked about the slave trade and how that was the beginning of the Black diaspora, and how there’s a Black population that exists in so many Spanish-speaking countries. And even though they have different cultures and some speak different languages but there are, just by definition of the route of the slave trade [and] where that left Africans

just logistically tells you that there are Black people in other places. So excluding other Blacks from Black culture, from Black identity is denying that there are Blacks outside of an African American subtitle, and that's obviously not true. But then it also requires a responsibility of Latinos to start accepting that and to start seeing themselves as Black and start identifying in positive ways with that and I think that that's what's going to take a long time.

JK: Can you talk about terms like “avanzar la raza” or “mejorar la raza” and what they mean to you?

S: I've heard my mom use this term so many times in my life. I remember when I was younger I used to let it slide, I didn't really know what it meant, I was not listening or I was not concerned about what she was saying. But the continuity of her dialogue really upsets me because I can't believe that she hasn't moved on from that topic of 'bettering the race' by marrying someone who to her is considered to be higher in the scale of goodness and success than someone who's Black. So I think for her the lowest thing that I could do is be with someone who's Black. Black is the bottom, that's the worst I could do. So I will be taking two steps back if I marry someone who's Black. If I marry someone who's Latino/a that's like “Well at least they're your own kind” and so you're staying within your spaces, it's not a step backward and it's not a step forward so you're really just in the same spot but that's better than going down to Blackness. And then marrying White is like, “This is the dream”, this is what we're supposed to strive to. This is why our hair needs to be straight, this is why we need to go to college and find ourselves a White man and have like, White kids. And that will be, *adelantar la raza*, that will be the definition of advancing the race, and that's what's important. It's just a very disgusting thought to someone, I mean, to anyone who has a brain, I think it's disgusting. But to someone who's always thinking about these things and considers themselves to be progressive and intelligent, ...it bothers me to know that someone so close to you thinks that way, someone you are a part of, whose DNA is inside of you, can have such opposing views to you because, how do you come *of* that and then rise from that. It's crazy. I'm happy, that's great and I'm proud but there's so much work to be done even within your own household, there are people still have these ideas about Blackness that are ludicrous.

JK: Do you see or have you seen a prejudice by Dominicans against Haitians, specifically? And also what do you think Trujillo's effect has been on how Dominicans in the US identify or view their Blackness?

S: I think with Dominicans and Haitians there's always been this struggle for who's better and how different are we and, “stay on your side” because you're lower on the scale than we are. And I think Trujillo's dictatorship had the most influence on that first, in the way that we saw Blackness and the way that Dominicans saw themselves. For him to be able to brainwash almost an entire generation of Dominicans and eliminate progressive Dominicans who were working towards rights of Blacks in DR and in Haiti—to get rid of that so, you're removing the intellectuals who are like the centerpiece of guaranteeing that the next generation of Dominicans would have a better

understanding of who they were in the world and who they were in relation to other people, to eliminate them. And then also convince everyone in the country that we're better because we were conquered by the Spanish and so that makes us European, that Haitians are Black and that that's not good, definitely influenced the way that my grandparents thought and the way that they taught my parents and the way that they still continue to carry themselves so I think that the dictatorship definitely influenced the way that Dominicans think about themselves as better than Black and also because of proximity to Haiti I think his [Trujillo's] dictatorship really sparked that division and that hatred towards Blacks, particularly Haitians because they were next door, they were an easy target, you know, and because people were starting to marry each other and create mixed-blood children and that was not acceptable to Trujillo.

So I've never seen, for me in terms of seeing it, I can't remember a conversation that I've had with a Dominican who specifically said something about a Haitian person, no. But I can say that I've definitely had conversations with people, Dominicans, who are of...who will call out Black people and talk so much shit about them and are Black themselves but don't consider themselves to be Black so they're Dominican and that trumps everything so once I'm Dominican and once I'm Latino/a, and you're not identifying as Black, I'm already better than you. Because if you're Black and I'm Dominican it doesn't matter if I'm a dark skinned or light skinned Dominican, because I'm better than you,...I'm Latino/a and Latino/a is a better race.

So that's the angle these arguments are coming from and I've definitely heard a lot of boys, friends of my brother's who would always come through and a lot of them are light skinned Dominicans and they're like "I would never date a Black girl ever, just because she's Black." There's no other reason, she could be the most beautiful girl in the world and because she's Black they're not dating her or like the Beyonces, even women on TV, the women that everyone fantasizes about, they're like "I would never date that". It runs deep and yes it has seeped into this generation. I would love to say that "OMG I'm first generation Dominican-American and because of that I went to school and I had all these ideas and I know that I'm marrying Black and like, Black Power and I studied abroad oh shit" and I want to believe that everybody is following suit but it's not true. There's still so much work to be done, even within my household and within my cousins or people that I don't see all the time that are being influenced by Dominicans who think this way, like, they're just transferring the thoughts down. And for people who are easily influenced, who don't try or have the opportunities to really think about it. I think that it's easier for them to be brainwashed and to think that Black is bad and that they're better.

JK: Has speaking Spanish affected your identity and if so, how?

S: I think speaking Spanish definitely affects my identity. It makes me feel closer to my nationality, makes me feel closer to my family. I'm happy and proud that my mom thought about that and she thought I want my kids to speak Spanish and I'm going to teach them how to speak Spanish. And I feel the same, I want to teach my kids how to speak Spanish and about culture and everything that I learned from my mother I want to keep passing that down because it's important. And I don't want them to forget that stuff.

[Speaking Spanish] definitely influenced me. I think where I see it the most is what I chose to do with my life, where I chose to study and the way that I've lined myself up to work. It affects my choices, it affects where I want to live, it affects a lot of things. Because I feel connected to a people through language and through culture so it's definitely important to me and to my identity.

JK: Do you think people of your generation are self-identifying differently than older generations?

S: I think we are self-identifying in a lot of different ways. I think that this generation... I think what I'm seeing is such... even just our trends as a generation, even just social media platforms and our obsession with any device that makes you feel like a superstar or that you have a platform to say anything that you need to say gives you such liberty to say "I'm here, this is who I am and this is how I feel and I identify with this thing or I saw this documentary and I really identify with that". You have that space now and I think that's because, because we've created these spaces for ourselves we have more to say, about who we are, about what we love, about what we do and where we want to be. **So yes I think we're identifying in ways that are more specific and in ways that are more detailed that are more classified, that are individual than ever before.** Because now everybody wants to be different and that's cool (that probably makes us all the same) yet at the same time we're having conversations where it's not just Black and White anymore, we're really stepping outside of that and I'm happy about that. So yes I do think that we're identifying differently from previous generations. If I asked my mom "What are you?" she'd say Dominican, there's nothing else to that. The answer to that question is that she's Latina, she's Dominican and for me it's so many things you know. I'm Black, I'm Dominican, I'm a New Yorker. I'm all these things that she would never choose to say or that are not as important to her as they are to me in terms of being able to vocalize them.

*b. Javier Interview Transcript*

Jordan Kifer: You say that you identify as mixed, has there been an evolution in how you identify? Was there an event or experience that helped shape how you identify?

J: There has definitely been an evolution for me personally in terms of how I think of myself. The odd thing about it is that as far as I can remember I've always, even when I was a little kid, identified as mixed. It was something that I couldn't avoid, my father (which is the Dominican side of my heritage) is very dark and he's also part Haitian and my mother (which is the Puerto Rican side) is very light, and her heritage is also part Spaniard. So there was this really distinct understanding that I was a mixed-race child. What did kind of feel a bit more volatile was the, not so much about race but about which side of the family I identified more with, and for a lot of time, especially after my parents divorced when I was 7, I identified much more with the Puerto Rican side of my family because they were the ones who were always around me. I mean, there were times that I would even say that I was Puerto Rican and just not say the Dominican to people, and that wasn't really because I was ashamed of it but because I had been raised primarily

around Puerto Ricans. I think because of that there was a slight nuanced feeling that maybe I was a little bit more tied to that heritage than the other side but as I got older it kind of started to balance out. I'm trying to figure out if there's anything specific that made that happen and the only thing I can really point to is reconnecting with my dad after he was out of my life for a while. Getting to know him and getting to know his family and hearing stories about that side of the family just made me appreciate that there was a distinct blend of two different groups of people that made me.

JK: For you, what does the term 'Afro-Latino/a' mean to you, have you heard it before and would you ever use it for yourself in any contexts?

J: The term 'Afro-Latino/a' to me is...I find it problematic, to be honest. I think that in some cases, at least for me and my knowledge and understanding of the issue and the people I've been raised around, to signify Afro-Latino/a is almost demarcating a line where you don't need a line. Especially for me coming from a background where most of my friends are Latino/as typically from the Caribbean, the idea that anyone would have to call out the fact that they're Afro-Latino/a is sort of like, well we all are so why do you bring that to the surface when it's just a matter of fact. So to me I personally wouldn't ever use it but at the same time I wouldn't run away from it. If someone called me Afro-Latino I'd be like "Well duh" because I just feel like that's something that you have to accept, that that's part of your heritage, not just for Latino/as in the Caribbean but in other places. There's plenty of mixing that happens over time and...I definitely understand the need to identify with it if it's a super strong part of your culture and your upbringing but for me personally I think that it is kind of a misnomer.

JK: How were you raised to see your Latino identity?

J: Super proud of it. I think I was instilled with a very healthy and maybe sometimes unhealthy sense of pride in being Latino/a and that really came from growing up in a really strong tightly knit Latino family that had been in New York for a few generations and had settled in really well and was upwardly mobile at the time. My mom works for the postal system, her aunt teaches at a college here, uncle owned a pharmacy in Washington Heights, so there was this kind of sense that we were one of the ones that made it, in a lot of ways. And basically every summer I also went back to Puerto Rico and spent the summer there, so there was this balance between feeling assimilated here in New York but still very proud and then going back to Puerto Rico to really connect with the roots of where we were from. So it was always very present and very positive, it was never cast in a negative way or as something that I had to downplay.

JK: When you have to respond to the race and ethnicity category on things like job applications or standardized tests or the Census, how do you decide how to respond to those categories?

J: Even with those, (this is going to sound really crazy) I tend to...it really depends. I'm remembering times when I was much younger that I kind of screwed around with people and would check the 'Other' box and write in something stupid. But I think now



typically, it's a struggle because there isn't a box that encompasses both Latino/a and mixed race, it's always just, the Hispanic moniker is always in there so... As far as I can remember the last few times I've actually checked the 'Other' box and written in 'Latino Mixed heritage' just because I feel like that's something that's missing from those forms that needs to be there and is going to continue to need to be there and to be there in the future.

JK: Can you describe your family's outlook on color?

J: So I definitely spent more time with my mom's side of the family. I think like very many Puerto Rican families, like very many Latino-Caribbean families, their outlook on color is basically the most fucked up thing ever and is difficult to wrap your head around. So their outlook on color essentially is, it's almost like there's this unofficial caste system based on color and the lighter you are the nicer and prettier and cooler you are, and the darker you are the worse off you are. But at the same time there's this really nuanced set of discriminatory POVs that don't always get expressed when you think they will be. For my mom, I can remember her touting to her friends how my skin tone was so great because I didn't turn out super dark like my dad or I can remember times when I got older that my mom would jokingly (but not really joking) tell me not to bring home any dark skinned girl, when I was starting to date. At the same time she actively prefers darker skinned men when it comes to her personal romantic preferences. So it was a huge set of really conflicting weird difficult to understand signals from my family that I think over time as I took it upon myself to self-direct through learning more about my background and I came to understand the grasp of the internalized racism that a lot of Latino/a cultures have because of the odd mix of different backgrounds. That's something that was always present and difficult to parse out and it's something that I think I'm just now at 26 starting to come to understand.

JK: Have you experienced colorism? Have you had any specific experiences around that?

J: Not really. I think the stories I have of issues around that are all very typical of walking into a friend's household and he is Dominican and his family's super dark and the mom makes a comment about how fair-skinned I am or the opposite of going to someone's house who's lighter than me and then cracking a joke about how dark I am. At least in my experience I've never experienced what I would call a significant event around that. It's always been this kind of ever present thing.

JK: For you what is 'pelo malo'?

J: Something that my mom was always thankful that I didn't get from my dad. It's funny because that's something that would always crop up into conversations depending on who was there, whether it was my family, a friend's family and the one thing that I always got to hear from that was to be thankful that I didn't have 'pelo malo' and that I got my mom's side of the family's hair, and that I didn't have dense, as my mom would call it 'kinky' hair. I obviously didn't have to deal that much with it because of, I guess genetics but it's was one of those things where I was like "Well what does that actually

mean?” and to me, it was always so interesting because growing up in New York, (at least where I grew up) was right alongside a lot of African-Americans. It never dawned on me... I never understood it until I got older and really started to dig into it that I began to understand what people were saying. There was something about it that I knew kind of instinctively not to perpetuate.

I remember there were a lot of schoolyard fights between say, a Puerto Rican friend and a Black friend and the Puerto Rican friend would invariably say something about the Black friend's hair and then it turned into this massive undertaking by stupid kids to try and explain what that meant, no one knew what it actually meant, no one knew the actual definition. I just remember it being a *thing* and kind of being like a school yard thing, a school yard insult and to me it was like, ‘You’re making fun of him for having that kind of hair but I know your cousin and your cousin has that exact kind of hair, what the hell are you saying?’”

JK: Do you think where you grew up shaped your identity?

J: Yeah I think growing up in New York definitely influenced my identity. I think it allowed me to... Growing up in New York and how I grew up in New York definitely shaped my identity so on the scale of New York City, being in a place that contains such a multiplicity of different backgrounds and people gave me an appreciation of how you can contain and hold inside of yourself different ideas about yourself and even different conflicting ideas about yourself, the same way that the city holds conflicting groups of people. And I think the way I grew up added something interesting which is that I grew up in the Bronx, my mom is a schoolteacher here and she really invested a lot of time and energy in exposing me to arts and culture. There wasn't a weekend that we didn't like, go to the aquarium in Queens or go to the museum down in Manhattan and there was a lot of, especially as I got older and started to cultivate groups of friends in different parts of the city, there's a lot of code-switching that I went through. So, when I was with my friends who were a little higher up on the class system I had to adjust to that and talk in ways that they would understand and talk about things that they would understand and when I'd come back to my corner in the Bronx I could switch back to what was comfortable and acceptable there. So there was a lot of having to navigate different types of people here in New York that I felt had contributed a sense of being okay with the fact that there's just different streams of consciousness that filter into what makes me what I am and sometimes they blend together and sometimes they don't and it's okay to let that happen and it's okay to bounce between them when necessary. Ultimately I think it's given me an appreciation for the full spectrum of different cultures and ideas and ideologies that make me who I am.

JK: Growing up do you remember having to explain being of mixed heritage but also being of mixed *Latino* heritage to kids?

J: I think that only really came up later on in life, it came up really during adolescence and the process of explaining it usually came from, it actually came from my Latino friends talking to each other and it usually came from a lighter skinned Latino making fun of a darker skinned one and everyone kind of ganging up and saying ‘Yes you may

be light skinned but odds are you probably have some African heritage', and that was typical conversation that happened around that. And then also there were situations and opportunities where you'd be hanging out with a few of your Black friends and they'd actually initiate "You guys are Black too" and that again was like a whole opportunity and conversation around the different streams that make up Latino/a culture and so those conversations were always very interesting for me because they were very teachable moments. It was never a kind of argumentative sort of thing, it was always a situation where someone had either pointed out something that they didn't realize was just as much a part of them or someone saw something that they recognized was a part of them that we had never discussed so, those were always really interesting good times because it led to, at least in the circles of friends that I had, it led to kind of a greater understanding between our peers and that was something I really value a lot because I have friends who never ever thought to tackle that issue with their friends around that time. It was something that even as adults now they kind of struggle with understanding their backgrounds or their feelings around Latino/a culture.

JK: Do you think the media perpetuates a certain Latino/a look or image? If you do, what is that stereotype in your opinion?

J: It definitely does perpetuate a certain stereotype and I think that stereotype has been around for a while and there's a very particular Latino look especially when it comes to (let's say) typecasting for mainstream television and movies. I think a lot of it's... I would almost hesitate to separate it from just general issues around presentation for all dark skinned peoples. I think that, at least from my knowledge of having worked really closely in the media industry for a while, they're too stupid. Most people are too dumb to actually think about whether or not they need to discern between a dark skinned Latino/a character and a light skinned Latino/a character and the kind of stereotypes that go along with each. It's literally just a blanket issue of wanting to lean more heavily on casting light skinned people in general. So in that sense I think what's more interesting is, when you get right down to it, that's part of why a lot of Latino/as that I know aren't engaged by advertising or movies because even when they are fed a kind of a token character or even when it's not tokenized, even when it's just a fantastically written, amazing thing whether it's in an ad or something, it's typically the usual light skinned Latino/a and that only speaks to a sliver of the experience and the backgrounds that we all have so, what's interesting to me is how that's going to play out and if there'll ever be a point where that will change, because I'm not sure, because again there is that kind of blanket bias against dark skinned people in general. So yeah there's definitely a stereotype and it's definitely the light skinned Ricky Martin of the universe. Whether or not that will actually change is tied to those larger issues.

JK: Have you ever heard terms like "adelantar la raza" or "avanzar la raza", ideas surrounding 'bettering the race'?

J: Not a ton that I can recall. I've definitely heard the phrases before and have heard people say those things before but it was never something that I heard often and it was definitely never something that I heard in my own family. And to be honest, because I

never heard it that much it was just one of those things that kind of fell by the wayside and that I never really delved into.

JK: Do you think that people of your generation are approaching their Latino/a identities differently than older generations?

J: Yeah definitely. I think that amongst my peers and the people that I encounter. The challenge that I think our previous generations had to fight was finding ways to maintain a sense of their identity while trying to... There was almost a desire to save face, I think that's a holdover from even another generations step back and especially in the US and discrimination against Latino/as is much more heavily embedded in the culture. And I think for my generation, it's really a struggle for claiming and owning and being able to control your identity. It's about finding a balance between feeling very very American and feeling very very Latino/a, and trying to understand and reconcile the tension points that exist between those two things. And that goes for friends of mine who don't speak a word of Spanish just as much as it goes for friends who probably speak more Spanish than English is the feeling that you, because of where you were born or because of where you were raised, you now have this third stream that's been introduced which is, you know, you're not just Puerto Rican or you're not just Dominican and even within that, you're not just made up of the different streams that make up those groups but you now have this American thing in the mix that adds its' own set of complications and issues. And so I would say that that's the kind of challenge for my generation—reconciling yet another set of issues that come along with being young and Latino/a in America.

JK: Has speaking Spanish affected your identity? Or how you connect to your culture?

J: I don't think so, I really don't. I mean, personally it hasn't and maybe that's because I primarily speak Spanish in the household then kind of in passing with certain friends. In terms of how it connects me to the culture I think again because it's primarily spoken with me in front of family members, I can't pinpoint any major impact that it's had besides kind of keeping me connected to generations that came before me.

### *c. Gina Interview Transcript*

Jordan Kifer: You say that you identify as biracial but also as Guatemalan and Black, has there been an evolution in how you identify or something that's shaped how you identify?

G: I think college really shaped how I identify just because I started to learn about my identities so I guess parsing through which identities fit me and which don't so for example, the term 'African-American' I don't think that term is really identifying because I have no idea what part of Africa my ancestors were from or if it was even Africa for real on my Dad's side, so, I'm Black. And I think that that's an identity that is, if you empower yourself to take it on and you charge it to mean something to you then... I think that in college I've kind of realized that it's okay to not have a specific origin. I have the Guatemalan origin but in terms of my "African-American" quote on quote roots

I don't know what part of Africa my dad's family was from. I think college was the main point in which I kind of transitioned in my identification of myself.

JK: And before coming to college, what did you generally use [to identify]?

G: Well before college I just said I was mixed, but not half Black, half White but half Black half Spanish or half Black half Hispanic. So I think less focused on the Guatemalan part and more on the Hispanic so I guess I got more focused with my identity in college. I mean I had mostly Black friends all through high school and in college but I think I got more in touch with my Hispanic side in college so maybe that's changed the way I see myself.

JK: What does the term 'Afro-Latino/a' mean to you? Have you heard it before? And would you ever use it for yourself or no?

G: I don't really know anything about the term, I didn't know it was an actual term until I was invited to participate in this study. But I think that it means someone from African and Latino descent but I would not use that to define myself just because of the previously mentioned fact that I don't know where any of my family was from in Africa.

JK: How were you raised to see your identity as Latina (or Hispanic)? Or if identifying as Guatemalan is more specific?

G: I was raised to see it as a gift so I think culturally speaking the language was always instilled in me that that's just been a skill that God gave me or my family, that I inherited and so I should use it. So I think it was always just seen as a gift.

JK: Has speaking Spanish affected your identity? In what ways?

G: I think speaking Spanish has confirmed my identity and given me a vehicle to reinforce it, just because speaking Spanish has been a way to externally exhibit my identity and I think that in a lot of situations where my identity has been questioned or challenged I've been able to take comfort in the fact that I do speak Spanish and I do take up a lot of traditions and cultural customs. I think the ability to speak Spanish reaffirmed or confirmed my identity.

JK: Was there a situation you remember specifically when you were younger where your identity was questioned?

G: Um, nothing specific. I guess just the typical 'too light-skinned for Black people, too Black for Latino/as', not feeling really a place to fit in, but speaking Spanish I fit in with my family so, it was a nice underlying connector. And it connects me to a few other people too. No, nothing specific, just the typical confusion that kids often have when it comes to identities.

JK: Do you think where you grew up shaped your identity at all?

G: I think for me I moved around a lot so I never really think that any one place shaped my identity. I think that moving shaped my identity. I mean, when I was younger it kind of gave me a chance to change who I was every time I moved to a different place. If I didn't like the friends I had then I would search for different types of friends, things like that. So I think moving...just the mobility and growing up in a lot of different places affected the ways that my identity evolved, because every time I moved I had the opportunity to choose whether or not I wanted to change any part of my identity.

JK: When responding to race/ethnicity categories on things like job applications or standardized tests, how have you decided to respond to the boxes?

G: I usually either pick 'Other' and then if 'Other' isn't an option then I either don't fill out the survey or I skip that question...because usually the options are 'African-American', 'White-(non-Hispanic)', 'Hispanic', 'Asian' or 'Asian Pacific'. So I wouldn't want to pick one identity and even 'Biracial' identity is ambiguous because you're not really specifying what identities you are (or what you identify with).

JK: Do you think that the media perpetuates a certain Latina look or image and if so, what is that stereotype to you?

G: Well the stereotypical Latina woman is the vivacious, loud, dark hair woman.

JK: Can you describe your family's outlook on color?

G: On my mom's side of the family, I think she, I think she's only ever had one non-Black boyfriend so I don't think color is really an issue in terms of either way around. She has friends of all races... My dad's family is a little different. My grandpa, he always made me laugh. Junior year I went to prom with a White boy and I sent him [my grandfather] a picture of my prom and he said "I hope that's not your boyfriend" and I was like, "Ohhh umm, no it's just my friend" pretending. So I think that that's just like my grandpa. He was never out/external with it, he just had those personal convictions.

JK: Were there any reactions when your parents got married? Did anybody have any opinions or was it not a big deal?

G: Some of my dad's sisters didn't really like my mom when they first got married but I don't know if that had to do with the fact that she was Latina but I know there were some issues but I really don't know if those were based in race or not. Other than that no not really. Nothing like...no protests.

JK: Have you ever heard the terms 'mejorar la raza' or 'avanzar la raza' (like better the race)? And if you have, what do they mean to you or have you had any experiences with it?

G: No, I don't think that in my family keeping 100% Hispanic lineage is important. I mean my grandparents don't really value that, they don't really care if I marry someone

who's Guatemalan or not, so I don't think that they prioritize making sure that Guatemalan race keeps going. So I think that for me I really haven't had much interaction with those terms before. I think my grandparents would be happier if I married anyone else but a Mexican, they don't want me to marry a Mexican I don't think, but that has to do with Guatemalan and Mexican tensions.

JK: Do you think that people of your generation are approaching their identities as Latino/as differently than older generations or that they're more aware of the history? Or do you not really see a big difference between your generation and grandparents and parents?

G: Well I think that maybe my grandparents are definitely more aware of traditions but it's really important to me to preserve them so it's not like I completely forget them but I'm not ask knowledgeable as they are because I didn't grow up in Guatemala. So I think that this generation, we definitely allow (especially if you weren't born in the country which your family is from) then you allow American values and media and ideas and normatives to influence your culture so I think that it's more of a mixed culture than would be in earlier generations. So like more of a fusion—Latino/American culture than just strictly Latino/a traditions.

JK: You being a second generation (your mom was born here) and being raised completely bilingual, did she ever give you a sense of why she really made the effort to raise you bilingual, especially when you had a non-Spanish speaking parent?

G: I think that for my mom...from my mom to my uncle, all of my mom's side of the family really enforces us speaking Spanish. My cousins, they don't speak Spanish as well because their father is a doctor so he's not around and they have a non-Spanish speaking parent who stays at home with them, so they didn't have the opportunity to learn Spanish. It was instilled in me that Spanish would give me more opportunities in life (which it has) and that it's a part of my culture and that...that it's important. I never asked why. My mom told me it was important to learn Spanish and I got in trouble when I didn't. I think, looking back on it, it really was to give me more opportunities in life. And because it was so important to her so she wanted to transfer that on to her kids.

JK: Any closing comments?

G: Um... I do understand certain parents don't want to teach their kids Spanish just because they come here and they associate Spanish with primitive ideals just because they moved here for a reason and they don't want to revert back to their life that they left so they want their kids to have American names and they want their kids to speak English...that makes sense to me but I do think that it's really important to instill that Spanish is a gift, speaking another language is a gift so passing it on to your kids is important.

*d. Fernando Interview Transcript*

Jordan Kifer: You say that you identify both as Dominican and as Black. Has there been an evolution in how you identify? Or a specific event that really shaped how you identify?

F: Well I think it was in the first year at Michigan that I had to confront my social identity as being Black and then also as Latino, because I always just self-identified as Dominican not as Black, but I had to also redefine myself by the color of my skin. I did that through things like MESA (office of Multicultural and Ethnic Student Affairs\*) and just talking to people. Sometimes the school was very divided at the time with people being like “Are you Latino or Black?” and there was no gray area towards that, so I had to define myself. I think it was through the experiences of MESA specifically, to see how I had self-identified and to be proud of who I was.

JK: What does the term Afro-Latino mean to you? Have you heard it before? In what contexts would you use the term?

F: Afro-Latino to me means the trans-Atlantic and through slavery, the trans-Atlantic slave trade. I was learning it through history and I think it was a gradual process, like I was learning more about myself throughout the years at Michigan. And I think it was through music like Celia Cruz and then through baseball and just different aspects of what Afro-Latino/as were and so (and I still need to learn more about it) I was reading a lot about it in the Miami Herald, about different countries and how they experience themselves. So I used ‘Afro’ as an Africanism, and then Latino being the Spanish, the Spaniard and having the full essence of the culture. I’m still reading about it to this day, there’s a lot to still learn.

JK: And for you, is [Afro-Latino] a term you see more in what you’re reading as opposed to conversations you’re having?

F: Actually it’s more the conversations. I don’t really see...well from the reading I don’t really see it as much as I think it should, because I think people in the readings, the readings that I’ve seen, are more seen as the ethnicity part but they don’t use the ‘Afro-Latino/a’ as much. But through conversations with people I’ve heard it more.

JK: Growing up do you remember having to explain to other people or other kids that you were both Black and Latino or Black and Dominican?

F: It was really hard because I would get these questions a lot and I would always go to the Latino side because, specifically in the Dominican Republic a lot of Dominicans don’t confront the Black history of themselves, that there’s a Black side. They actually really don’t announce it, they’re not proud of that side. They have these stigmas behind being Black so they always announce as Dominicans and as myself I would always announce myself as Latino. And it didn’t occur to me, (my black history) until I went to college.



JK: Do you feel like where you grew up shaped your identity, and how so?

F: Where I grew up definitely shaped [my identity]. I grew up in the Bronx and there's a lot of Dominicans there. There's a big Dominican community there and so I was in the Bronx and then for a couple years I was in the Dominican Republic, and Spanish was my first language. So I was shaped in the way that I always saw myself as being Latino through the culture, through mannerisms, through all different life aspects. There was also a large community of African-Americans (Black people) but I didn't see myself as that part of the community because I didn't feel like there was open space for dialogue or for me to even get into that circle.

JK: For standardized tests, job applications, I don't know if you've had to fill out the Census, but when there's a race and ethnicity category to be checked, how do you decide to respond?

F: Sometimes it depends on my mood but Hispanic or I put 'Other' and then I just put 'Afro-Latino'. I used to just put 'Hispanic' but now I just put 'Other-Afro-Latino' or I put 'Other' and I don't explain or I could put 'Black'. It really depends on my mood. But nowadays I mostly (since I self-identify as Afro-Latino) I put 'Other-Afro-Latino'.

JK: For your family, can you describe your immediate family's outlook on color?

F: We're very multiracial so my sister is fair-skinned and my other sister is *indio*-skinned so color doesn't really announce itself in my family. It's all aspects of dark to light so it never was an issue with my family. But with other family members (it was really interesting when I was reading more about it,) it was more the hair. Hair is a big aspect in my family, like "Oh my god, don't grow out your hair", "that's disgusting cut your hair". To this day I cannot grow out my hair even if I wanted to because that makes you more, makes you look more like a Black person and Black culture. And I love my hair but I can't [grow it out]. And my sisters have to perm their hair, it can't be natural so there's still stigma. It's more European culture than in a Black context.

JK: How do you see colorism playing out in how you grew up or in the Dominican/Latino community at large?

F: So there were always jokes like "Oh you look Haitian" if I had a tan from being at the beach. There's a lot of animosity between Haitians and Dominicans because Haitians are darker and Dominicans never want to portray themselves as being Haitian or dark-skinned so that's how it played out. And then in the Black culture, it's like everyone's...like if you're Black, you're Black.

JK: Like hyper-descent versus hypo-descent?

F: Exactly, like if you go to Livonia, Michigan which is like the third whitest town (I learned that somehow), one of the whitest cities in America, you're just going to be

racially profiled as Black, not be Dominican or Nicaraguan or Panamanian, it's if you're Black, you're Black. And my family still doesn't understand that and Dominicans don't understand that and they still pronounce themselves as being Taíno, which is like a Native American in the Dominican Republic. But, saying that their skin color is not black but Taíno just to denounce the reality of the situation.

JK: Do you think the media perpetuates a certain look or image and if you think there's a stereotype, what do you think it is?

F: Oh yeah definitely, I mean especially in America. The stereotype is (to be honest) is like 'Oh Latino/as are brown, nationality: Mexican and there's this whole spectrum of Latinos that are not looked upon. I think media definitely portrays that there's a certain type of color, certain mannerisms when it comes to Latino/a culture and it's not, the media doesn't have the outreach to see more aspects of it. I've seen through my family how it's turned out to be, because every time they question it it's like 'Oh wait, are you Black or are you this or are you that?' like it's a Black and White area. "Are you Black or what are you?", there's a lot of confusion when it comes to that question about my nationality or where I come from.

JK: Have you heard the term "mejorar la raza" or "arreglar la familia" or those mentalities? And if you have, have you had any specific experiences relating to them?

F: Well, *negra* yes, *negra/negro*. Well we say *moreno/morena*, to like "beautify" or try to put this beauty aspect on being black because it's not seen as beautiful in the culture which is very unfortunate, so more so 'morena'. 'Negra' I've heard 'negrito', so they put the -ito, so I've heard some of those terms before. It makes me...it doesn't offend me but sometimes...it's interesting, I've always wanted to look more into that and see why use this terminology.

JK: Have you ever heard 'you need to marry lighter'?

F: Yes! Yes yes yes yes yes. Even my grandma tells me, "you should marry a light-skinned person so I can be brown" or if it's my sister who's more fair-skinned/olive-skinned, she needs to marry a darker-skinned person so she can be brown. Or the more extreme Dominicans or Latinos in my family would be like "Oh you should just marry white" so the whiter it gets, the more European-look you get so there's always that stigma to be 'the lighter the better'. And the better hair, the better skin.

JK: What do you think Trujillo's effect has been how Dominicans in the US identify? How do you think Trujillo's regime...

F: Oh Trujillo, oh my god. Ok, Trujillo. So I'm so happy that, what's his name, Junot Diaz, when he wrote his book, I was so happy to see that it was opening up the story of the Dominican life and how Trujillo has affected that. And I think Trujillo really did make an impact on Dominicans because Dominicans didn't really come to this country until after the regime ended and he was very pro-lighter skin and he massacred 30,000

Haitians just because of the color of their skin. He was really, he was trying to call the Dominican Republic Hispaniola and really just affect Dominicans' mentality about who they are and there is this confusion now about identity, of who they are and where they come from, because it's multiracial but at the same time they still emphasize this European culture and Hispaniola, instead of the Dominican Republic (that's what Trujillo wanted to really call it) to be more aligned towards Spain. So I think Dominicans especially in America are still not as outspoken about their race and saying "Yeah I'm also Black, I can also be aligned towards that." It's more a separation of being "No I'm not Black, I'm Dominican, so yeah the color of my skin might say I'm Black but I'm really not. I'm Dominican because I speak Spanish so we're different and I'm better than you."

JK: Do you think speaking Spanish has affected your identity and kind of how you relate to Dominican culture and Latino culture?

F: Yeah, definitely. I think it definitely has affected me through pop culture references and stories and food and having more of a connection to my family. I think Spanish is definitely been an outlet for me to be true to my culture, and to know more about my culture. Because of the Spanish, people almost accept me more, especially in the Dominican Republic when I speak Spanish, because they're like, 'Oh you're coming back to your roots, you're not just someone who threw out that culture'. I think when I came to America, I mean I was born here but when I came back, it was a priority to keep Spanish in me, to stick to the language. Because, like my grandma says, language is the most organic form of being Latino, to know your roots, to know the language.

JK: Do you think people of your generation are starting to identify, not completely differently, but differently than older generations, or do you feel like they're approaching their Latino/a identities in some different ways than their parents or grandparents?

F: Yeah. Something is different, something has started to turn around with the younger generations that, it's a lot of like slang and I don't see it as much as it used to be with Spanish, there's not as much... I don't know. Like, with the younger generation I think it is changing of what they see themselves as being Latino/a, it's not, like there is this generation now that a lot of them don't speak Spanish, like my sister hates speaking Spanish and then some of the siblings of my friends don't speak Spanish or it's not as strict with parents or grandparents that aren't as strict with their children to speak Spanish or be as fluent or as knowledgeable about Spanish culture so it is getting lost in a way. So I've started to see that more and more, especially as there's more generations. Especially as first generation moves to second and third.

JK: Expanding a little on the identifying, in terms of Latinos who are visibly of African descent, do you feel like more of them are more comfortable with acknowledging or how they approach the Afro- part of their identity or no?

F: I don't think so, I think there needs to be a lot more knowledge about that and I think that, and I have TV in Spanish right now and my grandma's listening to some music right

now but I think it needs to start coming from home and go from the political and social backgrounds of different countries because in one country let's say, Panama or Nicaragua-they're more knowledgeable about their African roots whereas the Dominican Republic isn't as much. It's more hidden and it's not really spoken of and so I think it needs to come from the top to the bottom because I still don't see...I still see myself as the only person in my family that really identifies as Afro-Latino. Most of my family still see themselves as just Latino/a even though the color of their skin says otherwise.

JK: Are there ways in which you feel influenced by previous generations of Latino/as or people who maybe didn't call themselves Afro-Latino/as but were Latino/as of darker color?

F: I think my...It was always Sammy Sosa and Celia Cruz were like the big outlets of what, and when I was thinking about other countries especially Cuba and how proud they were about the color of their skin but also they're Latino/as. They were especially like an ethnicity, a country that really helped me find myself, and with my family my mom helped me a lot with saying that there's more me than meets the eye, and especially with the culture and the history Junot Diaz really helped me out with my identity and seeing that it wasn't just me seeing the differences between cultures and seeing themselves as being Black and Latino or Afro-Latino And there still needs to be a lot of work with this identity.

*e. Julia Interview Transcript*

Jordan Kifer: You say you identify as Latina, has there been an evolution in how you identify? Was there something specific that affected how you chose to identify?

J: No not really, just family and visiting the Dominican Republic every summer, you know. Spanish is the language I speak at home so I just decided to identify as Latina.

JK: What does the term 'Afro-Latino/a' mean to you? Have you heard it before? Do you ever use it for yourself or would you ever use it for yourself or no?

J: I've heard it actually when I came [to the University of Michigan] I took an Intro to Latino Studies and that was the first time I heard the term. I think that I would identify [as Afro-Latina] like I don't really have a problem identifying as an Afro-Latina because you know, I'm Hispanic and growing up a lot of people thought I was African-American so it really doesn't bother me to identify as Afro-Latina.

JK: How were you raised to see your Latina identity? What did being Latina involve for you? Was it more Dominican and then Latina?

J: Yes and no, because everything I went to involved Dominican culture and growing up I went to festivals and parades and stuff like that. I didn't really mingle with people, like I have friends that are from other ethnicities but growing up I really didn't hang out or

wasn't really involved in activities where there weren't Latinos, it was mainly Dominican.

JK: Where in New York did you grow up?

J: I grew up in New York City, like Manhattan, Times Square area so that's not really known as like a big population of Latinos...

JK: ..so it wasn't like a Dominican neighborhood?

J: No not at all. It wasn't like a Washington Heights or anything

JK: Growing up did you have to explain to other kids or other people that being Black and Latina weren't mutually exclusive, that you were both?

J: No I actually, growing up I didn't get offended but I would get upset sometimes when people asked me, "Oh you're Black?" or "Oh you have good hair so you can't be Black" or "Are you Latina?" so I got that a lot. I would get upset at it, not necessarily like offended but I would be like, "Noo I'm Latina" but then once I came here [University of Michigan] you know, I was more accepting of the term.

JK: Because for "Black" it's so synonymous with being "African American"...

J: Yea.

JK: How did where you grew up shape your identity and how you identify? Do you feel like New York had any kind of impact?

J: I wouldn't say my neighborhood because it's not predominantly Hispanic but yeah I mean growing up, going to my uncle's house and my aunt's house, like they live in Washington Heights, where like 90% of the people who live there are Dominican or Latino so I feel like that helped me with my Latina identity.

JK: And do you think that just being in New York you saw more than one kind of person? Cause some people grow up and they're the only kid in their class...

J: Yea I feel like I see that a lot here. Like growing up a Spanish person or a Latina person, I saw people from everywhere whereas here I see a lot of the [Latino/a] population in Michigan is Mexican and that means Latino. So it was really weird you know but...

JK: How do you decide to respond to race and ethnicity categories on job applications, standardized tests, when you have to check a box?

J: I can't remember the categories but I will usually put ...what are they?

JK: They can change but the Census...

J: I'll usually put like Hispanic or Latino but I can't remember what else there is.

JK: How would you describe your family's outlook on color? Your parents specifically

J: Ok, so my dad for example, I'll use him as an example, he is my skin color, like darker skinned but he doesn't see himself as like a darker person so I don't think he would identify as an Afro-Latino. He sees himself as, like a lighter color for him is better, like the lighter the better...

JK: Like 'mejorar la raza'?

J: Yeah basically. But that's all because of Dominican history and Trujillo and how he wanted to whiten the country so brought Europeans and Asians to the country and like Haitians were seen as these bad people and he still has that type of mentality which is really close-minded to me. But he still has that mentality as 'the whiter the better' basically.

JK: If you can expand a little on what you think Trujillo's effect has been on how Dominicans even in the United States identify...

J: Well my dad was a kid when he was in power and I feel like my grandmother and people around him instilled in him the whiter the better so you have to try to whiten the family, like that was something that I grew up with them saying. Like, "Oh arreglar la familia" which is like "fix the family" and I had never really put any thought to it until I got older and I was just like, "Woah that's racist, what do you mean?" Like, look at your skin color, you're not different from anybody else. And I feel like that's a lot of Dominicans as well, that's how they are. They're just "Oh you have to whiten the family" (whatever) But as this generation is getting better with that.

JK: Growing up did you ever feel like you had to choose Black culture or Latino culture among friends?

J: No not really.

JK: Do you think the media perpetuates a certain Latina look or image and if so, what do you think the stereotype is?

J: Well it depends. If the Latina is light-skinned then she's considered a Latina but for Afro-Latinas I feel like they'll represent them as Black or African-American. Like an example I could use is Christina Milian, the actress, when she does movies and stuff she always plays an African-American girl where in reality she's Cuban, you know, she's a Latina.

JK: There's a short video that Mun2 did called "Black and Latino"...

J: Yeah I've seen that and it's pretty interesting because it's so true. Like, you have to look a certain way and do certain things to be identified as Latino/a or for the public to think that's ok.

JK: So you've heard the terms 'mejorar la raza' or 'adelantar la raza' but outside of your family have you ever had anyone tell you that, even jokingly, for example as you go to date someone?

J: Yeah of course. Well outside of my immediate family, like my other family members will always say that. I've heard friends of family always say that, Dominicans in particular, they always say that. But I really think that's not right.

JK: Has speaking Spanish affected your identity?

J: No. I mean I feel like when people hear me speak Spanish they're shocked but it hasn't really affected my identity.

JK: Do you think, in terms of your identity, speaking Spanish helps you maintain a connection to older people in your family or with Dominican culture?

J: Definitely, because most of my family members, like aunts and uncles and stuff, they speak Spanish so that's vital, you have to know how to speak Spanish in order to communicate.

J: ...I have some cousins who don't speak Spanish at all. They can understand it but they just can't speak it but with my parents they were like 'you have to learn Spanish, you have to learn Spanish'. Although my dad speaks English, [Spanish] was all he spoke to me. And then when I got older and I already knew Spanish, that's when he started speaking to me in English.

JK: Do you think people of your generation are self-identifying differently or treating their identity as Latinos differently than older generations?

J: I think it depends on where you are and the knowledge you know. I think it really depends because some people just still have that same mentality that their grandma came to the United States with. I feel like those who research or are more open-minded about things, because that's another thing- a lot of Dominicans tend to be really close-minded and they want to keep that and pass that on.

JK: Is there anyone who has really shaped how you identify or someone who you look up to?

J: Not really. I really like the actor Zoë Saldana. Like I was saying before, she plays a lot of, well she played Colombiana, but besides that she plays African-American parts. But I feel like she stands her ground.

*f. Alicia Interview Transcript*

Jordan Kifer: You said that you identify as mixed race and Black, as well as Afro-Latina on occasion. Has there been an evolution in how you identify? Was there anything that really shaped how you identified?

A: I just found this notebook of mine where I write out the evolution of how I identify. So let's see... I think what has changed is one, just proximities to people and places and then my education, which is part of the people I've met. So I think that, you know, I've identified as Black longer than I have Latina, or more fully I guess. And maybe that's because I grew up in Georgia and was surrounded by a lot of White people, actually. But there were also a lot of Black people, Black Americans, like US Americans in the South and there weren't that many Latino/as of any kind. And then there were some Mexicans that started moving in to Savannah and so I didn't quite identify with them,... Well I did and I didn't. It was distant. I identified with the Spanish language but I wasn't quite sure what else to identify with or not. And my mom was always friends with any of the Spanish-speaking people that I grew up around. But then I think that probably as I moved to New York for college when I was 18, I was around so many more Dominicans and Puerto Ricans especially, but also a little variety of some other nationalities. And I that that time I was able to more identify with that Latino/a side of me, just because there were other people to sort of bounce that identity off of. And then probably at the time I realized that those could really coincide. I mean, I knew they could, like in my body but I think that just meeting more Latino/as that were brown and Black and light skinned. I do remember a point of being like I didn't realize this existed, like Afro-Latino/as, dark skinned, or...not even, not Latino/as, mixed, brown African, like *Latinoamericanos*, like in their countries of origin. So I was like "Wow" but not really sharing that thought with anyone but being like "Oh, it makes sense but I didn't really think about it."

JK: What does the term 'Afro-Latino/a' mean to you, what do you understand it to be? If you do use it for yourself, in what contexts?

A: It's definitely contextual when I use it. I would say it's either a social move or a political move (to use the word Afro-Latina). I think for me these days, any time I'm using any identifying term for myself it's like a social or political move rather than just a need to say, or to speak my identity. I think before I used to be more, you know, trying to find my identity so being able to speak it was important. Basically there is nothing that...Ok I'll start with I love the word 'queer' because for some reason I have been able to feel comfortable in, and it's one of the only socially constructed identity categories that I feel pretty comfortable with, where there's not so many other words that feel like the best word, that one feels the best one to me. So with race and ethnicity there's already this weird thing where we're not ever really sure if we're talking about race or ethnicity or nationality or...It's always like whatever you're asking, the question is always so blurred. So that's another reason why it's contextual because it's surrounded by other Afro-Latino/as, like we're more talking about what country of origin versus the Afro-



part that, I think that in those of Latino/as that are predominantly light skinned or trigueño, it's always important to say. So it's about social interactions and social context. But I usually do, you know, if I'm going to talk about being Latino/a, I think I usually do.

JK: You said that you like to use the term "Raza" as well. Can you explain a little bit about what your definition of it is and why you use it?

A: It makes me think of really looking into the origin of that time, but for me it means kind of reclaiming, or more just claiming term. For me it's also people that fit into this really broad category of culture, cultural links more than necessarily the Spanish language. So 'Raza' includes everyone from and in South America, Central America and North America who have like, the same kind of roots, ... I don't know, it's hard to say but I think that it includes people that have come, like Europeans, you know, European-descended people that are in these countries, African descended people, Indigenous people and there is like a Spanish-language tie. There's also a lot of other languages that are spoken, especially in Indigenous communities, so I don't think that it's just necessarily a Spanish-language connection but maybe like, we shared the same part of the Earth for a long time and even though we're talking about the Diaspora, it's not such much localized to South America or Central America or the islands, it's spread. I like 'Raza' because it feels like it's coming from a place that centers Indigenous folks and also Afro- descendant folks and also...it's very mixed.

JK: How were you raised to see your Latina identity or if you feel like it was more of a Colombian identity, how were you raised to see it?

A: I think for me within my household there was not so much, this concept of Latino/a or anything pan-cultural, because basically my house was my mom who is from Colombia and she doesn't try to represent a whole bunch of different people. And I think that when you're in Latin America it's like, almost insulting to compare, to put all those people in the same category, there's so many differences between like, everyone in their countries. While I was growing up the term was Hispanic, it wasn't Latino/a and a lot of people still use Hispanic so there term Latino/a still has like a newer, ...not just a newer context but...

JK: Has speaking Spanish affected your identity and if so, how so?

A: It definitely does. On the one hand it's a sticking point for me for a lot of other Latino/as, for sure. I guess for me I've never grown up around that environment with even some people that are Colombian and definitely not like a lot of people that are so I've always identified as, ...since I've started really identifying as Latino/a, like moving to New York, with the Spanish language somehow was the thing that was connecting me to these other people that otherwise basically had such different lives than me but, especially for like Colombian people, are searching for at least Latino/as, and there are like cultural similarities for sure but you know, a lot of... or it's like the details of the cultures are different but there's some similar flows and just the way that people enjoy food in Latin America, it's not the same as in the US amongst, ...it's just different. But at the same time the language has also been isolating for a lot of people that are Latino/as

because there's so much to speaking the Spanish language but there's also a lot of shame around how you speak Spanish or how you don't speak Spanish or what your Spanish-speaking ability is. And also different views from different folks about whether you're supposed to be like speaking Spanish or whether you're supposed to be speaking English, or in what context. It's always like, ...it's just really complex.

I speak Spanish but a lot of it was learned in a lot of different contexts. I learned in school and in college and from studying abroad, from self-study...

JK: Where did you study abroad?

A: In Cuba. In Havana.

So I just had a lot of Dominican and Puerto Rican friends and now I have a lot of Mexican friends so I don't necessarily have a Colombian Spanish but it's a very multicultural kind of Spanish. So it's like Spanish is this connection that I have with other Latino/as and it's been like that more so than it's ever been a language I've spoken with other Colombians because I've just had the lack of interaction. And that includes Afro-Latino/as who are just like, underrepresented but are like a huge existence.. And also Afro-Latina is weird because the context of race and color in Latin America, there's so many ways and contexts that it's actually....identifying as Afro- in Latin America is way more politically charged because it's not...because a lot of people identify with African descent, so many so that it's like "Why are we even doing all of this?" so I think Afro-Latino/a comes out of being a person of color minority within a person of color majority. And because of how it's been underrepresented, so I think it's like a term of resistance too.

JK: When you were growing up do you remember having to explain being Black and Colombian to other kids or other people? Was there a confusion about you being mixed?

A: I feel like, ...I think like when I think about growing up I think about when I was little I went to this predominantly White, Catholic school where most of the kids were Irish, and so the mixed thing was difficult because I was obviously a mixed person as opposed to everyone else who's less obviously mixed around me. So there's that but I think as I've moved out of Georgia especially, but not even just that but, moved around. As time has gone on there's just been like, more mixed people so it's not like I was confusing, I think.

JK: When you're responding to the race and ethnicity categories on things like job applications or the Census or even standardized tests, when you have to check a box, how do you respond?

A: I really try to answer as many of those questions as I can. So usually, with these I see you can pick 'Black, White or Asian' and it's like, "Is that it?" I don't even know. It's all a little iffy [the categories] I usually try to make sure that I check 'Black' and I try to write 'Latina or Hispanic' but also if they give the option of country of origin then I also try to write Colombian. And depending on, ...I also have Cherokee ancestry and depending on what it is and how many boxes they let me pick then I'll also check

Indigenous or Native, especially if it's,....a right, like they're fighting for a right. And whenever they only give me one option I usually have to decide what's tactful in a situation so it depends on what population of people's underrepresented in that thing that I'm applying for or whatever, just to make sure that statistically I'm helping out somebody else eventually down the line. It's a process.

JK: Do you think it's important for people, especially for people of color, to respond to things like the race and ethnicity categories, even if the categories are really imperfect or sometimes completely illogical? Do you think it's important for them to answer so that they're represented in that space or more do you think that it's something they shouldn't have to answer?

A: I definitely think that it's important to answer. I just want more information about what people of color are doing... I understand that for statistical purposes you need very specific categories but I think that there could be a happier place where you have much more openness that you have in order to check the boxes. But I don't believe in colorblind processes so I think that it's important and also it's not just an identity it's important what you put down and share.

JK: Can you describe your family's outlook on color?

A: From my mom's side of the family and my dad's side of the family I have different ideas of that. So on my mom's side of the family (my Colombian side of the family) we're 'mestiza' so we have European descent, and there's some other stuff in there, so we have darker hair and lighter skin, basically, to put it very like, simply. I have a cousin Samuel and he's a little bit darker than his siblings and his mom and so it's interesting to see how color operates in that way because,....no one treats him badly, you know, for his skin being darker but people are, (in his family) often pointing it out in certain ways and usually it's in a joking way, more like "How did you end up so dark?" which could be read a lot of different ways, but it's sort of just in jest and just read it in seeing color. It's hard to say, it's just like a cultural context that's different for me, so it's hard to say what's appropriate. I think that in the US we're so very race sensitive and for good reason, absolutely (and I support it) but in Latin America it's a little bit race insensitive and I also think it's because it's a different understanding of how people mix. I think that mixing has been more, just percentage-wise, there's been so much more mixing in Latin America than there has been here, even though there's been a lot of mixing here too but, there's been a lot of not mixing as well.

I guess like, my family, meaning my nuclear family we're sort of like the oddballs, because we're basically like the Latino/as, on my dad's side African American side, then my mom's mestizo Colombian side so I think it means more....but also US American, like we grew up here and not in Latin America so there's just cultural differences. At the same time, I just want to say, on my mom's side especially, is all visual artists so I think that alone means something, it means that the people that they've come in contact with over the years have been from all over but they like, really search for beauty and

color so I think there's something there but my tías have always liked my dad and I think things might be different if they didn't like him.

JK: Do you think that the media perpetuates a certain Latino/a look or image, and if you do, what is that stereotype in your opinion?

A: I think that it's important to say what media you're talking about.

JK: I think that what I've been referring to is quote on quote "mainstream" media but also Telemundo or Univision, television or films, more visual media.

A: Yeah, I think that that [type of media] should be specific. I don't participate in 'mainstream' media and I definitely don't participate in 'mainstream' media that's supposed to be for Latino/as. I don't even know if I can really talk about mainstream media because I hardly partake and I realize that, what I've been realizing in general about mainstream media is that it has been changing and I've been so out of touch with it for so many years now that I really don't know what is on TV. I only know like what was on Telemundo like five, six seven years ago but I think there's different stuff on now. You know that I participate in a lot of media, a lot of Latino/a media that's not mainstream and I think that there's certain images there that are maybe,... I'm in California now and so a majority of the Latino/as are Mexican or Central American so I think that in terms of the images of who I'm seeing portrayed is usually Mexican or Chicano/a and so there's certain stylistic choices that I think happen because of that. Mainstream, I really don't know.

JK: Could you talk more about your involvement at NYU in LUCHA?

A: I don't know if I mentioned I did an exhibit about Afro-Cuban women. But it's connected.

So I went to Cuba and I studied abroad there, I really enjoyed being around brown, darker skinned Spanish-speaking people and I did a photography series on Afro-Cuban women and the exploration of what it means to be a woman, what it means to be a brown, dark skinned woman, of African descent woman in a place like Cuba where that's kind of the norm. It's like a majority, and I guess things like the complexities of being a woman, of gender and race and age. So I was taking these photos and I got back to the United States and was like "Alright guys I really have to be around Latino/as a lot more" I had a lot of Black friends and I had a lot of White friends and I just hadn't done anything yet to really be amongst Latino/as. And it was mostly because I was shy but also shy because I'd always been a Black Latina in a White world so it wasn't just being shy, it was also being different and not quite celebrated. So I decided that I was going to apply for an executive-board position for this organization LUCHA, (Latinos Unidos con Honor y Amistad) and I ended up getting that position for my senior year. And that was one of those moments that's just so unfortunate to happen at like age 21, you know, it's like, where I was sitting around the table with other Latino/as who were involved in their communities and were brilliant people and were going to a school like NYU and we were all leaders on campus,

like making decisions and using money, and bringing people to New York. LUCHA is a lot like FOKUS, like it's pretty art-based but it's in a Latino/a context.

A: I think it's absolutely important for people to have safe spaces where they don't feel triggered all the time, about how they identify and I think that when you have spaces that are really committed to being those safe spaces for people then diversity can happen amongst it. It's more because of the intention of the space and how people are responsible to the space and the other people in the space that allow it to exist peacefully.

JK: You mentioned you follow a few Tumblrs and blogs. When you're looking at them are there certain things that you see that have stuck out to you? Certain terms or topics that get mentioned?

A: I think that I've graduated from the "101" like information about Latino/as (like Afro-Latino/as) and I'm looking for topics within them or that are, ... I'm looking for the intersectionality of different things and I'm not looking just to have a conversation about Afro-Latino/as. So there are a couple blogs that are just Afro-Latina and they're super broad.

JK: Do you feel like people are using sites like Tumblr as a way to create their own space? Like you were talking about safe spaces.

A: Yea for sure. I mean I think that we can never rely on anyone else, we can never really rely on people who don't understand yet create media representations of us and I don't know why we would because, everyone has their own talents amongst their communities so. Art is an act of political warfare. And so creating representations, the process of creation puts out energy into the world, so I think that it's crucial for us to make our own representations of ourselves. It's crucial just for us to imagine who we are and what we want to be so, it's necessary. I love Tumblr because it's simple and democratized in a certain kind of way. It's a good way to be accessible. These Tumblrs especially, are like places of resistance and of creation and, yeah. And they're important. I love my Tumblr because it's like my little place that I've created. I can control what I see and I only see beautiful images of people of color and it's nice to have in the world.

JK: Do you think people of your generation are approaching their identities (as Latino/as in particular) differently than, say their parents and their grandparents? Do you think there's been any kind of a shift in how that's approached?

A: Yeah of course. The terms, the words that we're using, the way that we feel nostalgic for homelands. Some of us have never been outside of the US so as much as we feel, ... I guess with generations, generations before people were not like, migrating here in the same ways. There were people here obviously but I guess migration has shifted in terms of who and how and why.

There's definitely a shift, I think just people being able to take in more images and more of the images that they choose, is a shift. It's hard for me to speak about people who partake in mainstream media anymore but one thing that I know is that people who are

politicized in a certain way that's similar to how I'm politicized have really found outlets to create and to view media that is actually inclusive and that celebrates who we are. So I think that we're not having to settle for less as much as our generations before have had but at the same time we're becoming more and more disconnected from some of the things that are in us, that we can't really escape anyway. I think there's just different tides changing and different relationships around us.

JK: Is there anything you want to add?

A: I'm having all these little thoughts. I was thinking about how when I was in Colombia a couple months ago, in Bogotá, where my mom's family is from, and there are some people of African descent in Bogotá and they generally live in certain neighborhoods and are very racialized. A lot that are of African descent live on the Caribbean coast of Colombia. And I'm just thinking out loud. But it was very interesting to be walking around in Colombia, especially because I have big curly hair that looks entirely different from most of the mestizas who have like, long straighter or wavy, dark thick hair and mine's lighter and big and my curls are small, and I have a hair texture that's very obviously of some African descent. So just thinking about being around in Bogotá which is like a modernized city, I think that I probably did look like I was from the coast. And I was walking around with my darker skinned cousin (he's not even dark skinned by any standards but compared to my family). It's not that anyone reacted to us that I could tell, it's more like me looking out at the other people, realizing "Ok yeah, I do look different from these Colombian mestizo/as in Bogotá. So what I'm saying is that I tend to identify, when I'm in Colombia, I still identify with the people of African descent even within Colombia even though my African descent did not go through Colombia. So that's kind of something that I've been exploring recently is, 'so what are the Afro-Colombians like and what are they doing and what are their cultures, you know, what's their history?'

JK: When you are working or thinking about an issue, do you approach it from a creative standpoint? Do you approach it with your art, in a way?

A: I'm an artist through and through so that's the one thing I could never not be. So yeah I have my project on Afro-Cuban women and now I'm working on another project. I'm a massage therapist so my work is focused on queer and trans- people of color so basically in all of my work I'm doing some kind of race/ethnicity research and work and also sexuality and gender and ability, so a lot of my life's work is basically related to race and racism and how people identify. And not just identify but also their lived experiences. I'm an Afro-Colombian woman doing this work and it's not necessarily related but it's real because it's already in me.

*g. Paula Interview Transcript*

JK: You say you identify as Afro-Latina. Has there been an evolution in how you identify? Were there some specific events or experiences that affected how you chose to identify?

P: Well I never actually heard the term ‘Afro-Latino/a’ when I was growing up. There wasn’t necessarily a talk about being Latina; it was more an idea of color, especially when we lived in Puerto Rico when I was little. It was, either you were light skinned or you were dark or you were *indio* which was like you were in the middle or more Indian, and that was my early experience with separation within my own family. You were either White or you were Indian or you were Black and it was really when I came to NYC that I really started to see more the lines of White and Black. Not necessarily the Indian color, the middle color but seeing that Latino/as fit into that middle and not wanting to identify with, all of a sudden, the dark side...

JK: How old were you when you moved?

P: I was about five or six years old when I came to NYC. So even though it was, I was around people that were dark skinned Puerto Ricans or dark skinned Dominicans and they would consider themselves, you know, they would say ‘negrito’ or “I’m dark skinned”. It wasn’t like a big deal but you were aware that they were dark. But when we came to New York, it was either you were Black or you were White, and for a lot of folks that I was around ‘Black’ meant African American and they didn’t want to be considered African American or African so it was sort of like “We’re not Black at all”. And that was very evident to me when I was in Junior high school that I befriended a girl that actually lived in my neighborhood and she actually was from Trinidad and we walked home and my brother saw us and didn’t say anything when he saw us, and then told my mom “Hey she was walking with this girl” and I couldn’t believe that it was even a problem, because it was never a problem in Puerto Rico but suddenly it was like I was with someone that was Black and not Latino/a Black but Black Black, in that degree, like African American Black or African to their conception. They didn’t even understand that she was Trinidadian, and I’m (as a kid) like “But she’s from the Caribbean, and we’re from the Caribbean.” I didn’t get what their separation of her was because to me she was just like us; she was just from another island. But to them it was like she was African American, she was Black. And the more, (and I’m dark skinned, I’m not necessarily really dark, I might be like, probably *india/indiacita*) for them if I hang out with darker skinned girls then I will be seen as darker than what I am, you know. So the fear was always also of being too dark or being around other dark people.

JK: Was it like Black by association?

P: Absolutely, by association. So if I hung out with the light-skinned girls who had straight hair then I would be ok, like I would be accepted. But if I went toward people that were darker or for god’s sake had dreadlocks or anything like that, I would be too Black. And by then I was already starting to listen to hip hop, and when I was in school I was reading and learning and I had mentioned before that when I got to high school, it was really reading Piri Thomas’s book “Down these Mean Streets” that it was the first time that I ever saw, on paper, someone use the word ‘Afro-Latino’ and then say “I am Latino but I am also Black”. And understanding that it wasn’t necessarily meaning that he was from Africa, it was of “This is who I am now, I’m a mix of all these things and

this is okay” because this is who I am. That was the first time I ever really read something about that contradiction because the idea is also that if you’re Latino/a but you’re light skinned or you have straight hair, you know, that you look a certain way, the stereotype, . . . So even within the Latino/a culture, there is this hiding of the darker ones, the hiding of the ones that have curlier hair or wider noses or bigger lips, you know. So it’s a little bit of you’re ashamed or embarrassed of it too. A lot of those things have just been playing throughout my lifetime just because I happen to be the darkest one in my family. My father’s dark and my mother’s really light so my mom you could consider light enough, like basically light like a White person-light and my father’s dark like if he was from Africa dark but they’re both Latino/as. But to see how the family treated my father because he’s dark was very interesting and then to see how my mother was treated, and then to see how I was treated, because I was the darkest one, and then my sister being lighter how *she* was treated. So I was always aware that I was the darker one, I was always fully aware that I was closer to my dad because he was darker. I mean I remember my mother telling me stories too, saying that she would drink, when she was pregnant with me, (and I’m the first-born) that she would drink shots of Milk of Magnesia which is, you know, like a white liquid substance, really creamy and stuff and it is completely ridiculous we know, but the idea to drink that during your pregnancy constantly so that the baby inside could have a creamy, white complexion, is crazy. But that’s what happened to me and thank goodness I’m okay, but to go that drastic of ‘I’m going to ingest something while I’m pregnant because I want my child’s skin to be lighter’ goes to show you how important it is to be light, so that they could have, a good life within your community.

So I’m very aware of that contradiction within my own life for sure.

JK: What does the term ‘Afro-Latino/a’ mean to you and if you use it for yourself, are there certain contexts you use it in or contexts where you choose to not use it?

P: For me it means that as an Afro-Latina that I identify my Latina roots, being from the Caribbean, being Puerto Rican and Dominican and it also identifies my Afro- Latino side which would be African, Indigenous, and at the end of the day my Black roots, especially because I am dark-skinned and I have curly hair, I think it’s important for people to know who I am. I know that when I’m in NYC a lot of times, (and I learned to speak English and I have my NYC dialect, people can think that I’m a light skinned African American girl and it’s not that I don’t want to be considered a light skinned African American when honestly as an artist, as an actress a lot of times when I go into an audition people do think that anyway. It’s also important for me to let people know that I am Latina because I am fully aware there are the JLos out there in the world, the light skinned version. And when people only think that there’s one version of a Latina, to me that is a disturbance for us because I *want* to be able to represent being a Latina because I *am* a Latina. And I want to see all kinds of Latinas-short ones, tall ones, skinny ones, girls that have different eye features, you know. There’s so much color and beauty within the Latino/a community that to say that only one is a representative is not really fair.

And then by saying ‘Afro-Latina’ means that I’m truly aware of my roots and I would love for other Latino/as if anything, to be aware of it. I mean, to some degree sometimes I



don't think that, depending on the room or space that I'm in I'm not sure that it even matters. I know that in the hip hop community for me, it's really important to say that I'm a Latina, I don't even think that they, if I was to begin the discussion of 'Afro-Latino/a' I don't necessarily feel like we're there yet within the hip hop community, just because Latino/as are still trying to get recognition within hip hop period.

Latino/as in hip hop is like the milk and the cereal, there's no way you can have one without the other because of how NYC is built. We're all living together in the same buildings, it's impossible, if someone is Jamaican on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor and there's a Puerto Rican on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor...you know, that we're all not listening and doing the same thing, we *are*. And to say that it's only one group of people is not really true. And so a lot of them actually, you know, Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa, they're from the Caribbean. So people can say 'Oh it's Black like Bronx Black' but what does that really mean? It means Black people from all of the Diaspora, the Caribbean folks that came to live in the Bronx, it means Africans, it means Latino/as, it means from all over the world, really. And it's really at the end of the day, poor people of color that were all in one neighborhood or in this one area together, and because of that situation we have hip hop. I understand it though, because African Americans didn't have much before, as far as ownership of a culture, ownership of property, ownership of business, ownership of anything before the Civil Right situation came along.

It only makes sense that if there were to be something that they would want to claim ownership, you know, responsibility for and all these things but at the end of the day it also eliminates certain people and right now the way that hip hop is, it's universal. We would, we have to open up that idea because it's, the Internet has provided that forum, right? So people in Indonesia have every right to say that they're hip hop and people in France have every right to say that they're hip hop and you can't marginalize.

Everybody's hip hop now. I think that it's interesting that Latino/as were there [in the beginning] and are still trying to find their place within the hip hop community, and I think it also goes to why things are being sort of separated and labeled, like, there are the Grammys but there are also the Latin Grammys, you know. We aren't, it's not a mainstream situation: the Latino/a voice, it's a separate segment.

There's an MTV for Latino/as, there's HBO for Latino/as, there's things that are marginalized so, when an artist is making music, especially as a Latino/a, you have to think, "Okay, am I going to market towards the American (meaning the English-speaking market) or is it for primarily the Spanish-speaking market?" What happens now is that now at my age, being as a young person, people understand that we're all of that, we're not just Spanish-speaking and we're not just English-speaking, we're both. So, I'm not around, you know, the music that I used to be around when I was in the Caribbean, or when I was little, I'm around hip hop. So the music that I create is going to be, the music that I'm surrounded by. But really when I make music people are saying, "Oh you should really be at the Latin Grammys potentially, but *why* when I see the community that I feel like I belong to in like a regular situation? And I think that actually that we're not a part of the dialogue yet because it's not embedded in the mainstream culture, you know. And I think that that's one of the things that is really going to have to break down or have artists that can cross over and there have been artists like Shakira, like Ricky Martin and

JLo who have been playing that line of being completely mainstream American but still having that Latino/a connection to them. But if we go down the list and say which one is dark skinned, it would be very hard to find one.

There are a lot of Afro-Latinas who are really really good actresses and singers and dancers and they're not getting the chance in Hollywood. I mean if anything, as an actress you end up, when there's only one woman of color in a film and we're all coming in for that role, people don't understand that you know? Black African American girls, African girls, Latina girls, we're all going for that one role. And when mainstream media can, or mainstream sort of, the creative community can't decipher between them and if they don't fit that one category it's not fair because then it also puts us up against each other in the sense that Latinas are going to go for the same role and everyone's going to go for the same role. Then where do people say 'Oh that's Black or that's Latino/a'? On television it could anybody if it's a dark-skinned girl, you know? It would help if there were Afro-Latinas on a show *and* an African American sister and a White sister and an Asian sister, like, the possibilities are there but usually there's only enough for one person of color, there's always that token but who will it be, you know. For a long time people thought Zoë Saldana was African American but at the end of the day she's Latina, you know. Some of her roles she hasn't played an authentically Latina, ... she wasn't necessarily playing a Latina role but she had to play sort of African American roles until she was discovered and then all of a sudden she's now a Latina actress.

And that wouldn't happen for someone like Salma Hayek, right, it wouldn't happen for JLo, ... they wouldn't have to go through another culture and an African American role to be seen as a Latina, they already are seen as Latina, you understand? It's really tricky especially when you're trying to build relationships within the people of color, I mean, right now I keep up with it because I'm a fan of her [Zoë Saldana] work so I think it's really difficult what she's going through right now where there's a film that she's doing, the Nina Simone biopic, and she's getting a lot of hate for that and I do believe that it goes back into that because at the end of the day I do believe that the African American community wants to see an African American play an African American singer, and they went and got a Latina. So, it's one of those things where I don't think it's Zoë Saldana's fault but I think it's culturally insensitive, you know what I mean, it's not listening and not looking at 'hey, there are people that can play this role as African American'.

And the same thing with that Selena was really Mexican and they played you know, JLo when she's Puerto Rican. People were upset about that and it's because there are, there are very talented Mexican singers and actresses, why are we cross-culture jumping and saying 'Oh it doesn't matter', well because people of color are always being jumped across and whenever it's, ... it's not like a Latina could just play the mainstream, you know, White role and it's fine, it wouldn't necessarily be accepted in that way, it'd still be tested to see if Latinas can hold a box office, or if African Americans hold a box office. People really do believe that we're a post-racial America, after Barack Obama won and I beg to differ because of all those underlying things everyday when these choices are being made, you know, they're being done with a lens, and that lens is still there. Once that lens goes away then I can say safely 'Hey ok, here we're looking at things' but we're still sort of being insensitive to people of color in this country, you

know. And to then, that degree, then people of color because being treated that way, then people don't know who they are, people don't find themselves in their schools, there's no material about them. I mean I feel like I didn't know about who I was until I came to college. I understood that I was a Latina, I understood that I was poor when I got to high school, but *really* understood who I was and then the literature that was behind me as a Latina, I had no idea, I never read, you know, all these books and all these things that I got when I went to college. But, what did I have to take in college? I had to take a Puerto Rican and Black history studies class, right. It wasn't like it was part of my upbringing or education, it wasn't a multicultural education, it wasn't, it was a European, Anglo education. So when you have a situation where people of color are not aware of who they are, don't know how they belong and are being told, you're being treated the same but really when you go anywhere you're not. You're frustrated, you have questions, you don't know where to go or what to do and I think, for me being an artist is where I get to explore all of those questions, I get to step outside of myself, I get to pretend to be other people when I'm acting or when I'm writing music I get to question a topic or an idea that I have, you know, so if anything, being an artist has definitely kept my sanity and given me therapy all at the same time, you know.

JK: How were you raised to see your identity as a Latina in your family? And in your community in general.

P: I'm fully aware and was raised as a Latina in the cultural traditional sense and I feel that when I came to New York, I don't know where I got it from but I became a New Yorker very quickly, and it really was against all of the traditional Latino/a stuff that I had come with.

JK: Do you think people of your generation (whatever you define your generation to be) are self-identifying, ...rather, do you think they are approaching their Latino/a identity in different ways than their parents or their grandparents?

P: Yes, I do believe so and I think that, there's, ...I mean I'm a little worried sometimes about it but, it's like a ball has to keep rolling, you have to keep going and change is good, no matter what that change kind of looks like at the end of the day. But it is scary because I do see, (and it's happening within the African American community but I see it a lot within the Latino/a community because that's what I'm a part of, and that is becoming part of the mainstream American society means to also lose who you are culturally back home. And it's really sad the idea that if you want to be a part of this country that means that you need to assimilate, that means that you need to go to a really top-tier school, that you need to lose your accent, that you need to not dress, you know, maybe in traditional clothing so you need to wear something from, you know, Forever21 or Zara, you know what I mean? That you need to keep up with the trendy girls and the Kim Kardashians of the world, and I think that that's a disservice for all the Latinas and Latinos is that we should be, comfortable in being in our own skin and not say that being more American means that we're better than our families back home, you understand, that we're better than the island.

And I think that that resentment happens and will continue to grow and, could become a problem in the future if the Latino/as in the United States forget about the Latino/as that are in the islands and are in poorer countries because they have jobs, because they have better opportunities. I think that that's a problem, you know what I mean? We need to always remember where we came from and where we're going is sort of why we are here, and that's why we've always been here. As opposed to 'Oh we want to do better and we want to be,...I'm using Kim Kardashian obviously like, to represent the whole thing but the idea of 'I want to be that and I don't want to know about the girls from my country or, how they dress and what they eat and what they do and, that these girls are cooler because they are, whitewashed, and really bland to some degree. I love that all these girls in the United States will be multicultural and will wear their own, (you know, wherever they're from) and I think it's such a beautiful idea but when you go out into NYC, or really any city in America, you don't, you might see color but really when people open their mouths, it's really an American culture that's going on, and you only see that when you travel outside of America and then you say 'Oh man you can tell who the Americans are' no matter if they're dark-skinned, light-skinned or green or purple. You can tell who the Americans are and it's an American attitude that's really what the problem is, you know. It's the American attitude, it really is crazy. So then there needs to be a sense of humility and empathy and, and compassion from all cultures within the United States, especially when we travel outside of the United States.

JK: What is 'pelo malo'?

P: ...I was actually doing a project with the William Shakespeare company in London and we were staying over there and I didn't know about the electrical outlets being different, obviously, from America, from the United States. So I wasn't able to sort of, flat iron or blow dry or anything like that because I didn't have the converter. So my hair actually, went more curly and natural as I was over there and I had a friend who had locks (dreadlocks) in her hair and just walking around the streets with her, we were stared at so much. I mean, in the grocery store, in the street, in the restaurants. It felt like there was someone amazingly famous, someone else there and we kept looking behind us like, "Who is there? What are they looking at?" and it was slowly, you would see the eyes really grazing more to our hair and by looking at our different textures, from what I could gather, because obviously I couldn't go up to everyone and ask them what was happening. But because she had locks, and they were really long and really beautifully done and my hair was really big and bushy and curly. And predominantly people had really straight hair, you know, like blonde or brown. Even in that experience alone it was kind of like, wow, so this is how it must have felt back in the day or, for a lot of people.

Being in NYC we kind of don't get that a lot of times because we're so surrounded by people from different cultures, people with different hair, and all kinds of stuff so it's a little more casual. I feel privileged that I grew up in NYC but I know when I leave NYC, there is a huge stigma, not only for the color of your skin but also your hair texture and how it feels and how it looks and if it's bad it's 'pelo malo' and if it's nice, straight and sleek it's 'pelo bueno'. And not only in Europe I mean, it's Latin America, South America, I mean it's worldwide—the idea of bad hair versus good hair.

And now, I would say in the past year or two especially with the social media influence, I feel like being natural has become a trend and has really inspired a lot of companies to create new natural products and more artists are celebrities are going natural so it's giving more people confidence to go natural. There's a big movement towards it, I don't know if it'll last forever necessarily but, it's a trend that is going in the right direction in my eyes.

JK: Could you speak about Afro-Latino/a (and just Latino/a in general) representation in the mainstream media? And your experience as someone working more behind the camera?

P: Right, well I mean it definitely has an impact in that there aren't many opportunities for dark-skinned anybody to be on television, to be in a lot of different things. I remember working in different environments where I saw everyone sort of fighting for those same roles and there was a specific experience that I had when I was working, I was doing AD work (which is like Assistant Director) so just, helping out with the production for music videos and, depending on the girls, and this was for a hip hop specifically reggaeton as well so it's really you know, it's specifically genre-based so I wouldn't categorize everything like this but, specifically for what I was working on, the light-skinned girls were chosen to be in the front and the darker-skinned girls were chosen to be in the back. The girls obviously, you know—whoever was skinnier or had prettier butts or like, those things would stand you out and you would go forward into the camera, and the more ethnic or African features, you were kind of put more towards the back. And one of the interesting moments that happened, I wasn't one of the video girls but one of the video girls came up to me and asked me 'Would you choose one of the dark-skinned girls,' saying 'Hey, can you get me in the front, I want to be in the front, why are all the light-skinned girls in the front?' And it was such an interesting dynamic there because I was the only woman of color that was working on the production crew side, period. And I'm also the one negotiating between all of the women that are there sort of, how do they want to be, you know, on the stage and a lot of them were like, 'the less clothes the better', you know. So, there was a lot of this mixed together with femininity and sexuality and then gender roles, skin color—like, all these things were just coming up in one of these video shoots for me.

And I'm politicized enough to see this happening now but I don't think, when I was like eighteen or seventeen, that I would have been like, "Oh this is internalized racism" and all that. I feel like now I'm able to call it when I see it, even though I don't fit, I don't say it necessarily but I did tell them [the video girl], 'Hey, why don't, instead of worrying about being in the front, why don't you try to help me, make my job easier and understand that I'm the only female of color trying to do this on this side.' And she looked at me kind of like 'Oh,...' like she never even noticed. And then when she thought about it, it was like 'Oh that's true, that's cool.' But it wasn't necessarily something that she was thinking about and for me, that's where I would want to encourage more women, is to set behind the scenes of the camera, being producers and being directors and being writers because that's also where we'll get a chance to sort of say 'hey this is what you should aspire to (or not aspire to).' I understand that being sexy and being cool is desirable to some degree but it's like...then to say that you're ugly

because you're dark or to say that beauty is only a certain thing is also just not fair and it's not fair for millions of people in this world. Because not everyone is blonde and blue-eyed and thin and it's that idea of beauty that is being challenged. It started with color and then if you were Latino/a, if you were light-skinned or you're dark.

I happen to be actually the darkest out of my siblings. My sister is lighter than me and I was always made to be aware of that fact. It wasn't like I grew up not knowing it; I was so aware that I was the darkest one. They'd be like 'Oh she's the darker one', 'Oh yeah, she's the one with the bigger lips or 'Oh yeah, she's the one...'.

JK: Do you feel like a lot of it is even connected to hair? I've heard a couple people say that even if friends of theirs or they themselves were one of the darker people in their families, that the hair could be the decider.

P: It depends. It is, because the hair can definitely tell a lot but I have known like, really light-skinned Dominicans with blue eyes and really kinky hair but blonde. And then for me, I don't have kinky hair but it's completely curly but I'm darker. So, it's harder to kind of pinpoint who's more Black or who's more whatever necessarily based on hair. But that was just because, ...like for me because I'm darker but my hair's not so kinky then I'm *india*. So I'm what you would consider *india* in the sense of that middle. If you have kinkier hair and you're darker, then you're *moreno*. But if you're light and you have kinkier hair then 'Oh you just have a little bit of Black in you', like *jabao*.

There's different passes that you can get but obviously the "minus-minus" you can get is dark skin and the kinky hair. Like, you don't want that combo but if you're dark skinned and have really nice, straight hair then 'Oh you're a Black girl that's pretty'. It could be a flip of the coin and it's sad because you don't decide what the texture of your hair is. That's also why companies are trying to help you decide what those things are and it's a billion dollar industry because you don't have the choice of deciding what your hair is. And who you are is, you're kind of given that by nature. But all of that is completely internalized racism and oppression and just layers and layers and years and years of believing it also.

I do love now that in 2012 you are finding more examples of darker skinned beauty and of natural hair and different textures. I mean, it's still a fight to some degree, it's not like I can go into a CVS and say 'Oh there's all these products meant for me.' But it's gotten a lot better and especially now with the Internet; you could just go online and buy the products. It's getting better but it's a conversation that's happening in America. I'm not sure what's happening in South America or Latin America, the Caribbean you know. It would be nice to see what the world conversation is. Having an American experience is also what I want to be able to say and offer, because I don't know how the rest of the world is living.

It also helps having our President be Barack Obama, it helps in all these different things that there are more people of color out there in the world that are in positions—...

JK: ...that you can see, that's it's not just "one day"?

P: Exactly. Because Barack by having, and even Michelle, by having dark skin allow other people all over the world to see a different hue and I think that that's political in it's

own way. And it's nothing huge that has to be said, it's just them just standing there, and it's crazy to think that, 'Oh you're dark so you can't do certain things in this world' but it's amazing how polarizing skin color can be and again it goes back to internalized oppression. There are things that are either said that are, you know, but there are also things that are also just underlying in our society that are not said but people treating each other based on those stereotypes and it's...it's not cool because everyone has that freedom to explore who they are, if you want to have straight hair or if you want to have like a Mohawk or whatever. It's all good in that way.