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Rodriguez, Felix

Rodriguez, Felix Interview: Bronx African American History Project
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Interviewee: Felix Rodriguez
Interviewer: Oneka LaBennett
Interviewer: Mark Naison
Date: October 25, 2007

Transcriber: Danielle Jakubowski

Oneka LaBennett: Two, three, four, five. Testing one, two, three, four, five. Okay, that's working. Thank you.

Mark Naison: Okay, excellent.

OL: So today is October 25, 2007 and this is the one hundred and ninety-ninth interview for the Bronx African-American History Project and it's our honor to interview Felix Rodriguez.

Felix Rodriguez: I'm glad to be here.

OL: And if you could say and spell your name for the transcriber.

MN: Just close the door a little bit because they are making some noise.

FR: And do you need the mic also or no?

OL: No, I'm fine I [muffled].

FR: Okay. Felix Rodriguez, F-E-L-I-X R-O-D-R-I-G-U-E-Z.

OL: And Felix, can you tell us where and when you were born?

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FR: I was born July 9, 1967 at **Flower Hospital** on Fifth Avenue and [inaudible] street in East Harlem.

OL: [muffled] And how long did you live in East Harlem?

FR: I was there a year and then from there we moved to Queens, we lived in South Ozone Park until I was eleven, so ten years. Then at eleven we moved to Puerto Rico to [inaudible] in Puerto Rico. And I was there for seven years until I graduated from high school.

OL: And are both of your parents originally from Puerto Rico?

FR: Yes, my mother is from [inaudible] and my father is from [inaudible].

OL: And what, what did your parents do for a living when you were growing up?

FR: My father worked for a factory [muffled], he worked for a factory and my mother was a babysitter.

OL: And they did that work in East Harlem, and before you moved back to Puerto Rico?

FR: Yes. I mean basically in, in Queens.

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OL: In Queens.

FR: Yes, that's where I basically grew up and yes. And then once we moved to Puerto Rico my mother worked as a, a cleaning lady and my father worked for a couple of years as a construction worker.

OL: What propelled your parents to first move to New York and then move back to Puerto Rico?

FR: My mother's situation, she was one of the oldest in her family, and the situation was such that they needed more income. My grandmother was sick, couldn't take care of her kids or financially support them so my, my mother was the only one in her family that didn't go to college after she graduated from high school. She came to New York and basically, I would say like fifty to sixty percent of her check went back, she sent it back to her parents. My father didn't want to go to school anymore; he went to school until the eighth grade. And he was **lazy**; he did not want to go to work in the, in the sugar cane fields and he didn't want to basically do anything. And my grandfather told him, "You're going to have to go to New York and get a job and do something because you're not doing anything here." So he had brothers and sisters here in New York already that were established and were already working so he came to New York eventually and landed this job in this factory and he worked there for about twenty years.

OL: Although that work in the sugar cane fields, that's back-breaking work.

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FR: It is. It was really bad, really bad. So he didn't want to do that, he didn't want to go to school, he didn't know what to do so he came to New York and worked here.

OL: I see, so your parents met here?

FR: Yes, they met here because in Puerto Rico they were on completely different sides of the island; he was on the south side of the island [inaudible]. So they would of never met, they were so far apart, but here they met. My aunt, my father's sister, worked with my mother at the same factory and that's how they - - they met at a party. And the rest is history.

OL: Interesting. So then - - so how many siblings do you have?

FR: I have one sister, one older sister; she's three years older than me.

OL: Okay so they took the whole family and took them down to Puerto Rico.

FR: Yes. We were, we were in school and it took us a little while to adapt because we were born and raised here so we didn't really know much of Spanish, especially not reading and writing it. But luckily Spanish is phonetic so a lot of it made sense and we adapted, it was actually easier than English to learn. So we adapted pretty quickly.

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OL: What was that like for you being - - well you were a year old - - how old were you when you moved back to Puerto Rico?

FR: No, I was eleven.

OL: Eleven years old.

FR: I was eleven years old. When, when I went to Puerto Rico it was very interesting because first of all, being a Puerto Rican in New York and growing up going to elementary school and stuff like that I remember just thinking that everybody when they were home would speak another language.

OL: [laughs]

FR: You know what I mean? It seemed normal because that's what we did. So I always wondered - - I always thought either A: everybody's speaking Spanish when they go home or B: they all have their own separate languages. And when I found out that people didn't, that they spoke English all the time, it was kind of a shock for me. So going to Puerto Rico was another shock because up until then I was considered a Puerto Rican, I considered myself a Puerto Rican, but then once I went to Puerto Rico I was considered "The American." And it was a mixture of envy, and admiration, and I remember kids asking me, "Did you buy those sneakers in New York?" "Wow." It was such a big deal that I had - - you know, I mean some of these kids had

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never even been to an airport. Like “How was the plane? What does it feel like to travel?” and stuff like that so it was a culture shock also because I lived in the country. So I went from the suburbs to live in completely, completely rural - - raising animals. We had pigs, we had turkeys, we had chickens, so - -

MN: Your family had pigs?

FR: Yes, and I had to raise them.

OL: Wow.

FR: So with all my responsibility I had to actually - -

MN: Now who’s initiative was this, your mother’s or your father’s?

FR: My father’s, God rest his soul [laughs]. He, he basically had this whole idea of being a farmer and without any type of agreement volunteered me to take care of the animals. So I was basically the, the keeper.

OL: Wow.

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FR: And that was part of actually, part of the motivation to get out of the country and to move back to New York. I guess I knew the difference. I knew that there was a difference.

MN: You made sure there were no pigs at Stony Brook?

FR: Exactly.

OL: [laughs]

FR: And I, I actually boycotted animals all together. Like I, I have now, it's probably been about seven years, but up until then I didn't have any pets [laughter] because I was so, I was so upset about the fact that I missed out on so much by like vacations, sleep-overs, I couldn't do any of that because I had to take care of the animals.

OL: Time, yes. Wow.

FR: Can I stop for a second?

OL: Sure.

FR: I just realized my cell phone is on and you can probably hear it in the hall.

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OL: Okay.

MN: Wow.

OL: This gives me a chance to say that the interviewers are Dr. Oneka LaBennett and Dr. Mark Naison. I failed to mention.

MN: Now do you - - you don't have any experiences with animal husbandry?

OL: When I was little in [inaudible] we had chickens. I used to go and get the eggs, collect the eggs, which you had to be very careful and I was given that job because I was very careful. But other than that I didn't have - - I didn't have, I didn't have to raise pigs [laughter].

FR: So that was also a shock because I felt like I didn't really - - again because I knew the difference, I didn't really have the advantages that all the other cousins - - my other cousins in New York had, which was, they were going to the movies, they were going to the malls, they were shopping, they were doing tagging on subway trains, and, and skateboarding, and rollerblading, and I lived in the hills so I didn't do any of those things. So I really felt cheated and left out and they would brag about it when they would come visit and they were like "I would be right now going to the movies, what would you be doing? Feeding the pigs?" [laughter] So again, that was motivation. I also, because my sister is older than me she went to college in Puerto Rico and originally I wanted to stay in Puerto Rico to go to college, but

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because my father, my parents were both very strict, and even though she was like on the other side of the island, every weekend she was at home. And if there was a holiday or whatever, my father would pick her up and bring her home, so it was like she never left. So I learned from her experience that I needed to be out of the island completely in order to have the freedom that I, that I wanted.

MN: When you left for New York at age eleven, were you very aware of music, and was music an important part of your life?

FR: Yes, very much so. I mean, I grew up going to parties all the time; my parents were party-animals, especially my father. My mother was religious and she was practicing Evangelist, but she definitely always went to church and tried to teach us religion and my father was the player, he gambled, he danced, he partied, he drank a lot. And so there were always parties at my house, we were always going to people's parties. On weekends my father would just take me to like bars and - -

OL: Whatever he was doing.

FR: - - and baseball fields. Whatever he was doing he wanted me to be with him so I was always listening to music, especially Salsa and Meringue.

MN: So, so they listened primarily to Latin music?

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FR: Yes, and I grew up listening to Pop music.

MN: So you, you got Michael Jackson - -

FR: Even before Michael Jackson - - well you know, I grew up with like Jackson Five - -

MN: Jackson Five, in the early seventies.

FR: Yes, Tina Turner, Captain and Tennille, Diana Ross, that kind of music. So and that was another thing, I mean the music - - the television and music was the one thing that I wasn't exposed to in Puerto Rico because we didn't have any cable that worked, only the local channels. So I, I again had to compare like what I was used to watching in New York to like television that was very limited in Puerto Rico. And also the music, not all the music was imported, so I missed out on a lot of my music history. And it's funny because a lot of times when I'm with friends and they hear a song from the eighties and they're like "Oh my God, do you remember that song?" and I'm like "I was in Puerto Rico." That was, that was the [inaudible].

OL: [laughs]

MN: So what, what were the exact years you were in Puerto Rico?

FR: I was in Puerto Rico from seventy-eight to eighty-five (1978-1985).

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OL: What do you remember from Puerto Rico about the sort of early emergence of hip-hop?

Did you - - were you exposed to any early hip-hop then?

FR: Yes, yes. In 1980, I had a cousin of mine who lived in Puerto Rico for a year, he just came to live with my grandparents and he was the one that told me all about tagging on the trains. He was really - -

MN: Wow.

FR: - - so he was like an influence to me. Like I used to hear his stories and he would tell me how exciting - -

MN: Now what borough did he - - was he from?

FR: In East Harlem.

MN: He was from East Harlem?

FR: He was from East Harlem. He had a tag name, it was "**Ray Shocks the House**" [laughter] and he taught me how to tag, so he made my, my tag name. I'm a junior so my tag name was "Jay." So he taught me how to, to write it and I kind of lived vicariously through him. So he started telling me about hip-hop before it was what it is today. And that year was the first - - the

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year that “Rapper’s Delight” became commercial so he knew all the words to it, and I learned all the words to that as well so - -

MN: Now, now what about other kids in Puerto Rico, were they - - did they have relatives who performed that same role for them?

FR: Yes, yes and there were, there were a few. They were always the - - what they would call, the “Nuyoricans” that would be in school or that - - so they, they kind of would imitate them. So once the, I would probably say two or three years later when “Electric Boogie” was really popular and break dancing and all of that, people were imitating what they saw in the movies.

MN: So did you get into break dancing?

FR: I did not because they had this thing in Puerto Rico, that now it doesn’t really exist, but it was called Cocolos and [inaudible]. And Cocolos were - - which translates also to morenos, dark-skinned people, but Cocolos, by default, were people that listened and were fanatics of Salsa music. And **Roqueros** were the ones that like rock music, and they had like really specific things that you couldn’t do. Like it became part of one of these cultures. You couldn’t like - - like the Roqueros wore corduroy pants and they let their hair grow, and they had dread locks and they were mostly associated with the beach; they were the surfers. And then the Cocolos were the five, six gold chains - -

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MN: [laughs] Oh wow.

FR: - - and the baggy pants, and specific haircut - - the, the what do you call it - -

OL: **Flat top?**

FR: The mullet - -

OL: Oh, okay.

FR: - - the mullet. And you danced Salsa; you have like high waters, white shoes. You know you had all these, these codes. So I was a Cocolo when I was in high school.

MN: Are there any pictures of you in, in that, that outfit?

FR: Yes, yes in those outfits. I had the clock with the chain. [laughter]

OL: Oh, that's brilliant.

FR: And my sister is three years older than me and because my parents were so strict, I was always her chaperone. So I learned how to dance Salsa when I was in junior high school. I was

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going to high school dances, so I had a head start and I became really, really wrapped up in the whole Salsa thing. So I actually would win Salsa competitions.

OL: Oh really?

FR: That was fun.

OL: That's great, that's incredible.

FR: But yes, so I didn't - - if I were, I guess if I would of lived in New York during that period I would have gotten into it because I like dancing regardless, but because I was under the influence of the Cocolos - -

MN: But, but - - there weren't people in your high school who were like putting down like cardboard and break dancing in the school yard?

FR: Yes, there were, there were. And they weren't as good as the New Yorkers. Again, they - - their only, their only means of I guess getting ideas or whatever would be from the movies, the [inaudible] at that moment in time.

MN: Breaking to "**Electric Boogie**" and all that stuff.

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FR: Yes. So unless they were coming to New York on vacation, there were - - there were no ways of me learning how to develop the Electric Boogie.

OL: And you were in the country in Puerto Rico?

FR: And I was in the country. So now, now I go to Puerto Rico and even in the country there's cable, everybody has cell phones, and communication globalization has grown to the point where now everyone's aware of MTV, but at that point not only was MTV just beginning, but we didn't have access to it. We just had to imagine and kind of create your own form of break dancing to Electric Boogie.

OL: Interesting. So you were - - so then you were in Puerto Rico from eleven until seventeen you said?

FR: Eighteen.

OL: Eighteen, and then straight from there you went to college?

FR: Yes, yes. So again because I learned the lesson from being the younger son, I, I came to New York to Stony Brook and there was one thing that was really interesting about, about my father, which is, he didn't want me to be in the city. And I didn't know why he was so resistant of me living in the city. He was like, "You can go to New York, but you have to go to one of the

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outside, not one of the state universities.” And I really wanted to come to the city because, again, that was where my attraction was, that’s where I knew popular culture was going to be and I wanted to be where all the action was. And I didn’t get into like five or six years later, when I graduated from Stony Brook and was living in the city. And then going to NYU, I came out of the closet, so I think my father always knew that I was gay - -

OL: Really?

FR: - - and he didn’t want to expose me to that culture, so he wanted always to protect me from, from being around it. And obviously when I was around it was when I came out because I realized not all gay men have nine inch nails and are hairdressers. So it was, it was kind of like his way of keeping me from doing that because it was - -

MN: Wow. Now was there a gay subculture in Puerto Rico?

FR: Not at all. At least not where I lived, or lived, or currently now when I go back to visit there is no - - there aren’t any gays, or out-of-the-closet gays.

MN: So you had to learn a disguise or - -

FR: Well I was in denial, I was in denial and I hoped to be straight, also because I was brought up going to church and learning that being gay is an abomination and all that.

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MN: Wow.

FR: Even if I had the thoughts, I would repress them. I would - - I just hoped that that wasn't going to be the case. And then eventually I became comfortable with it, and once I became more worldly - -

OL: So when you say that you, you realized that your father wanted to shelter you from the city because he didn't want you to be exposed to sort of a "gay subculture," did you - - did it occur to you all along that your father knew you were gay or were you in such denial that you think he knew, but you didn't?

FR: I think he knew and I didn't.

OL: I see.

FR: And he would even specifically ask me. Because even when I was in high school and I was winning Salsa competitions, I would ask permission for some of my female dancers. I would go over their house, so I had girlfriends that I would go over their house and ask permission to - - for her to go with me to dance. And then once we would compete and win our trophy, she would go and make out with her boyfriend and my father would be like, "What are doing, you're asking someone else to go out and you're not even dating her?" And I would be like, "Oh, she's a good

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dancer.” And again it was my ignorance, you know, so I didn’t really think of it in that way, I just thought like, she’s a great dancer, I want to dance, and that’s what I want to do. I wasn’t interested in her in any other way. And my mother would defend me because my mother would say, “Oh, he was brought up as a Christian, he respects women.” And I really believed that, I really believed that I just respected women and, and it wasn’t - - that I wasn’t fresh without really realizing that I wasn’t attracted to women in that way.

OL: So when - - so you went to Stony Brook and that’s where you, you eventually came out - -

FR: No, I actually came out when I went to NYU.

OL: Oh, oh later - -

FR: I came out, that’s another thing, I came out relatively late because kids in the city usually come out at twelve, thirteen.

MN: Now were you at Stony Brook - - were you - - did you start to become aware that you were gay or that - - or it didn’t even happen until later?

FR: I, I actually had sex with men, but didn’t consider myself gay. There’s a theory in Puerto Rico, that’s really a macho theory which is “a hole is a hole and a mouth is a mouth,” [laughs] which meant that as long as you weren’t the one receiving, that you were still straight. So you

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could have someone give you oral sex or penetration and that doesn't necessarily take away the fact that you're still a man, that you're not gay.

MN: What is the expression in Spanish for that?

FR: **“Un agujero es un agujero, una boca es una boca.”** So it didn't, it didn't matter, didn't matter in that case. So even though I was having sex with men, I didn't consider myself gay. And it took again when I was at NYU and I was surrounded by the kids in the village and I started going to the Christopher Street Piers, that's when I realized that there was some sort of connection, that I kind of could relate to these kids and that I was attracted to men and I was repressing it. So it was, it was a very important part of my life. But again, it was kind of late, I came out when I was twenty-three, which - - but in retrospect and I'm glad I came out so much later because most kids in my age group are now dead. They came out when HIV wasn't as popular as it is and the prevention for it out there so by the time I came out, I knew about AIDS, I knew about using a condom, I knew about all the things - -

OL: That's an, an interesting way of thinking about it. It, it also seems like, from what you were telling us earlier about your sort of development into thinking of yourself as a filmmaker when you were at - - tell us a little bit about when you were at Stony Brook you were still thinking you were going to study Electrical Engineering. It seems like being at NYU coincided with coming out as an artist - -

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FR: Yes.

OL: - - and coming out as a gay man.

FR: Yes, yes, yes, yes. Coming out in many different ways. My grandfather lived until he was one hundred and seven and he was a great story teller. And I would sit with him on the balcony and he would just tell me stories, and he saw the world change. Like I used him as a, as an example whenever I needed to memorize years of wars or whatever. Like I would always have him as a reference because he was alive, you know what I mean?

OL: Wow.

FR: He was born in the late 1800s and he lived until - -

MN: Now was he still living in Puerto Rico?

FR: Yes. He lived in America, he lived in New York a couple of years, but most of his life he lived in Puerto Rico and he was into agriculture so he, he knew a lot about nature. And he would just look at the sky and say, "Okay at three o'clock it's going to rain." And, you know, he was just amazing.

MN: Wow.

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FR: So I, I love hearing his stories and I loved telling other people his stories and I just loved telling stories. And he also has this, and a lot of people in my family have this, which is they have a really good sense of, of picturing a scene and really giving you the three-dimensional feeling of how the person spoke and how it felt, and what it smelled like.

MN: Really?

FR: So when I started taking filmmaking, it seemed like second nature to me. When I, when I would write stories, it would just be so natural for me to be able to pick up an accent, or be able to speak like a ninety-year old, or a fifteen-year old, or someone from Long Island, someone from Europe.

MN: Now did you do acting in college?

FR: You had to as a, as a writer, you had to take video classes and you also had to take acting because it all kind of blends into each other. A lot of the exercises that actors do to develop characters or to, to get into character are the same exercises that writers do to write them. So I was actually pretty good in my acting classes, and enjoyed that a lot. I respect actors a lot, so I would never put myself out there because I know how hard it is and I know that I'm not as talented as actors are. But yes, a lot of the exercises are very similar.

OL: So, so you started talking about your grandfather when I asked you about - -

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FR: I know. I'm sorry.

OL: No, no, no that, that was great to hear.

FR: And the question was again, I'm sorry?

OL: That you - - your coming out as a gay man coincided with coming out as an artist. I wanted you to talk about the progression from thinking you were going to be an electrical engineer to deciding to go to NYU and study film.

FR: Well, I think I was obviously very young and it was my first time away from my house and it was the first time being in the United States after living seven years in Puerto Rico so I was very - - I was kind of thrown into the world and I had to learn a lot about myself. And I learned a lot, but in the process I also learned of my - - of what really my interests were. So I kind of was censoring myself and I was trying to satisfy to please my parents in electrical engineering. It sound so good, like such a great thing, but I wasn't really interested in engineering, I was more interested in something more creative. And even after I graduated from Stony Brook, I still didn't know, I still wasn't sure what I was going to do as far as a career. So I was a counselor at Bronx Community College for a year and while I was there I was still soul searching and trying to figure out what I wanted, and I knew that I wanted to be involved in filmmaking or television production. So that's when I started applying to colleges, and started studying at NYU. So I, I guess throughout the years, the more time away from home, the more independent I became and

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comfortable with myself, my likes and dislikes and the easier it came for me to, to realize what it was I really wanted. I'm still, I'm still learning and kind of coming out of my shell.

MN: I, I want to just bring up something we talked about during lunch, which is that the **New Yorican** Salsa bands on their albums would have these doo-wop or rhythm and blues songs that contrasted with the rhythmic material they were doing. Could you comment on that, and when you first encountered that?

FR: I first encountered that in the eighties. I had, again, I had cousins that lived in New York and would visit Puerto Rico and they would have - - so I was really familiar with the Puerto Rico bands, the Puerto Rican bands from natives. And he had all these tapes from bands that were from New York. And they all played Salsa songs, but they would always have one or two tracks of rhythm and blues songs. And it would be either a doo-wop song from the fifties or it could be a contemporary R & B song, but they would sing it with a Salsa beat, or they would just sing it as it was in English, but I guess it was their opportunity to, to kind of remind people that we have a dual bi-culture, culture.

MN: And the bands in Puerto Rico never did that?

FR: No, no. They were, they were very specific on - - like they would, they would play - - if it was a Salsa band, they would have like one or two ballads. [inaudible] is what we called them. And they would probably have one Meringue if it was a Salsa band, but it would mostly be Salsa.

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MN: Now, now a lot, a lot of Nuyoricans grew up with African-Americans. Were - - did you ever hear people consciously in Puerto Rico - - consciously criticize Nuyoricans for, like, adopting the language or customs or behavior of African-Americans?

FR: Yes.

MN: Is that an issue?

FR: Yes, and it, and it went both ways. I mean there were people that would criticize it and there were people - -

OL: [background noise] Excuse me, I'm sorry. Come on in John. It's okay. You were saying?

FR: There were people that would criticize it, and there were people that, that admired it. So I got, I got both. It's interesting again because when I moved to Puerto Rico I was considered a Nuyoricano for the first time, I was considered an American and I noticed there was such a, a difference and I never knew that there was a difference; I thought Puerto Ricans were Puerto Ricans regardless of where you are. So they would knock me for how I spoke, they would knock me for how I dressed, they would - - you know some of my beliefs or my politics, they would say "Oh that's because you're an American" or whatever. But at the same time, they admired the fact that I spoke English, that I actually knew what songs meant. Like they would adapt a

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song based on what they interpreted. So like, "Get Down on It," [laughter] would be [inaudible] right?

OL: [laughs] That was brilliant.

FR: Or like, what was another song? **Manero**. Right in, in "Rapper's Delight" there is a section where he goes, "Master Gee, am I mellow? It's on you, so what you gonna do?"

OL: Oh, mellow.

FR: So they would say "Manero," and that would, that would be the only part that they would say or identify - -

MN: [laughs]

FR: - - so it was interesting to them to have someone around them that actually knew what the words were and what they meant. So it was sword of two edges; there was advantages and disadvantages.

MN: Now was, was race dealt with differently in Puerto Rico than in New York City?

FR: Yes, definitely. It wasn't as in your face as it is New York City. It wasn't - - like obviously, Puerto Ricans that are light skinned, white, blue eyes, green eyes, blond hair - - they

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are the ones on television, they were the ones working in corporate America and the darker-skinned were the “help,” my father. But it was never really like addressed and because we all fall under the Puerto Rican umbrella it’s kind of camouflaged, it’s not so - - and I realized it a lot more when I came to Stony Brook, when I came to New York where there was a big distinction. And even within Latinos, the darker ones, and the lighter ones. And I’ll never forget that one of the first orientation sessions that I had was for people of color. And the woman that was talking was African-American but I never - - I didn’t even realize. She was very fair-skinned and up until the moment she said, “I never witnessed racism until one time I was combing my hair and a white girl was staring at me, and she was staring at me because she had never seen a black girl comb her hair.” And I’m looking around like “You’re not black.” [laughter] To me she wasn’t black because she was so light-skinned. But then I realized that it wasn’t a matter of light skin tone; it was culture, it was - - so and then because I’m darker, a lot of people would say “Oh why are you acting like a Moreno? Why are you acting like a black person? Why are you talking like them? Why are you dressing like them?”

OL: Wow.

FR: So there was always - - I, I pledged an African fraternity. At the time it was when, when this whole African awareness was becoming - - and everyone was wearing kufis and the African symbols and, and dishikis.

MN: So which fraternity did you pledge?

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FR: It's called Malik Sigma Psi - - it was called Malik Sigma Psi until they eliminated the Greek letters all together, so it was just called the Malik fraternity. And my Latino friends would ask me, they're like, "Why would you be pledging an African fraternity? Why wouldn't you pledge a Latino fraternity?" And I'm like, "Well this is where we all come from, and we have so much of the African culture within our culture and we've been denying it, or we don't address it."

OL: When you were talking earlier about the two sub-cultures and the Colocos?

FR: Cocolos.

OL: Cocolos were the same - - they were - - it's the same word for Moreno, you said. Was there a racial distinction between those two groups? I just thought it was interesting that it was the same word for Moreno for people who listen to Salsa.

FR: Right. And it was, it was. So Cocolos mostly were darker. And **Roqueros** were mostly white, light-skinned. I mean there were exceptions, but it's interesting that the term Cocolo also meant dark-skinned.

MN: Now was, was that group **Minuto**, were they - -

FR: They were Roquero.

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MN: They were Roquero.

FR: So again, they wore corduroys, they had long hair, they were, they were influenced by American and we were kind of against that and we had our own - - so we weren't Minuto fans.

MN: [laughs]

FR: We would be very offended if we were considered to be - -

MN: Now did this sort of distinction later emerge when Reggaeton came up? Was there any sort of racial, cultural clash?

FR: I think that they don't have the name, now the culture doesn't divide it as strictly as it did back then. But there is a division also, and there is definitely the darker are into - - the darker Puerto Ricans are into Reggaeton and, and Bachata and all that. And the lighter ones are into the Rock and the, and the - -

MN: Shakira?

FR: And the Shakira, yes. I think the Shakira is kind of more on the Reggaeton side because, again, she's, she's more considered black.

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OL: So when, when you were at NYU and you were studying film, what was, what was your social scene like? What were you - - were going to clubs, were you - - where were you listening to music, were you still dancing?

FR: I always escaped. I always - - so it was interesting also because as a Puerto Rican, you never knew how to fit in. There wasn't a specific way of being as a Puerto Rican. You either adapted to the white American or you adapted to the black American, but there wasn't like a strong role model in Puerto Rican culture so you kind of had to figure out what you wanted to follow or if you were just going to be an independent, and just be yourself and do whatever. So going to NYU, because it was also the period when I was coming out, I started going to the gay clubs, I started going to the balls, the gay balls - - I don't know if you're familiar with [inaudible] culture. But I always escaped that scene and go to like a Salsa class - - to a Salsa club because I always had that like strong connection.

MN: Now where, where - - there is Salsa clubs in lower Manhattan?

FR: Yes. There was the Palladium at the time, which was on Fourteenth Street. There was Broadway Ninety-Six - -

MN: That I remember. [laughs]

FR: - - Studio 54 had a Salsa night, **Roseland** had a Salsa night.

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MN: Now was, was it - - was there a gay presence at the Salsa clubs?

FR: Usually there were transsexuals or what I would call “flaming queens” that would dance only with other guys and would create a whole circle around them and I didn’t want to be associated- -

OL: That’s not your scene.

FR: Yes. I danced with women and I acted like a heterosexual and I just wanted - - there is a term in the gay scene which is called “scooped” and I didn’t want to get scooped. Being scooped is kind of being discovered, people find out that you’re gay or not and so when I would go to that culture, and still when I go, I dance with women, I don’t dance with men, and that’s just the way that I carry myself. I don’t like that kind of attention. I like just coming like I did here as opposed to like walking around - -

MN: Right, with your arm around somebody - -

FR: With my arm around - - you know because there is so many - - I feel also, there is so many risks that you take that you, you can get into a confrontation that may even lead to death - -

MN: Wow.

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FR: - - just because you're, you're gay. So I try to avoid that.

OL: And also what you're balancing is your political identity, but also your own personality of not being an extrovert, you're trying to be yourself within - -

FR: Right. And kind of just, just developing my whole new individuality. Like when you're younger I think, at least I was, influenced by so many different types and I wanted to figure out which type I belonged to and which one I wanted to be a part of, and it kept changing, like every year it was different, like "No, I want focus more on being like this" and now after a while, it's just like, I'm just going to be me. If one day I want to wear corduroys, I'll wear corduroys [laughter] and, and that's just what I've learned.

OL: So tell us now a little bit about - - you're at NYU - - when did you graduate? When did you start sort of - - because you said earlier that you didn't just decide you were going to go into filmmaking, you had, you had another job first. Tell us a little bit about that.

FR: While I was at NYU, there was a course called "Writing for the Camera" and basically we would write a script and they would literally hand us a camera and just send us off to film it. And then they would give us a quick course on editing, at the time it was three-quarter inch tape. I was very familiar with three-quarter inch but they were like the big VHS-type tapes and then it was like from one machine to another and so it wasn't like it is now that it's all digital and you can press "undo." It was like, if you did a mistake, it was done.

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OL: It was there.

FR: And from that course I fell in love with filmmaking. I fell in love with the whole idea of editing and shooting and ever since then I've worked on little projects on the side. I've always had a full-time job, but I've had projects where I've done public service announcements and video-taped shows and plays, and La Bruja's documentary was the first full-length **speech** for documentary that I directed.

MN: Now where did you find people to work with on your film - - was this from contacts from NYU, your fellow students?

FR: Depending on the project. When I first graduated a lot of the contacts were still the people that I was connected with from NYU, but over the years it's, it's been a lot of different types of networks. I belong to an organization called NALIP, which is the National Association of Latino Independent Producers, so that's an organization that has a lot of Latinos in different parts of the country that we have this network. So whenever I have a project, I'll put in an add, and I'll get responses from there. I still belong the Alumni Association at NYU and, and just putting adds on Craig's List or whatever. So now when I get production companies together, we can meet by any of those **means**.

OL: So when you decided that you were going - - well I wanted to know what your day jobs were while you were - - you said you always had a - -

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FR: I first started, when I graduated from NYU, I was working for PBS on the Adam Smith show; I was a productions assistant for that show. And then I worked at FX when it was first formed, the cable network for Fox, as an associate producer for a morning show and while I was there I decided that I didn't want to work at a network because it was almost like working in a factory. I wasn't necessarily a fan of the show that I worked for, I didn't get it, they didn't get me whenever I had an opinion. I wanted to always have a story that had to deal with the urban kids, or Latinos, or blacks or - - and they were more interested - - it was a national show, so they wanted it to be something more universal and kind of middle-America type topics.

MN: Excuse me, just - - I have to leave - -

OL: Okay

MN: Nice to meet you.

OL: So, so you've had some work in the film industry or in the TV industry but you weren't really realizing your own personal goals.

FR: So for the experience it was good, but after a while I became kind of like a prisoner and I felt that I was investing so much time because they were really busy in high-pressure jobs, but I was working for these production companies that I had - - I didn't have any interest not even to show my **reels** to say look, this is where I work; I'm so proud of it. I wasn't really proud of

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where I was working, so I decided to go on another route and I wasn't sure if I was going to be -
- people suggested to be a cab driver - - if you want to have really interesting stories, become a
cab driver and you'll, you'll have time to write and be able to, while you're working, get some
really great stories. And then another job option was temping. So I decided to go with temping
because it seemed a little bit more - - less dangerous. [laughter]

OL: Than being a cab driver, yes.

FR: Being a cab driver, even though I wasn't going to have as many interesting stories in it. So
I started working as a temp, and from being a temp, I became a full-time worker at a - - at
Citibank. At first I worked as an administrative assistant, I worked for ten years as an
administrative assistant, and the last two years I was [inaudible] for Citibank and I just quit in
July. When I turned forty I decided, okay, now I'm going to start my new life and I've been
working freelance since then.

OL: So tell us about the, the artistic process of meeting "La Bruja" and then deciding that she
was going to be the subject of a documentary film that you were going to make?

FR: I already knew Caridad because she, she - - we had a mutual friend and I had a reading of a
play that I had written and I met her there and we became friends. She, after six months of
knowing her, asked me to come to one of her readings and I didn't know that she was a poet and
fell in love with her performance. I thought she was amazing - - I didn't immediately think, oh

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my god I have to do a story on her, but I knew that there was something about her message that I can totally relate to and I wanted to give it as much exposure as possible. I, I studied playwriting as well and I've written a couple plays that haven't been produced, but it doesn't - - it doesn't really reach out to as many people as film, as film does. So I was searching for an idea of a documentary and this kind of fell on my lap because she asked me, "Would you videotape my wedding?" and that, that's when it hit me. I was like, "If I videotape your wedding, I want to do a documentary with you" and that's how that started. And again, it was a five year process and I didn't know exactly what the story was going to be when I started shooting and now I learned. I mean that was my first feature and I learned a lot, it was a great learning exercise because I learned how to work with someone, I learned how to work with someone who's your friend [inaudible], I learned about editing and about - - because it's almost the same thing, it's almost the same thing as writing a script because you have to have a middle - - the beginning, middle, and the end, and you have to have drama and you have to have a resolution and all those formulas you need for script writing, but it's on real footage. It's not something that you wrote, it's something that you have to kind of pick up when you, when look back at the footage and figure out okay where's the story?

OL: True. So then after - - aside from the, the process of editing the film and - -

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OL: - - have to learn how the process of trying to market it right? And what was that process like?

FR: Very difficult, very difficult and - - because it's very time consuming, it's very time consuming in each job within film production, whether it be pre-production, production, or post; it just requires a lot of your time, and I was basically doing it all. So from writing proposals to get grants, to shopping it around once it was completed was like a lot of time that I had to devote to first learning how to do it and, and then actually doing it. And, and when you hire someone like a publicist or an editor or a grant writer, these are people that only focus on that and have years of experience and have a lot of contacts, so even though it's hard for them as well, it's easier because they already have it. And it's like you're, you're starting raw to you know, pitch this out. So it's, it's very difficult, and it's very difficult if you don't have any money because unfortunately, that makes a big difference. I mean it makes a big difference for an audience member if they get a flyer that's in color as opposed to getting a flyer that's in **black and brown** that is just regular paper. So all of those things you, you need money, so it was definitely a challenge.

OL: And when you said earlier that you held fundraising parties, you sort of work a little bit, make some more money, and then when that money ran out, you had to start working, make more money. Was your family supportive in that process, when you were struggling to make money to get this film complete?

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FR: No. [laughter] No, it was not. They, they're not artistic in any way so they didn't get - - they didn't understand why I was devoting so much time to something that was not necessarily going to be promising, as far as financially. And they almost thought like I was working for her. They were like why are you putting all this time and all this money for a **project** that's going to benefit her and not you? So I stopped. I gave up on trying to convince them or to have them understand. They were not supportive, they didn't understand and they worked as much as they could to try and discourage me to continue to invest so much time and money into this project.

OL: Wow. What about when you made the decision that you were going to study film and not become an, an electrical engineer?

FR: Also, very disappointed. I mean my, my mother was a little supportive because she knew as a little kid I always liked to tell stories. I would watch television or, or read a book and I would create the same story, but my version. Like if I watched "The Wizard of Oz" I would create The Wizard of Oz again but it would be a spin-off of it and - - so she remembers all those years when I had comic books of all these shows and movies that I had seen. So she knew that I had a, a deep passion for filmmaking, but she was always concerned about my well-being and my future and, and stability of making money so she was always - - she was very happy when I worked at Citibank.

OL: [laughs] Did they come to the premiere of "La Bruja" or - -

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FR: She didn't come. My father passed away, he passed away in ninety-three (1993), but she, she didn't come to the screening here in New York, but they actually flew me out to Puerto Rico, they screened it at this culture center called [inaudible] and that was great. That was great for me as an artist and also for my family to see my work and just - - it, it was kind of like the push that I needed to get out of corporate America also because that in combination with the fact that other experiences that I mentioned earlier just were reminders that why am I still - - like people would ask me "What's your next project?" And I would be, "Well, I work full-time, I don't really know" and I got tired of hearing myself with that same excuse. I just - - after meeting so many other people that are doing it full-time - - **anthropologists too**. I realize that if you want to do something, and if you, if you feel like this is your calling, then you shouldn't put it off; life is too short.

OL: So when did you move to the Bronx and buy your co-op - - because you were saying earlier that that was like your security right?

FR: Yes. In nineteen - - in 2004 I, I bought a co-op near Yankee Stadium and that's when I kind of could relax because up until then I was saving money but as you know there is always something that comes up, and then you have to start all over again and you know, you pay off your credit card and then something comes up and you have to use your credit card. So it was like that constant struggle; it was really hard, especially in New York City where everything is so expensive. So I finally made that investment so now I didn't feel like at least for room, for room and board I didn't have to worry about, oh my god, how am I going be able to afford rent? I

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actually started looking for an apartment just to rent it, when I realized that studio apartments in really bad neighborhoods were like one thousand dollars or more, I realized I might as well just buy something. So that's, that's one of the stepping stones. When I had that, that's when I realized okay, now I can pursue it. I also live with my partner, so we're sharing bills [inaudible] so it's not just me paying all the bills, we share it together so I feel that, that support.

OL: That helps, yes. How did you come to choose the Bronx?

FR: I have a friend that lives in the building that I live in. I was looking for apartments, and I was living in Brooklyn, I lived in Brooklyn for ten years and I was hoping to find something in Brooklyn.

OL: Where in Brooklyn did you live?

FR: Park Slope.

OL: Okay.

FR: Park Slope. So I was looking and I couldn't find anything. Again I would - - I would see these apartments that were like studio apartments, the layout was really crazy and there was nothing that I really liked and when I saw the apartment here in the Bronx and the size - - I wasn't very happy about moving to the Bronx because of the reputation or whatever, but when I

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saw the space and I saw how much I was getting for the price I was, I was convinced that this was the move so - -

OL: And you've been living there now for, what, seven years?

FR: No, no. I've only been here - - well 2004 so - -

OL: Two-thousand four, sorry.

FR: - - three, three years.

OL: And I would like to hear what your thoughts are on how the Bronx is represented versus the sort of reality of the Bronx. Because in following "La Bruja" around for over four years, and there's a lot of footage of the Bronx in your film - - you've probably become very intimately connected to the Bronx.

FR: Yes, yes. Well I already knew a lot about what it was like to live in the Bronx because I had family that lived in the Bronx and I also, when I was applying to colleges, was working in the Bronx so I had a lot of interaction with a lot of students, so I would listen to their stories. And - - so again, I - - I guess when I was living in Puerto Rico you kind of fall under the same assumption that being in the Bronx is like the cliché that you see in the movies and then when

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you actually meet somebody you realize that they have some elements of that, but that's not all they are. They are more than just a show, and it's more than just the poorest borough in the city. It has a lot of, of, of different, different characteristics that we don't normally see or know about. So I learned, I learned that people are educated, that people are successful, that people have houses and backyards. It's not just projects and graffiti and all these images that you kind of associate with the Bronx. I, I also, because I grew up in Puerto Rico I enjoy the fact that there are so many Latins here, especially in the area that I live. There's days that I wouldn't have to speak English. Like I would go to this corner store and they would speak Spanish, and I would go to the bank and they would speak Spanish, and I would go to the train - - you know what I mean? Like everywhere in my neighborhood they speak Spanish on the streets so it's like - - it's great to have, like, a home-away-from-home in a way. So yes, I've become very comfortable here in the Bronx and it's going through some changes, I know there's some political controversy about the gentrification and, and, and - - but I think that, like everything, neighborhoods change and hopefully it will be for the better. I mean the, the area that I live in now in the beginning of the nineteenth century - - of the twentieth century, was considered like the Fifth Avenue of - - Grand Concourse would be considered the Fifth Avenue of, of the Bronx. And that's no longer the case, I mean it's in really bad shape but I think it's picking up again and so I, I'm glad to be back here to kind of see that, that change.

OL: If you could characterize the kinds of people who live in your building - - who, who else lives there besides you? So you're a filmmaker and you, you bought a condo in this building; who else is living in the building?

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FR: I have all types. I mean I live in the building that's half co-op and half still renters, so as people move out, those apartments are sold as co-ops. So we have people that have been there for thirty years and they're blue-collard, they're - - have roots in their community, but then you have artists, you have other artists, you have white people, you have Spanish people from Spain, you have gay and lesbians, you have - - you know you have a mixture of all these people and, and it really feels like home. And I really feel comfortable and when I run into people in the hallway we really feel like this connection and, and we all respect our space, but at the same time we're all friendly with one another and - - so it's, it's, it definitely makes a big difference when you, when you're surrounded by people that you feel that care, and that know you, and that will protect you if anything happens. When I first moved I had a lot of problems with contractors so moving to the Bronx, and at the time living alone and having to deal with contractors - - and they were suing me and I had to sue them and it was just a nightmare. It was good that people in the building were very supportive and, and reached out to me and, and connected me to the right people or whatever. I don't know if I would have been able to, to do that if it weren't for their help so - -

OL: That's really interesting. That's great that it now feels like home to you. I wanted to ask you just a few questions about how you reflect on Caridad as an artist because one of the reasons why I wanted to interview her and you was because I felt that your film portrayed a woman in sort of a man's world, which is the hip-hop music industry. And not only is she a poet and an actress, but she's also an emcee and I was really interested in how she negotiated that world,

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especially since hip-hop is seen as being misogynist, as being aggressively masculine - - how - - what do you think it's like for her negotiating that? How did you see her doing that?

FR: I think that she has a great talent as far as giving them what they want to get what she wants. So it is misogynist, it is very **machismo**. But she uses that to her advantage. Because she's pretty, because she is attractive she'll flirt a little bit up until she gets that opportunity and then she'll push, push it to the side and perform and do what she has to do. She has - - you know, it's been hard for, it's been hard for her because she's not rapping about how many people she laid and how - - what, what brand of jeans and shoes and sneakers she's wearing; she's talking about political things. She's talking about issues that are happening in the community. So they're not topics that people in the rap industry are - - particularly care for and care to hear from a woman. I still think she has a lot of ground to break. I think that she's definitely made some - - has had some good opportunities, but I think that there's still a lot to be able to get up to where she would like to be. And unfortunately, the women that have, have had to play that role - - have had to be the "hoochie mama," or blond, you know what I mean? Like I was really taken back when Lil' Kim came out with blond hair and I was just like - - we fought so much to get away from that and here she is like - - aren't - - why are people supporting her? Why are people applauding her when she, she would - - went two steps forward, four steps back. It's just like, what are you doing? And what are we doing that we're taking that in and, and - - most of her - - when you look at her now, so much surgery and - - so yes, there's still, there's still a lot of work that has to be done because I feel that she, she is very political. She is not, she is not going to go out in a blond wig and breast implants.

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OL: Do you think that there is a space in the hip-hop music industry for artists like her yet? I mean, she's not mainstream.

FR: There are spaces, but they are underground. So then you have Nuyorican Poets Café, you have Def Poetry Jam, you have little venues where you can - - the hit, The Hit Factory [inaudible] I'm sorry. So there are places where you can establish yourself and have some sort of fame, but it's not the masses because, again, that's not what - - not only what the masses want or, or asking, it's what the producers, the people behind the scenes are putting out there. They're not interested in putting that out there; they're more interested in being safe and doing the sexualized, getting high, hanging out, driving a nice car.

OL: You were talking earlier about some of the parallels between your own life, and your own pursuit of your dreams, and Caridad's life, and aside from the fact that you're both Puerto Rican, what, what are the parallels you see?

FR: Well the, the - - one of the parallels is the fact that she is pursuing her dream regardless of all the strikes she has against her because she's a woman, because she's Puerto Rican, because she's poor, because she has kids. She has all these things against her and she's still pursuing it and I admire that about her. I, I wanted to do all those things and I didn't have a kid, and I didn't have any of the things that she had, but I was really scared. I was not brave enough to say "I'm going to do this and even if I fall on my face, I'm going to do it." And it's amazing because - - I mean it's only been a couple of months, but I've realized that you become more aggressive. You

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find a way of making money. There is going to be a way of - - you know, I'm not going to starve, basically, and I'll make it happen but you have to be ready. And I wasn't ready. And her story inspired me, or helped me to get out of that, that trap.

OL: Is your partner supportive of your work?

FR: Very. That makes a big difference. He's very supportive and whenever I have doubts, or whenever - - he, he tells me - - he's like "Don't worry about it. There is going to be - - you're going to find ways of making money. You'll get very creative and you'll find ways." And it's true. And it's interesting also because while working at Citibank, I was making so much money that - - it was direct deposit, I would spend whatever I wanted, I would not even look at my account. It was just coming in and going out and coming in and going out and I wasn't keeping track of it. And now that I'm not making as much money, I feel like I'm making more because I'm so aware of how much money I have, how much money I need to survive, how much money - - and it seems like more money is coming in, although it's not, but I'm like "Wow, I just got a four-hundred dollar check; I didn't even expect this." And "Oh my god I have two hundred," - - you know what I mean? Like all these little checks are like a big deal for me. So it just shows the appreciation of money and, and, and how, again, we get so caught up - - and if I didn't get out, my next step was to make more money because after so many years in corporate America, I started feeling insecure. Everybody - - I mean I, I helped a friend of mine get hired into Citibank and he was hired as an administrative assistant, and then he became my boss.

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OL: Wow.

FR: So if that wasn't any inspiration for me to say okay I need to get out of here [laughter] - - it was like how could - - like people asked me how could you do that, how could you take orders from your friend who you actually helped get into - - and I was just like it, it's - - if I would of taken it personally then it would of really hurt me, but I wasn't taking it personally because I knew that, that's not, that wasn't for me, that's not wasn't what I was interested in, it wasn't my goal; I was just doing that to pay the bills. But after a while it did get to me, not necessarily that situation, but just the fact that so much time had gone by and I wasn't pursuing my craft full-time.

OL: Well the, the last time I wanted to ask you , and then feel free to share anything I haven't asked about that you would like to, is what, what do you want to do next? What's your, your next project or your, your idea of where you want to go as an artist?

FR: I want to continue being a filmmaker so that means a lot of different things. I would like to continue to make money as a filmmaker and that's really difficult. So as a filmmaker I could focus more on editing and that could be probably a steady way of making money while I work on my projects on the side, my personal projects, on the side. But it - - not too many people are full-time directors or are full-time - - you could, you could be a screenwriter but you have to focus on one other thing besides the projects that you may have in mind. So that's what I would like to do. I would like to focus more on editing and if I need to do some camera work, I guess

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we got a gig doing a fashion show, videotaping a fashion show, I'm going to have to edit that and that will lead into another job or whatever. So anything in that realm I'm interested in, in making money that way and continue to, to produce films of my own.

OL: And do you have any ideas of what your next personal project is going to be?

FR: I don't. I'm still thinking about what the next one is going to be. I would like it to be a narrative, just to take that challenge. And I'm just working on, on other projects. I have a project coming up with Bronx Aid Services. They have a, a, a department within their organization called "Go Girl," excuse me, and then it's a program for girls between the ages of twelve and seventeen that are in high risk areas and they basically write plays and perform in different parts of the city so they need someone to videotape the show [inaudible]. So that's one **other project**. So projects like that - - and, again, they're not money makers, they're not commercial, but I have a passion for those types of stories and doing presentations in school. I had just met someone yesterday, she teaches a video production class and so she asked me if I could come into school and talk to her students and I was like, "That's fine." One thing that I guess, that I also, going back to the question of the correlation between me and Caridad, is that she likes to inspire people. Her job is done when she knows that she touched someone and that she inspired someone to be an artist or to - - and that's kind of the same way I feel also. I, I would like to - - because I came from the ghetto, or because I grew up in Puerto Rico and I have so many people that I saw that were just left behind, I would like to go back to these communities and say, "This is what I've done. I'm not rich and famous, but I'm, I'm following

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my dream and I'm not white, and I'm not Jewish." [Laughs] Which is mostly what, what the industry is, is made of. And, and I'm happy bottom line. I'm happy to do what I'm doing and, and even though it's a little bit of a struggle, it's worth it.

OL: That's great, thank you so much.

FR: No, thank you.

OL: Thank you for sharing your story with us.

FR: Thank you, it's an honor.

[END OF INTERVIEW]