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Avila, Jose Francisco Interview part 1

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Lisa Betty (LB): Okay, so this is Lisa Betty with the Bronx African American History Project. I'm here with Michael Partis and Lucy Blanco, who are community researchers, and Jose Francisco Avila, who is a leader within the Garifuna community all over the world, but mainly we're centering on his work in the Bronx. Hi, Mr. Avila, how are you today?

Jose Francisco Avila (JFA): Hello Lisa, I'm doing great. Pleasure to be talking to you.

LB: So I'm thinking probably just to start with, where were you born?

JFA: My name is Jose Francisco Avila. I was born in the Garifuna village of Cristalis, which is now a neighborhood of the city of Trujillo. So if you look at a Honduras map, you will see the city of Trujillo, and that's where I was born. But I like to make clear that the reason that I mentioned that I was born in Cristalis is because Cristalis is the second --- the first Garifuna village on the mainland. The second is right there in Trujillo, also called Rio Negro. So that's why I emphasize the fact that I was born in the Garifuna village of Cristlis, and not the city of Trujillo. And by the way, that's in Honduras, Central America.

LB: So how was your --- what is your migration story from Honduras to the Northeast of the United States? Like how did you --- what was the impetus. For one, why did you leave? And then for two, where did you go?

JFA: You know, I'm always asked that question. And the way I answer it initially, is like, I had no choice to migrate to the United States of America. I was a child of 15, my mother and my father made a decision to look for better opportunities for them, so they could provide for us specifically a better education. That's the way it was explained to us. And eventually, my mother was able to convince my father to pursue opportunities in the United States. And as a result, he, my father, was the first one to migrate in 1968, to the great city of Boston, Massachusetts, specifically to the neighborhood of Dorchester. A year later, my mother, myself, and five other siblings --- four other siblings, actually followed my father and we reunited with him in Dorchester in Boston, Massachusetts. And that was in December of 1969. So that was the migration, the reason for the migration, and that was the migration process. Again, I was a child, and my parents decided to look for better opportunities so they could provide a better education for us.

LB: What school did you go to when you went to Boston? What was the high school that you went to when you came at 15?

JFA: Well, again, immigration has changed, and it was totally different then in Boston. As I tell my friends, you had to learn English. There was no such thing as bilingual education. But there was what was then call "the Boston immigrant scribbles," the Boston school for immigrants, that's what it was called. And actually now I think it's called the Boston Immigrant School, that's why I kind of --- but it was specifically for people like myself, who came to America at the age of 15, between junior high and high school that didn't speak English. And therefore we had to attend that school since we arrived in

December we attended, we started, in January of 1970. And it was a school where there was people from all over the world: Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America, Central America, you name it. And because it was worldly, we all had to try to speak in English. That was the purpose of having all this mixed people. And the other characteristic of it that was different was that the subject matters that we were taught were to prepare us to enter high school. So therefore, we took English grammar, science, all of that, and English and Spanish, not in any other language, but in English. And again, it was actually what you call now, it was what they call it now an immersive language school. That was basically what it was. So I went there through my first year, my first six months. That ended in June of 1970. And then in the fall of 1970, I went to a school that is called --- you may know it since you've lived in Boston --- is called a Solomon Lewenberg Junior High School, which is right there in Dorchester. And I went there, through the ninth grade, and then 10th grade through the 12th I actually attended Boston English High, which was, at that time, was one of the prominent high schools and it's so prominent that it's located next to perhaps the most prominent school in Boston, Boston Latin School. So that was my school experience in Boston. And that was again, 1970 through 1981 or so.

LB: So how was the, at that time, how was the Garifuna community? Was it a large community? Was it very small, was it up and coming? And then how did Garifuna people connect with other immigrants, particularly black immigrants in in Boston, and then we'll move on to you being in the Bronx, or Texas first and then the Bronx.

JFA: Right. Actually, it was very small. At that time, Boston was not a popular place for Garifunas. New York has always been the top place for Garifuna. And the largest population from Central America, and specifically from Honduras, in Boston at that time, were English speakers, what in Honduras they call "*Negros que habla ingles*," Spanish speaking --- I'm sorry, English speaking blacks, as the way they are referred to in the Honduras census. So that's the largest population that was there. All the Garifuna population was very small. I like to say that, from what I remember, maybe 50 at the most or so, back in at that time, during the 70s. But still, we were a very cohesive group, like we always have, we always find each other, we always create our own little space. And that's basically what it was. And in Boston, it was Dorchester and it was Roxbury. And I always like to say, someone asked me once some questions, he was from the New York foundation, why do I always emphasize the black neighborhoods? And basically my answer was, which is also still my answer, Garifunas have never had a problem with blackness. We've always known that we are black, and we always identify with black. And I explained to him, you know, as a result, for instance --- and I just mentioned Dorchester and Roxbury --- those were the black neighborhoods in Boston at that time. And then in New York, actually, even though we ended up in the Bronx, but the initial migration was actually to Harlem for the for the same reason. So as far as the relationship with the black population of Boston, again, because we identify as black, we ended up in black neighbors dealing with the black Americans --- I like to emphasize that's what they were called at that time. And through my research, I found out that we arrived in Boston just at the tail end of the last large black migration from the south of the United States of America to the north, in specifically Boston. So we ended up in, again, Dorchester, a black neighborhood --- initially was mixed --- by the summer of 1970, because of white flight, it actually turned into a black neighborhood. There was a very small Puerto Rican populations, but it was mostly black. So we had to comingle, we had to coexist, we had to assimilate. But it was interesting, because even though, as I just mentioned, we identify as black, my black Americans, brothers and sisters didn't see

us as black, we weren't considered as Black simply because we were not born in the United States of America. We didn't speak English at the time. So my experience in Boston at the age of 15, as a teenager, was actually being called "foreigner" by the black Americans, again, because I didn't speak English at the time. My name is Jose Francisco Avalon, not John Smith or Johnson or anything like that. But still, what can you do? You have to coexist, you have to come along. I went to school with them from junior high to high school. Eventually, by the summer, we were friends. And then we found a way to communicate despite my English limitations and so forth. But overall, it was a very productive, very pleasant relationship. I still have friends from that era who are African Americans. And again, we still remember the good old times in Boston, specifically Dorchester.

LB: One thing about Boston --- I know we're the Bronx African American History Project, but you were in Boston at the time of busing? How was that? And how did that also kind of maybe solidify your identity as a black person? Because Boston busing was a very racialized circumstance. And it was centered in Dorchester and Roxbury. So how was your experience during that time, because you basically arrived at the most heated point in US integration and all in the backlashes that occurred, particularly in Boston?

JFA: Absolutely. I would like to emphasize it was the era of the desegregation of the American population. I was basically at the beginning of the implementation of civil rights then, people such as Martin Luther King fought for. Fair housing was just being implemented, which is why we ended up, we were able to live, even live in Dorchester was because of the implementation of the fair housing laws and so forth. But when it comes to Boston, I actually graduated from high school right at the beginning of that whole fiasco. By the time it got heated, I was out of high school and I was attending Bentley College, which was in Waltham, Massachusetts, which is a suburb of Boston. So that's where I was going. So I avoided all of that. But I was still in Boston, so I had to watch the news. My niece --- I didn't have any children yet, but my nieces and nephews did --- were attending. They were actually bussed from Dorchester to Redding and Needham and all the different suburbs of Boston. So I know exactly what it was and I know what it did that. The one experience, even though I was already out, the one experience that I remember was actually what happened in East Boston, which was mostly Irish and Italian. If you see, when you search for busing in Boston, the picture that comes out of the story that comes out is actually what happened there, which was actually the southern part of Boston. And it was difficult. I mean, it brings back --- watching what's going on, for instance, what happened January 6, a year ago, brings back memories of that, of what happened with Boston, in Boston. So I didn't have any children, I went on to college, I started my career. It was because of Boston, that I decided to move out of Boston, because by that by that time, my son was 18 months old, and my wife and I made a decision that we didn't want him to grow up in that environment. We didn't want him to be exposed to all of that. So that's why we made the decision to relocate from Boston to Dallas, Texas. So yeah, it is a dark moment. I do remember it but again, it happened I was coming out of high school and that's really when it actually got very heated

LB: That's perfect for context, because I think for me, when people come out of Boston, we come out --- or just people in Boston --- we're very racially aware. Black people who've grown up in Boston in a way that when we go to new places, and they're not as, we get kind of frustrated *laughing*

JFA: *Laughing* I'll agree.

LB: Because, you know, we're up south, you know? So I definitely understand even the impetus to leave Boston and to find roots or rhizomes someplace else because --- and to go to Texas is really interesting because probably it's better than Boston, and that's sad. Because we know Texas is not an easy place, we know down south isn't an easy place.

JFA: Exactly.

LB: But at the end of the day, it's better than better than that. So how was Dallas? Oh, Dr. Naison's coming on, I'm going to admit him. And this is actually a good point, because --- hold on one second.

FVA: No problem.

LB: Hi Dr. Naison. Oh, he's --- hold on. Hi Dr. Naison.

JFA: Hi, Dr. Naison.

Mark Naison (MN): Great to see everybody.

LB: We just finished talking about Boston. So we're just like in the first thing that, you know, the first part of Mr. Avila's migration to the US and what that all means. But we just finished Boston. And I was talking about Boston as up south. And the reason, that's the one of the reasons why many people who have been born in Boston or go to Boston, leave Boston, particularly black people. And so Mr. Avila was just saying that he, we're now in Dallas. And so what happens? So do you have any specific things you want to go talk about, Dr. Naison, or are we good to talk about Dallas?

MN: Well Boston, one of the fascinating things is how Boston has become a center of creativity in Latin music.

JFA: That's right.

MN: In particular, reggaeton. That's one of the ironies that is sometimes, you know, oppressive circumstances generate cultural creativity.

JFA: Yes.

MN: So when I first started exploring reggaeton, I was shocked to discover that some of the leading DJs and promoters are out of Boston. So just that was my one thought.

JFA: Just to follow up, I'm glad you mentioned that. It just reminded me there is one, which I didn't even know, that I remember. I'm sure everyone has heard about Mr. Abraham Laboriel? The greatest --- basically known as the best bassist in the world. I mean, he plays for Paul McCartney. He played for Henry Mancini. I mean, he's been all over and he's the greatest studio musician and he's Garifuna, he's

of Garifuna descent. What I didn't know until I started researching --- well, going back to Boston, you reminded me, Dr. Naison referring to music, in 1972 I remember these three ladies coming to Boston and visiting my parents' home. And the lady name was, we called Panchita Lopez. Her name was Francisca, but she was known as Panchita Lopez. Well, my mother's last name is Lopez, so she happens to be her cousin and that's why she was went to visit with us. Eventually I figured out that the two other ladies were her daughters, Nancy and Ella Laboriel. I'm talking about history here, I'm talking about the first and the most successful Garifuna artist family. But all the success happened in Mexico. And that's where they came to visit from was Mexico. It was not until doing the research that I was able to tie, connect the dots that the reason they were in Boston was because the man that I just described as the greatest bass player in the world, Abraham Laboriel, was studying as he started at the Boston Conservatory of Music, and eventually graduated from the Berklee School of Music. And that was the reason why they were visiting and that was the opportunity that I had to meet them. And again, their father, his father was one Jose Laboriel --- again, the family, entire family, was in the entertainment industry. I've written about them and basically describe him as the most successful Garifuna artist. But again, the tie to Boston is the fact that Abraham Laboriel was actually studying music in Boston, Massachusetts, the city that we just described as "up south."

MN: That reminds me, because we interviewed Bobby Sanabria, the great percussionist composer, who went to Boston to study music at the Berklee School of Music and was the first student there to specialize in Latin music.

JFA: There we go.

MN: And so again, as negative as some of the Boston experiences might be, you know, there are people who thrive there.

JFA: Oh, yeah. Let's not forget Juan Luis Guerra, the creator of popular bachata, the Dominican. He also went to Berkeley.

MN: He did?

JFA: Yeah.

MN: Oh, okay. I didn't know.

JFA: Don't get me carried away now. *laughing*

MN: I could just do music, that's my problem.

LB: No, but you can in Boston, but you can't stay there. If you stay there, you'll be walking in circles. To be honest, if you stay there, you'll be walking in circles. But no, you're definitely you're definitely right. I think within the framework of Boston --- and there have been historians that talk about Boston as like a primary stop, and then people go to the Bronx or Brooklyn, but it is still that important stop. First you stop in Boston, and then you can kind of go to other places. But definitely. And then, yeah, and then it's

small. And then there's the black population is diverse and kind of together. It's not --- if you're Dominican, you're still hanging around Jamaicans and Haitians and Cape Verdeans. It's not like, kind of New York where it's very ethno... I don't know.

JFA: It's a totally different experience. Absolutely. I totally agree with you. Because again, I have friends from when I went to high school and still have friends from all over. You know, one of the experiences that I mention, people are surprised when I tell them that when I was growing up, Little Haiti was in Boston. Not in New York, it was not in Miami, it was in Boston. There was Jamaican music and all of that. But again, yes, it's there, in spite of its racial history, it's very progressive, it's very academic. Top of the world in state and city, and that's why people still go there.

LB: So now we're in Dallas. So you were saying that you felt like Boston just wasn't, because of, in the 70s and early 80s, what was going on with desegregation, and in the kind of high intensity racial atmosphere of that time and racism at that time, you moved to Dallas, Texas. How was the transition to Dallas, Texas?

JFA: I describe it as culture shock. I describe it as culture shock. Because, Boston, in spite of what we just said, in spite of that bad experience, there was --- the one thing you can say about Boston is that people out there are cultured, and have a global view of, because, again, we gotta deal with each other, so you kind of get to know that. Just like their black in the US, they're black in Jamaica, their black in Haiti, and oh, and by the way, in Latin America also. So you get to, and I got to, taste all of that in Boston. Culture Shock was --- first of all, I eventually realized that it was, yes, it was Dallas, Texas, but I was moving south. It was the south of the United States of America. And the greatest difference from what I just described to you was the Hispanic population. The idea that --- I mean, in Boston, yes, I was called a foreigner because, again, I didn't speak the language --- that in Dallas, it was the whole idea of concept of people, Black people speaking Spanish, was like taboo. It was like an unknown. So that's what I mean about culture shock. So I, and I mentioned it in the book. I quote ---

MN: It's one of the most powerful passages in the book, your arrival in Dallas, and people not knowing what to do with you.

JFA: Exactly. Exactly.

MN: You're not black, you speak Spanish.

JFA: How can you be Spanish? Who are you? You look Black.

MN: But also the profound racism of the Latino population there.

JFA: Exactly.

MN: And just for background, during the Jim Crow era, the Mexican population in Texas petitioned to be classified as white. They fought for that. Part of their civil rights movement was the fight to be

classified as white. And you used it in your book as a segue into the profound, you know, white supremacist atmosphere of Latino Media. Which I see whenever I turned to, you know, the channel.

JFA: Mundo Visión or Telemundo.

MN: Yeah. It's just, that was where that came powerfully across.

JFA: Exactly. And thank you Dr. Naison. Exactly. And that's exactly what it was. It's one thing from, you know, well, it was mostly, again, white and black. But the other thing that was different, for instance, as we just mentioned, I mentioned Roxbury, I mentioned Dorchester, but we were close to the white population. Dorchester was Black was Irish was Italian, we just basically occupied different spaces of the town, of the neighborhood. That's when that's all it was. Dallas, was --- for me to visit the black neighborhood, I had to drive like 45 minutes to the other side of town, across the tracks, as they call it in the south. So that was that was the other part that made it different. And at the same time again --- and thank you, Dr. Naison, it's exactly that --- you are trying to talk to a person that you know, a Mexican who speaks Spanish, and it's like, you're not there. This whole concept. So it was not just the whites, it was actually the Mexican population. So that's what the culture, why I referred to it as culture shock. Eventually researching the book, I found out that --- which I did notice, one of the things that I noticed when I was there was how passive the African American population was in comparison to what was going on in Boston, at that time, and even New York when I visited. And then eventually I found through my research, I mentioned it in the book, I found out the reason for it. It was actually negotiations with the white supremacist: you kind of stay in your lane, and as long as you do that, we'll leave you alone. I happened to live, when I moved to Dallas, I lived in Plano, Texas, which was ---

MN: Oh boy. P-L-A-N-O? Plano.

JFA: Exactly. *En español*, Plano, Texas. That's where I lived. It was one of the new, one of the upcoming suburbs. As a matter of fact, Frito Lay has their headquarters there now. What's the other? But anyways, a lot of the large corporations that moved from New York actually moved there. But the point is that Plano was a suburb and right next to Plano was Richardson, which was an older neighborhood. And within Richardson, there was a small neighborhood that was called Hamilton Park. And that's where the blacks, African Americans, lived in that section of Texas was Hamilton Park. That's where blacks lived in Richardson. That's where we went to get our haircuts. That's where we went to get traditional black or Latino or anything like that. It was that particular neighborhood. And what I didn't know was the history behind that, which is really, that was the neighborhood that, again, it's called a compromise between African Americans and, again, the white supremacists. It was like, "you stay there, and we won't bother you." And that's how we were safe.

MN: But these boundaries, if you look at the history of Texas, were not just reinforced by law and custom, they were reinforced by mass murder.

JFA: Exactly. Exactly.

MN: And, you know, that's true all the way down from, you know, Oklahoma, Arkansas, into Texas, into especially East Texas. So it's --- there's a lot of history that you found yourself in the midst of that is rather overpowering.

JFA: Yes, indeed.

MN: And it's still there. Look at the voter suppression, you know, that's going on, none of this is dead.

JFA: That's not new. That's exactly, you know, and people are surprised. But again, take it into consideration again. Again, I mentioned coming from a Garifuna village and moving to Boston. And so all of that is like, culture shock overall. Because people ask me, "So what's the difference between what you went through and in Honduras? And I say, well, the difference is, in Honduras I was a child. And I saw what was going on around me, but I had no idea what was going on. And because no one spoke about it, no one talked about racism, no one talked about race. Yeah, they'd call you *moreno*, that's what they used to call us. That's where it went. That's as far as it as it went. It's totally different coming to a place where it's like, whoa, wait a minute.

MN: But what amazed me reading the book was, because of your experience in all these spaces, you are able to generate a global consciousness about Afro Latino status in a white supremacist world that took different manifestations. So when you talked about *mestizaje* that, you know, even though it seemed to elevate racial mixture, it was still pervaded with a white supremacist ideology.

JFA: Absolutely.

MN: So you're at the forefront of exposing these commonalities in what appear to be different racial systems. And, yeah, so I mean, this is all fresh, because I spent most of the day reading the book.

JFA: Thank you, thank you Dr. Naison.

MN: It's definitely worth reading, because you sort of invented new ways of seeing the world, because of these rather unique array of experiences.

JFA: I summarize it by saying, I took that rejection, and eventually embraced it to basically claim my own identity with dignity. And it's like, I'm a Garifuna. I'm a Garifuna. And what is that? Well, let me explain. But thank you.

MN: You're also a person of African descent and an Afro Latino and a Garifuna and you insist on the right to be all three.

JFA: Absolutely.

MN: And that --- see that, I think, is really important that you have the right to claim multiple identities, all of which are under assault in different ways.

JFA: Exactly. And you know, what's even more interesting, Dr. Naison, is under assault, even by my Garifuna brothers and sisters. You'd be amazed how many of them we resent my using the term Afro Latina. As a matter of fact, during my book launch, that was one of --- two different people asked the same question. And prior to the launch, I, you know, they were posting some on Facebook. I didn't read them, but people would forward them to me, you know, criticizing my views, "Are we really Afro Latinos?" This and that. But again, exactly. I come from the premise that identity is personal. In one of the interviews, she was a Honduran, a Garifuna lady, and she asked me about that. And I said, you know, first of all, let me make it very clear. The book is about my personal history. But because of my diversity, I had to include all aspects of history, but it's my own personal. Having said that, I said, identity is personal. And I believe that no one --- my whole point, the whole point of the book, I mean, my quest for racial, ancestral, ethnic and cultural identity, is what Dr. Nasion just explained. I claim my full identity, I know who I am. I know every branch of my family.

MN: And by you doing that, it allows others to do the same for themselves.

JFA: Exactly. Especially, you know, because, again, as I explained to the person that asked me during the book launch, it's like, what is an Afro Latino? Let's start with that. What is an Afro Latino? It's a black person. It's a black person that was born in one of the countries in the Americas that speak a Romance language. And what is a Romance language? It's Spanish, it's French, and it's Portuguese. So therefore it's all the 21 countries that speak Spanish, Brazil, Haiti and all the other French countries in South America, specifically in the Caribbean. That's what it is. A black person that was born in one of those countries. Now again, my father was a black man that was born in Honduras. I'm a black man that was born in Honduras. Yes, I'm a US citizen. But again, because of knowing my identity and claiming my identity. Yes, I'm a naturalized US citizen, but page two of my passport, of my American passport, says, place of birth. It says, Honduras. It doesn't say Boston, it doesn't say Texas, it says Honduras. What does this mean still? Honduras is one of the countries that's the census list as being Hispanic or Latino. Again, but that's --- and I'm making that very clear because this is for history, this is for the future, this is for multiple generations that are going to listen to this interview. And I want them to know that many, not necessarily all of them, are going to be Garifuna. And I want you to know, that again, you have the right to claim your full identity, no one has to define you. And even when the system does, and even when others do, you still, it's really up to you. And that's the position that I took throughout my life. I mean, the difficult circumstances that I faced, whether it was in Boston, whether it's in Dallas, whether it was anywhere. And it only strengthened the pride of my ancestors and figuring out who I was. And once I found out who I was, again, that's when I started claiming my identity with dignity, as I call it. As I call it, again, because I refuse to let people define me. And I take that.

MN: But here's the other thing. I'm sorry if I'm monopolizing, because this book got me so excited.

JFA: *laughing* I'm glad.

MN: This is what happens, and Partis knows me, if I start reading, I'm out of control.

JFA: Go ahead, Doctor.

MN: For you to claim your individual identity, you had a foreground a collective identity of Garifuna, this noble but forgotten history, with this global presence, with this huge impact in the arts and sports in a country, which doesn't recognize it. Because I watched the Honduran soccer team too. So this is what's fascinating that for your individual destiny to be realized, you had to, you know, create a collective destiny that others would benefit from as well.

JFA: Thank you. Thank you.

MN: It's incredible. For that reason, it's incredibly powerful.

JFA: Thank you. I'm very pleased with the feedback that I'm getting from the general population. I just read another review that someone posted in a comment on Facebook. And basically, she said, I read this book from cover to cover. And it's amazing, I learned so many things that I didn't know about the Garifuna community and Garifuna history and so forth. And I will strongly recommend this book to anybody that wants to really know the true history of the Garifuna people. But again, and thank you Dr. Naison, because that's exactly what it is. Because of this wide perspective, beginning with my family, and well beginning with not knowing who the Garifunas were and having to learn that. And as I mentioned, it was that, really researching the Garifuna history, which I didn't know. But it was all that that led me to all the other identities. It was that that led me to, oh, blacks in Latin America? Oh, they're blacks, and so forth. Oh, yes. And they're Afro Latinos? And yet Afro and Indian? And so it's all part of the Pan African movement and Marcus Garvey started way back before I was born. But it was continued by my father. You just mentioned the soccer team. I mention that story in the book. My father organized *El Grupo Deportivo Malecón* in La Ceiba. And eventually I found out that it was because Garifuna were not allowed to play in the league of the city of La Ceiba. So therefore, my father organized the first Garifuna team. Today, there are players --- I mean, the national team of Honduras is made up mostly of Garifunas and English speaking blacks. I mean, they are the stars. That was not the case back in those days. I'm talking 50 years ago that my father had to view that. He also had to organize access to its social club, because Garifunas were not allowed in the clubs of the city of La Ceiba. So therefore he did. So I come from that. Now I refer to my father as the man who exposed me to social justice. And that's a good way for me to explain the difference between Honduras and here, because I saw all of that, I lived it. But I had no idea what was going on. I had no earthly idea what was going on. Coming to America and facing racism, and reading about it, and not just reading in a magazine, it's like reading about it in school and history classes. I realized that this history is not taught in Honduras, this history is not taught in Latin America. I mean, the six years that I went to Honduras, what I remember was, Cristobal Colon (Christopher Columbus), Francisco Morazan, José Cecilio del Valle, José Trinidad Cabañas, all those heroes that don't look like me. Those are the stories that I remember. I don't remember seeing a black face in my books, or I a Garifuna, even worse. But again, I was part of that social change that was taking place at the time, and I lived it there. And then I lived it here, but it was here that I got to understand what was going on, and realize that it was bigger than me, and it was bigger than anything that I saw in Honduras. But anyway, I don't want to just dwell on one question. What are other questions do you have Ms. Betty?

LB: Oh, no, no, this is brilliant. Because when we do this type of these oral history interviews, and support, I'm thinking about what would people want to cite and quote all of that. Because we do have

Boston, Dallas, you know, from Honduras, Boston, Dallas, back to Honduras, like this is what people want. Identity Politics, what that means. So anything you say is very important to the conversation.

JFA: Just to follow up on that, you know, so again, now, when I talk about comparisons, Dr. Naison alluded to it, you know, he mentioned it absolutely. For instance, going back to the whole Afro Latino, you know, I look at social media and you see the term colorism and they're like, "Oh, there's colorism, racism exists" and this and that. Dr. Naison just mentioned: in the book, I mentioned the origins of colorism. Colorism is not just a term. Colorism is a policy, it's called *mestizaje*.

MN: Yeah!

JFA: It's *mestizaje*, that's the origins of colorism, and *mestizaje* is the result of the caste system that the Spaniards created in Latin America when they started by dividing themselves between those born in Spain, in Europe, called --- I forget the term right now --- oh, yeah, the *peninsulares*, *los peninsulares*, and those that were born in America, *los criollos*. What's interesting now is that *criollo* is no longer tied to the Spaniards. Its Creoles are black. So you hear, "Oh, the Creoles from New Orleans." You also believe that didn't start with us --- that was the Spaniards. A *criollo* was a Spaniard that was born in the Americas.

MN: Yeah. And what's fascinating is, when people talk about the browning of America, or the US becoming a mixed race society, you can still have that with white supremacy.

JFA: Exactly. Exactly.

MN: That this is not necessarily progress. So that's why those comments about *mestizaje* --- I'm sorry for my pronunciation --- are so powerful in your book.

JFA: You hear, you know, I read it, "Oh, *mestizaje*." That was --- okay, so going back to it, so that was *mestizaje*. That was the caste system. In the caste system, again, it was *los peninsulares*, *los criollos*. And then followed by the mixture. So depending on that, there was the mixture with the Spaniards, which is really where *mestizaje* comes from. So now, *mestizaje* eventually tried to portray the fact that *mestizaje* is really Indian, or indigenous, with Spaniards. That's a true *mestizo*. In other words, it doesn't have black in the mix. And then any other mixture, whether it's *sambo* or *mulatto*, and everything that they call those who mix with blacks. Oh, well, that was at the bottom of the rung, and at the very bottom of the ladder was blacks. That's where colorism comes from. So we have to understand the history of what we're saying, and that's why I mentioned it in the book, and that's why I'm mentioning it now. In the book I mentioned it, and I tell people now, so that continues. Why is there so much pushback to the term Afro Latino? It's an anti-blackness attitude. Nobody wants to identify with black --- as a matter of fact, going back to my fellow Garifunas, I laugh, you know --- and I'm being candid, because this is again, for history. And I'll say it, I'll say it right here. Many of my friends have said, you know, if there was someone who could claim not to be Garifuna, you're looking at it, and yet, I've lived a life defending being Garifuna. But if I wanted to, I could easily say I was not Garifuna. But I have defended it and the reason that I defend that is because, and I tell them, I'm the son of a black man. My father was a black man. My father was a Garifuna. Born in Honduras, my grandfather, was actually Garifuna born in Punta

Gorda, Roatan. And my great grandfather was part of the first migration of Garifunas to Honduras. Am I going to reject that part of my genealogy? No, I'm very proud of that. So that's why I claim it and even though, as I mentioned in the book, in my family you can find people who look like Amara La Negra and you can find people that look like Gloria Estefan, and everything in between, and some of them will look like Rigoberta Menchú, and many of them will look like they're black, and so forth. All of that is represented in my family, and again, and I own it. I own it, and I am very proud of all of that. And yes, I am a Garifuna man and, yes, I am proud to be Garifuna. But I am proud --- and the other thing that I mention to my Garifuna brothers and sisters, let us not forget, let us not forget why our ancestors were forcibly deported from St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Why? Who was forcibly deported? It was not Garifuna, it was not every Carib. It was not every Kalinago that was deported. It was the ones that mixed with the Africans. Those were the ones that were forcibly ---

MN: And who were the Africans? They were escapees from slavery.

JFA: Exactly. Maroons they call them in some places.

MN: These were rebels against slavery and fought off one European power after another.

JFA: Exactly. You know, so that's the history of our ancestors. But again, those were the ones that were forcibly deported. So therefore, as I explained this in the book, and I explained to many, the mixture of the Garifuna starts in St. Vincent, not in Honduras. We come as a mixed group, and we come as an African, black indigenous mixture.

MN: With a revolutionary history.

JFA: Exactly. And that's why we have --- people are like, "Oh, why were you able to maintain?" We were actually exiled, forced, forcibly deported as a nation, as a group of people, and therefore we were able to keep that when we arrived to Honduras. That's why you hear it from many Hondurans, even wherever you are, Garifunas are known as the most organized ethnic group. There was a reason why, but the point is that, again, it was the ones who mixed --- the indigenous that mixed with the Africans in St. Vincent, the ones that the British called Black Caribs --- those were the ones that were forcibly deported. There is documentation and it is in the book, including, the document that the Prime Minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines prepared for reparations claim against Britain that specify that some of those so called "Yellow and Red" Indians --- they were actually the Arawaks and the Caribs --- some of them got on the ship. And the British allowed him to get on the ship and stay, because they were only interested in getting rid of the ones who mixed with the blacks. I know my history, and that's why I'm so proud as well, I will not deny who I am. And I will not deny and let anyone to misinform about the history of my ancestors.

MN: This also has implications for US history, because there was, you know, slaves who escaped the plantations, who went to mix with Native America here. And that's part of what promoted the massive displacement of Native Americans by Andrew Jackson, they think. That has to be revisited in the United States by people who have that background.

JFA: I totally agree.

MN: This is what I think, you know, your book is a window that opens up, you know, reinterpretations of many different histories in the Western Hemisphere.

JFA: Absolutely. And I'll conclude with this --- this portion about *mestizaje* and all of that, and again, that's that's the root of colorism --- what's the difference between the United States of America and Latin America? At least the Spaniards created that caste system that recognized the mixture of the black, even though eventually it was the erased. The United States implemented the one drop rule. It doesn't matter what you mixed with, as long as you have a drop of black blood, you are black, which is how many ethnicities have been lost in this country. I saw it. We all know people that --- talk about the Creoles in New Orleans, you can find them all over the United States.

MN: Yeah, including Texas. One of my students is writing her, you know, senior thesis on the New Orleans exiles and their impact on black culture in Houston.

JFA: Exactly. But again, there is a history behind it. And basically, that's what the book includes. I include that to back up my claims of my identity, but at the same time to educate others. Because the other thing that I know, and, Betty, thank you for emphasizing Boston and all of that in my immigrant part. Because again, that's usually where we get lost when we don't include all those aspects of humanity. Being an immigrant, it does make a difference. I say that to say this, because I see it, for instance, in the Latino community, why do Latinos have difficulty with the term Afro Latino? And why do they deal with colorism in the superficial way, as I call it? Because they don't know the history. And they don't know the history of the black movement in the United States of America. And until you know the history of the black movement of the United States of America, a lot of that, you won't even care. And it won't even make sense. So I recommend, get a black study program, study history. I mean, even in my case, again, I was part of that history, I lived it. Again, I came to America a year after Martin Luther King was killed. And I mentioned earlier, it was --- the Civil Rights were just being implemented and all of that. But again, my point is that unless you know your history, the more you know about your history, the farther you will go. And as the great Marcos Mosiah Garvey said, "A person without a knowledge of their history or their culture is like a tree without roots." Well, again, I just mentioned earlier, I know my tree, and I know my roots. And I strongly suggest, read my book, or read any other books about identity, about what truly identity means. You know, I mentioned in the book, recently, again, going back to the subtitle, my quest for racial, ancestral, ethnic and cultural. The reason I used these terms is because I have to understand them to really get to understand identity. Most people do not understand those terms. Most people use those terms interchangeably like, oh, they're synonymous with each other. No, there is --- read each one I described in the book. I heard, for instance, I heard someone --- and this was on a Facebook Live --- a young Garifuna man said, "We're not an ethnicity. We are a culture." Hello? That's what he said. But again, what does that tell us? And there's fifth term that I didn't include, but we have basically addressed it in this interview, it's nationality. People don't know the difference between nationality and again, ancestry, culture, ethnicity; most people don't know the difference. So therefore it's like, "Oh, how can you be Honduran if you're black? Or, how can you speak Spanish if you're black?" Again, that's what I mean, people not knowing, not understanding the difference between those terms. And that's why I included it. So now that I've written the book, I have

explained and again, there's a chapter, I believe it's chapter two or chapter one, when I talk about Honduras, and I describe Garifuna identity, and I describe it from my all those points of view, ethnic, ancestry, culture, nationality, and so forth. But I took it one step farther, I included the definition of race based on the US Census, and the Honduran Census.

MN: That was a very powerful passage.

JFA: Thank you. Thank you. I included the definition of ethnicity in the US Census form, and the Honduras Census form. And when I ask people, I say, "How many ethnicities does the US Census recognize?" "Uh, uh, uh, uh" "How many does Honduras?" "I have no idea." Because we usually don't look at that. Again, those are the forms that entities use to define us. And usually what those definitions do is divide us. And they're surprised when I say that the US Census only recognizes two ethnicities: you're either Hispanic or non-Hispanic. That's the first question of the US Census form. "Oh, I didn't realize that." Yeah. And the Office of Management and Budget defined that in 1997. There are five racial groups, which interestingly enough, those are the same five racial groups that appear in the Honduran census. The difference is ethnicity. It definitely is. There are two in the US. Honduras recognizes nine different ethnicities, and one of those ethnicities is called Garifuna. So this person that said, "We're not an ethnicity, we're a culture." The Honduras form recognizes nine identities. Guatemala recognizes thirteen. And Nicaragua recognizes, I think it's between seven and nine ethnicities. And I mentioned it --- Belize recognizes, I believe this is the one that recognizes the most, between 15 and 20. All of those countries that I mentioned, that's the Garifuna diaspora: Belize, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. And they all include Garifuna as one of the ethnicities of their respective countries. But again, so we have to understand history and we also have to understand policy. What does it mean when the census forms talk about ethnicity? What is race? Well, we all know --- which is, again, I mentioned in the book --- race is a social construct. And what does that mean? Well, I use myself and President Barack Obama, and I actually learned this from him when he was talking about the census. And he said, "Yes, yes, my mom is white. But the fact is that when I walk on the street, no one sees my mother. They see a black man. When I stand and stick my hand out to stop a taxi, they don't look at me as a white man --- or they don't look at my mom --- they see a black man and they ignore me." That's the social construct. So yes, identity is self proclaimed, self identified. And at the same time, there are social constructs that is, doesn't matter where you live in, doesn't matter what you think you are, there's a system that defines who you are in this society. And that's the result, again, it's *mestizaje* in Latin America, it's Jim Crow in the United States of America. And every other country in Latin America that implemented the *mestizaje*, the Spanish caste system, all of that still has effects. I watched many documentaries. Most of what I watched now is about history, and it's really around identity. Because, again, we have to educate ourselves. And the other thing that we need to know, and I'm speaking to my Garifuna brothers and sisters, we have to understand that we're part of the world, and the world is bigger than us. So therefore, as a result, there are many histories besides the Garifuna history, and we have to know them. And I'll give you a specific example. When I started, and this is when I wasn't even thinking about the book, but when I started doing my research. And I found the Garifuna an what happened in St. Vincent, there's this one particular fact that I use as an example of being part of a bigger world, in a bigger picture. And I had a group of young people, and I said, "You know what? Now I've come to realize that what happened in St. Vincent was not a unique event, it was not special. It was part of what was going on in the Americas in the world." And I said to

the person, to the people, I said, "And here's what leads me to that. According to my research, the British sign a treaty with Joseph Chatoyer, my ancestors, in 1773." Well, if you look at history, and I said, this as a test, when was the when is the independence of the United States of America? Most people know 1776, that's three years apart. That's three years apart. So therefore, it's like, we cannot disconnect the independence in the United States of America and everything that was going on in this continent, from what was happening in St. Vincent. We cannot disconnect it with what happened in Haiti, the first black nation on this continent. It's all related. And what's the common denominator among all of them? That we were fighting the European empires, the one that wanted to kill them, the ones who took their lands, the one that basically committed genocide against people that didn't look like them. That's the common denominator, but it's all the same. So Garifuna --- and then, eventually, I found out that the way that British were able to subdue my ancestors was because they had to call a regiment from around Boston --- the British who were fighting in Boston for America, American independence --- they had to call that regiment to go to St. Vincent to support the British army that was out there --- or the Navy --- because they couldn't subdue our ancestors. It is all connected. And that's the importance of knowing history, because then you can put it into perspective. And that's basically what I'm doing now, and that's what I've done in the book.

MN: Well, Lisa, that's why you have to write your book.

LB: I have many books to write. *laughing* Well, I'll start with this dissertation first.

MN: This makes me even more ---

LB: Excited about what I'm writing, because what I'm writing is very similar. It's in this global framework.

JFA: I'm glad. I'm glad. I am glad. Oh, absolutely. You know, for instance, the first conversation we had I mentioned a few weeks ago, now it's going to be the thirty-fourth anniversary of our first Garifuna organizing meeting. Remember when I said, it was at 671 Prospect Avenue, the *Club Cuban Internacional*. And you said you're dealing with that in your dissertation.

LB: I still want to talk about that.

JFA: You know what? You don't have to speak to me just this way. I'm available whenever you need me.

LB: Yeah, we can have our own, but I still want to include it for the BAAHP record. So we do have to get to the Bronx. Because now, we went from Honduras to Boston to Texas to St. Vincent to Honduras back to St. Vincent to the US, 1776. Now we've got to be in the Bronx about late 1980s, right? That's when you moved back to the Bronx, right?

JFA: No, no, I actually ---

LB: Or moved to the Bronx, not back. I'm sorry.

JFA: No, no, there's some confusion, and I totally understand. No, actually, it was, again, the significance of Texas, going back to it, once I overcame the cultural shock. I describe chapter three, which is Texas, as my mental emancipation. Again, this goes back to what Dr. Naison mentioned earlier, that having dealt with all of that, that's what I call my stay in Texas, eventually led to my mental emancipation. It was there that I started researching the Garifuna history. And actually, everything that I did out, I was still in Dallas, Texas. To fast forward, so that was '88 when I started that, and then in 1989 was when I organized the first meeting at the *Club Cubano Internacional* at 671 Prospect Avenue in the Bronx. That was February 5, 1989. I was still living in Texas when I did that. And why was that? Because, again, I always knew that the largest Garifuna population was in New York, and at that time, I was in sales. So, I tell the story, I used to travel all across the country. And it didn't matter where I was going from Dallas, Texas. I had to connect, because back then, connecting flights were cheaper than direct flight. So it didn't matter where I went in the US my return trip always included a connection through New York to get back to Dallas, Texas. So I was in Dallas --- I mean, in the Bronx, just about every weekend from 1989 to actually 1998 when I finally moved. But anyways, it was '89, February 5, 1989, the first Garifuna organizing meeting. That was the beginning of it, that led to 1991, the first intercontinental Garifuna meeting, also in New York, but this one in specifically Medgar Evers College.

MN: Which is fascinating.

JFA: And that was, the reason for that was because of the relationship we had with the late --- how can I forget --- Dr. George Irish.

MN: There's a wonderful speech he gave that you included in the book, because he was the Caribbeanist at Medgar Evers.

JFA: He was the director, founder and director, of the Caribbean Research Center, at Medgar Evers College. He was director, and we developed a great relationship with him, so he was a great supporter. And, Dr. Naison, thank you again. If you read the book, he was the keynote speaker at the first Intercontinental Garifuna Summit Meeting at Medgar Evers College. So that was that, and then that led to the 1992, the second Garifuna Intercontinental Summit Meeting. That was in Los Angeles, California. And I'd like to distinguish the two. The first Intercontinental Garifuna Summit was about reclaiming our identity. That's basically, the theme of that summit was, GARIFUNA LANGUAGE: "Let's not be ashamed of saying that we are Garifuna." The second summit meeting was, yes, it was still about identity, but it was more about the reunification of the Garifuna people, and specifically bringing together the diaspora. Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and St. Vincent. And that was the first time in Los Angeles, we were able to have representation from St. Vincent and the Grenadines, which we didn't have in New York. So that is --- but all of this is happening while I'm in Dallas, Texas, and I'm commuting to New York on weekends, again, it didn't matter where I went, my return trip I always included a connection to New York, and then continued on to Dallas or to whatever the next city was that I was going to visit. And it was a good thing that we spoke about the background of, you know, identity in Dallas, culture shock and all of that. But that's what really raised my awareness of who I was. At the same time, still in Dallas, Texas, as Dr. Nation mentioned, it was there that I read about the "browning" of America in a 1990 article in Time Magazine. And it was there also that I read about the 21st century and the impact. That's what the article was about, that by the 21st century, the browning of

America, was the fact that people that looked like me will outnumber the white population and so forth. But all of that, and it was at the same time that I read that the indigenous population was beginning to revolt against the planned celebration of the 500th anniversary of the supposedly discovery of America. And they were saying that was not a discovery. And basically, they were beginning to organize. So I was exposed to all of that. At the same time, the Soviet Union collapsed, which caused the reunification of East Germany and West Germany. That's where the term reunification comes from the second Garifuna summit meeting. So again, it was, just like what I explained the historical background of what was going on, it was the same thing at that time, it was what was going on around me, what I saw that was going on and what was affecting me, and most of it was around culture, and so forth. So that's it. And all of that led to April 1997. The commemoration, celebration of the 200th anniversary of the Garifuna to Honduras and specifically in Central America, in general. I like to describe it --- as a matter of fact, there's a chapter that I include about specifically about that event --- which was known as the Garifuna Bicentennial. The Garifuna Bicentennial was the most prominent black event in Latin America during that time.

MN: Wow.

JFA: That was the biggest and the most prominent black event in Latin America. In 1997 was this commemoration and celebration of the 200th anniversary of the Garifunas in Honduras. I was there, I had the pleasure and the honor of being there. So, and I also write in the book and mention it, it was that event that led to what now is known as the *afrodescendiente* movement, or the Afro Latino movement. It's because of the 200th anniversary. And that takes me back to my claim to my Garifuna population when they say, "We're not black. We're not *afrodescendiente*." You know, numerically, Garifuna are one of the smallest black groups in this continent? But I've lived enough and I've experienced it, that we are one of the most admired and respected Black groups in the Americas, because of our unique history, because of our great history, because of being able to survive, fighting an empire at the time, and so forth. And here we are, 225 years later, we're talking about Garifuna and I'm talking to Fordham University, the Garifuna Initiative of Fordham University, 225 years after we were supposed to have been exterminated. What does that tell us? Well, that's why I started saying, one of my sayings nowadays is: you know, this proves the fact that we haven't just survived. We've thrived, we didn't just survive, we have thrived. And as a result, the other phrase that I use, is that Garifunas are a community that went from forcible deportation to a thriving community. That's who we are. And again, and that's a reflection of the resilience of our ancestors, not just in St. Vincent, but throughout the 225 years. It's the resilience of the current leadership, that's still fighting the fight, that's still dealing with the struggle of identity and discrimination and marginalization, and all those things that try to keep us down. And yet, we have thrived, despite of all of that, because of the efforts of people who resisted, who didn't let anyone dictate who we were.

MN: Well, one thing from your book, that people should understand about Texas, is that's where you found a career in information technology.

JFA: Exactly.

MN: Which --- and you were a pioneer in a field, which enabled you to acquire information more quickly and exhaustively than your predecessors, which in turn fed into your ability to create these global networks.

JFA: Exactly, exactly. Thank you. And that's why I call it my mental emancipation, exactly. That it was there. One of the questions people keep asking me, "How long did it take you to write the book?" "18 months." "That's it?" "Well, 18 months from the time I decided to take advantage of the pandemic and sit and write the book. That was 18 months. It's the pandemic." However, I've been writing for over 30 years and I've been fortunate, to Dr. Naison's point, that I've had IBM --- before the IBM, it was the Apple 323, that was 1976. I remember. Then IBM came in 1981 and introduced the personal computer, the PC, and took over the business. And even though Apple was the first, it became the most popular. I was fortunate that I was working for a technology company and I had access to an IBM Personal Computer when they first came out in 1981. And I had access to it not just at work, I actually was allowed to take it home. And like Dr. Naison said, I, as a matter of fact, it was with that computer that I learned how to use Ventura Publisher. I say that, and people are like, "Huh? What's that?" Well think about Photoshop now and all those graphics. Ventura Publisher was the first software that allowed you to format and basically that's when I started publishing my newsletter in 1988. That's what I used. It allowed me to format it in three columns.

MN: People don't realize how important that is getting information.

JFA: Thank you. Exactly.

MN: When I was reading, because why it was you, when there are so many other people writing about these issues. Scholars and activists. But you, because you had the access to information technology, you were able to get things that a lot of people were thinking out to a much broader audience.

JFA: Exactly.

MN: And this is why this book, I couldn't stop reading it. I just thought I was gonna skim it, and I spent the whole day reading it because there's a lot of powerful information in it. There's something else though that, you know, in the final portion --- this relates to Lucy --- the power of the arts, insofar as Garifuna identity is going to be, you know, transmuted and affirmed, the arts are going to play an incredibly important role in this.

JFA: They have, they always have.

MN: They have, but in the future even more so.

JFA: I totally agree. I totally agree. Well, if you remember, I mentioned chapter one, you know, when I talk about the Garifuna identity, and actually basically what I described there is how I remembered --- because I didn't know the history --- but how did I? What are the things that I remember, that made me identify as a Garifuna? And that was one of them. It was the arts. It was the way, watching my mother -- - my grandmother and my mother --- go to the farm, the little farm and so forth. It was watching them

make cassava, it was watching them make hudutu. It was watching, waiting, on and on. But the arts definitely play a role. I mentioned in the book, for instance, my big entertainment that I remember as a child was standing in women's cultural club during Christmas, as they would sing and the dramas would play and so forth. Well, that tradition still continues. Lucy is a reflection of that. I met Lucy when she came to New York and she was doing jazz in California. And I still remember when she showed up, we made an appointment, she showed up at the offices of the Garifuna coalition, and she was looking for a Garifuna drummer. And I say, by the way, one of the greatest drummers I know right now, is one of your cousin's. And she's like, really? Yeah, he's done more recordings than anybody when it comes to Garifuna music. But again, yes, Dr. Naison, it has and will continue and continues to play. Well, now we have Lucy, now we have Aurelio Martinez. All of that is a continuation of the same, the groups that I remember seeing as a child, and that we all have seen. And they still remain in the Garifuna community, it is part of our identity. It is part, a key part, a key component of our culture. And let's not forget that, the Garifuna culture was proclaimed in 2001 by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

MN: I love that. The Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity

JFA: Of humanity. Exactly. It was the emphasis, if you look at the proclamation and it specifically mentions the language, the music and the dance, but entails the culture because the other aspect --- now I've had discussions about this with many cultural practitioners --- and I said, there's a small group that I had convinced actually that we need to continue the research. And here's why: because when you look at, read the proclamation, it talks about music, language and, dance, but a key component of the proclamation is the need to add to the catalogue of existing cultural expressions. For instance, three years ago, I actually sponsored an exhibit by Isidra Sabio here in the Bronx. And the reason why, and this is a good opportunity to talk about, for me to mention one of my favorite topics right now, which is generational transfer. I actually had an exchange with Isidra, and I expressed my concern that I felt that the visual art, the Garifuna visual art was dying, it was disappearing. And I said to her, and the reason is because most of the ones that I know, especially here in the Bronx, are basically my contemporaries. Virgilio Lopez, we know him as Vilo, he's not painting anymore. He's not, and he is, again, in my age bracket, and so forth. My surprise was, months later, Isidra reached out to me and she said, "You know, I was thinking about what you told me. And that's what led me to learn how to paint canvas." I said, "Really?" She said, "Yeah." That's why, you see what she's doing, now she's making portraits. But initially, she was doing greeting cards. That was her initial business. She was doing children's book, but it was based on that conversation. And I said, and I explained to her what I just mentioned: you look at the proclamation and it just says music and language. And then everybody says that, we need to create and add to the inventory. And one of those expressions is visual arts. And that's why I was concerned. It's crafts, and when it comes to crafts, of course, now, I'm glad that, for instance, one of the --- which is a reflection of what I said earlier --- the fact that we didn't just survive, but we have thrived for so many years. When Lucy's group or any group needed a very flat drum, they had to send ones that have been made in Belize or Honduras. Those were the most popular places. Today, there's a Garifuna man producing Garifuna drums right here in the Bronx, and he is producing en mass as needed, whereas before, I mean, a craftsman could only produce nothing one or two drums and so forth. But he is, but again, I'm mentioning all of that as part of the Proclamation of a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, that there are other art forms that haven't really been [acknowledged]. And

actually, the one organization that I partner with, as a matter of fact we signed a memorandum of understanding, is called "The Battle of the Drums Initiative," which is located in Punta Gorda, Roatan, Heyni (sp?) in the Garifuna language. They actually came for my book launch in October, and we had a meeting. And basically, they have been following my tracks and everything that I've done and decided that they wanted me to work with them. And we've agreed that again --- and the one thing that is significant about what they're doing, and the reason I mentioned all of that, because the other part is that is the way most of my people have interpreted the proclamation is that is to preserve the culture. And I've explained to you many that when you emphasize preserving, when you emphasize preservation, it's the easiest way for a culture to become extinct. Because then the next thing, I'm seeing it right now. There's all kinds of museums being about the Garifuna. I said, no, we are a living culture. We are a living culture. We are not statues, we're not just crafts. We are the producers of the crafts. We are the producers of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. But again, that's part of my emphasis, as far as the origin and the role that Lucy plays and will continue to play. Lucy knows this because, well, Lucy knows it and I give her credit because I've written about Lucy, as part of that generation of Garifuna who has understood that culture evolves. Many resented her fusion of jazz, I supported her, because that's innovation. That's how cultures survive. That's how culture survive. And Lucy is part of that generation that understood that and decided to take it upon herself. And again, so now you have Lucy Blanco and the Garifuna Jazz ensemble. And now you have people saying, "Oh, well, I didn't know there was Garifuna Jazz? Yes, there. "Oh wow, I'm enjoying, and I'm really liking it" and so forth. But again, it was Lucy. And I mention that because, what I credit to Lucy, and there's a few others, one has been mentioned already, and I mentioned them in my book, is Arnold --- The significance of that when I talk about generational transfer, the significance of what Lucy has done, is the fact that Lucy was born here. Lucy was born here. And just like I did, she was able to take her exposure in music and all of that and combine it with her culture to create something new. And something that's innovative and something that will make, contribute to the preservation of the Garifuna culture, in a different form, in a different format, but something that no one can deny is that it's Garifuna. So thank you, Lucy.

MN: Are we going to eventually have a Garifuna Cardi B coming out of the Bronx?

JFA: Oh, there is already.

MN: Are there any Garifuna rap/ hip-hop artists?

JFA: Oh, yeah. That's the fastest growing segment of the Garifuna music. And I mentioned it in the book and Lucy knows it. I mentioned this in the book, also 1998. So this takes me back to your question about the Bronx. So when I came to the Bronx, the first thing that I did in the Bronx, when I moved here, was actually to organize the first Garifuna Music Awards. That was that. And, Dr. Naison, I love how you lead me to my next point, by having read my book, and I appreciate that. And actually, what it was, is your question. Because if you again, if you look at most writings, most writing about Garifuna arts and culture, you will think that Aurelio Martinez is the only Garifuna artist. You will think that. And then, you know it's --- well, I'll say it. There's a narrative out there that has existed for so many years. There was Paul Nabor, there was Gabaga Williams. Eventually they passed the crown to Andy Palacio, Andy Palacio passed away and he passed the crown to Aurelio. And when you listen to that narrative, you

think that, oh, that's it? No. Again, Garifuna music, arts, and culture is multi-genre. You mentioned, rap, Dr. Naison, you have younger Garifunas rapping in Garifuna, you have Garifunas rapping in Spanish, in addition to English. That's a growing segment, but it's a very diverse group. But there are those purists who don't want to recognize it as Garifuna music, just because it's, again, hip hop, and so forth, or just because it's jazz. Well, but to me, it's like no, you know, the fact that Lucy is a Garifuna and she's doing jazz, I'll celebrate that. And as a matter of fact, I'm proud that she's doing that. The fact that Chaka Khan did reggaeton and reggae *en Español*. Then the other many young men who are now doing reggaeton and so forth. As a matter of fact, one of my surprises when I, last year during the pandemic, as I was writing, I was listening to music. This is how I lived through the day, listening to music, and at one point, I got kind of bored. And I said, You know what, let me explore something, what's out there? And I went into Spotify, and I just did a search on, okay, let me see what's new in Afro Latino, because I haven't done it. To my surprise, I'm listening to this song, and I'm going, "Wait a minute. That has to be a Garifuna." And then I looked for the cover of the song and sure enough, there's a Garifuna flag. I mean, if you listen to it, you would have never thought that a Garifuna would have made it that far. So guess what I did? Oh, let me I add it to my playlist, and it became one of my favorite songs.

MN: What was the name of the song?

JFA: I can't remember right now, I'll look it up and I'll send it to you.

MN: Because I just posted on google, "Garifuna reggaeton," and I come up with Matten Guiratino (sp?).

JFA: I don't know.

MN: There's more, there's also punta. So I'm going to keep looking, now that you've got me interested.

JFA: Keep looking.

MN: I'm doing a walking tour of historic Morrisania tomorrow. And, which I say that the Morrisania/Hunts Point neighborhood produced more varieties of popular music than any place in the world. And it's partly because of the mixing of cultures. So, only a matter of time when you have a large cultural group such as the Garifuna, that their music is fused with other genres they're exposed to and something is going to take off. It's only a matter of time.

JFA: Well you mentioned it earlier --- it already has! I'm not going to say, unfortunately, but it already has Dr. Naison. You know what the biggest Garifuna song is in the world? In history?

MN: What?

JFA: It's called "*Sopa de caracol*." Look up "*Sopa de caracol*."

MN: S-O-P-A?

JFA: S-O-P-A D-E C-A-R-A-C-O-L.

MN: I'll look it up right now.

JF: Okay, "*Sopa de caracol*." Now, that's the biggest selling song, Garifuna song. That song sold over three million copies. But it was not by a Garifuna, it was by a *mestizo* band from Honduras.

MN: "*Sopa de caracol*," I see it. They don't look Garifuna.

JF: Now, the story of that song. It's a Garifuna song, it's actually written by a Garifuna man by the name of Chico Ramos. Chico Ramos wrote that song in the Garifuna language and it became a big hit throughout Central America, that's how they were able to actually copy it and so forth. So when they first became successful, they came out saying that they had created that song. And not only that they had created that song, that they had created the Garifuna sound, supposedly. Well guess what, my group of activists, we started complaining. At that time, we went on *Mundo Visión*. We started writing letters to *Mundo Visión*, we started writing letters to *La Negra* here in New York and so forth, until eventually Banda Blanca came on and apologized and admitted that the song was originally in the Garifuna language and that they had translated it into Spanish. They gave credit to Mr. Ramos. As a matter of fact, there was a legal settlement, and I know because I keep track of all the copyrights and that copyright was eventually transferred to Mr. Ramos. But yes, that's another example of how Garifuna music has evolved. But the other one that I was going to mention, that you mentioned earlier, is Bobby Sanabria. We work, Lucy and I have done work with Bobby and Elena Martinez, on the Garifuna Center. And Elena told me this story, and then Bobby elevated it: in 2009, I, with the Garifuna coalition, held an event at Hostess Community College at their Arts and Culture Center out there --- Lucy was part of that --- and she said, Bobby and Elena were in the audience, and as one of the groups was playing Bobby turned over to Elena and said, "You know, that reminds me of Puerto Rican *Bomba y plena*." So that interest actually led them to start seeking us out. That's how the relationship started with the Bronx Music Heritage Center, was Bobby and Elena sitting in the audience watching the Garifuna show and making the connections to the African descendants of Puerto Rico. We call our music Punta, the call their music Bomba y plena. So again, an example of the interconnectedness of blackness throughout the diaspora. What else can I tell you Ms. Betty?

LB: This has been wonderful and I think there's been so much information. Lucy, do you have any final questions? I know that I'm going to have a separate meeting so we can talk about *El Club Cubano* *all laughing*, so we don't have to go through that. But, Lucy go ahead, sorry.

Lucy Blanco (LB 2): Thank you very much. Before I lose the spot, I definitely am in gratitude of the kind words that you have spoken to me and my journey as an artist in Garifuna music. It's definitely important distinction because that's part of --- that's our way of letting the world know who we are and that we are proud of who we are. And despite what has happened, all the different prejudices and the things that went on, we still reside in the beauty of what we're creating, and I'm adding to the kaleidoscope with the coming, the unfolding of new music for the world to know and appreciate. Thank you so much for that. My next question that I wanted to ask you was --- I am not a Garifuna speaker, I used to be when I was little --- but there also has been so much division from our own people, people who've heard my music, they didn't identify it as Garifuna music, they didn't call it Garifuna music, that's

not Garifuna music. And the fact that I don't speak Garifuna natively was something that people look at. That's why, when I sing the songs in Garifuna, I have to be very deliberate in my intention of singing the song, because I'm not naturally a Garifuna speaker. I'm taking classes with Milton Güitin. I wanted to ask you, I think you're not, you don't speak Garifuna on a daily basis, so that's not the natural way that you speak. Is that correct?

JFA: That is correct.

LB2: So have you found --- how have you navigated your way through the naysayers that say you don't speak Garifuna, you can't be doing what you need to be doing.

JFA: That's a very good question, that's a very valid question. I understand everything that is said to me in Garifuna, I can say some phrases, but I am not conversant in the Garifuna language. However, that has not kept me from succeeding and achieving. And Dr. Naison mentioned it earlier, part of that was access to the technology that allows me to actually put information out there. When it was like, all of a sudden, it's not longer about this and that. Now to get to your point, I call those the "Garifuna purists," and I eventually, down the road I did deal with them, and basically what I said to them was --- well, and there's one of them who's prominent and we're good friends, we met in Los Angeles where he lives, and we actually did an event with his groups in Honduras, in Trujillo where I was born in 1996 and so forth, and we called it the "*Garifunas del Siglo 21*," Garifunas in the twenty-first century, and that's how close we are. I've been to Los Angeles, stayed at his home, and so forth. And he is the prime Garifuna purist. But the way I explained it to him was, you know what, I am very proud to be a Garifuna, and I have no regrets in not speaking the language. But let me explain to you why it is that I promote the Garifuna identity, which is, Lucy, what you have. You and many of your generation. And I said to him, it has to do with the fact that if I don't identify as Garifuna, what does the culture mean to me? What does the culture mean to me? What do the traditions mean? Nothing. So therefore, that's why I emphasize the identity, because once you identify, then your mind starts to wonder, and your mind starts to explore, and you want to know more about who you are. And eventually it's discovering that, okay, I'm not fluent, it's not my fault, my parents didn't teach me --- but anyway, that's the way I dealt with it. And when I explained it that way, the person said, "You know what, I never saw it that way, but you're right." And I said, guess what? The more people that we have that identify and accept being Garifuna, the more people will become interested in the language products that you offer. So your market is expanding. Anyway, that is the way I explain it. It is because of the --- well, what really concerned me, what led me to that, my real concern was this: it was that the language was being used as a wedge among us. As a dividing tool. "Oh, because you don't speak Garifuna you're not Garifuna." "If you're not born in a Garifuna village, you're not Garifuna." That's why I emphasize identity. I've seen all of that, I've dealt with all of that. Coming back to Lucy, coming back to Arnol Martinez Guity, why do I celebrate what they do? And I've said this, early in the coalition Garifuna, we have to recognize, there is another Garifuna that we need to start recognizing, and it's the Garifuna Americans. "What? But they're Garifunas?" No, they're the children of Garifunas born here. And here's why I emphasize that we need to recognize them, because usually, in an ethnic group, it's in that generation that cultures begin to get lost. So if we don't embrace them, if we don't embrace them, we won't have anybody to blame when the culture begins to die out here. Thankfully, they listened to me, and as a result --- and this was all happening when Lucy came to New York --- one thing I did was I changed the language of the way the

meetings were conducted in the Garifuna Coalition. And I said to them, we're going to conduct the meetings in English. "Well why?" Well, first of all it's the official language of this country --- and I was trained that when you hold a meeting in a country you use the official language of the country --- even more important than that, the Garifuna-Americans, in spite of speaking Garifuna, in spite of speaking Spanish, they're fluent in English. And if we want to attract them, we have to do that. There's a young lady, she became my biggest supporter and friend, she said to me after that meeting, "You know, I'm glad you did that. If you had done the meetings in Spanish, I would have been the first one not to attend." We're still friends, she still attends on my invitation. But again, that's the significance of Lucy's generation, the first generation of the Garifuna-Americans, and, again, Lucy, that's why I support you and that's why I'm proud of what you do and that's why I don't care if you speak the language perfect or whatnot. It's the fact that you identify as a Garifuna woman, as a Garifuna artist, as a Garifuna singer. I mean, you're one of the most accomplished singers I've met because you sing a genre that is not known within our community and I know is one of the most difficult genres overall, and yet you have been able to take our culture, our language into that music. That's what I celebrate. Arnol Martinez Guity was born in the Bronx, and he's the one that created GarifunaRobics and he has become successful. And that's what we need, what Lucy and Arnol and that generation is doing. And in the book, I mention that evolution is basically taking the best from the past with the best from the present and combining it in the new generation. Right? That's really evolution is, and that's really what Lucy has done. But again, a longwinded answer to your question: no, I don't speak Garifuna, I haven't, but that doesn't stop me and I'm proof of that in the end it's about identity, and in the process of identity is the fact that we have taken our culture, our identity to a level that it has become global, even in spaces where no other Garifuna artist has been.

MN: Let me say on thing, that could lead to two more hours. *all laughing* And that is, expanding the Garifuna diaspora allows you to better fight the battle against displacement, ethnic cleansing, and predatory tourist development in the Garifuna portions of Central America, which is a ferocious battle, and you need all hands on deck for that one, including every American-born Garifuna that you can find, because that is a hell of a battle.

JFA: Yes indeed.

MN: And I said, that's at the end of the book, I don't want to get into it now because it's inhumane to have a four hour interview, but at some point we need to highlight that with a forum.

LB: We can do a part 2, and in the part 2 we can talk about that.

MN: Because the fight that the sort of predatory tourism that is displacing and marginalizing Garifuna peoples in Honduras but also probably in the other Central American countries as well.

JFA: And I will just, quickly, before we conclude, why I celebrate Lucy and Arnol and that generation and I give them credit because I recognize that's how we're going to keep going. That's what thriving is: taking the best from your past to move forward.

LB: Yes, I'll say.

JFA: And that's what Lucy has done. Lucy is the face of the thrive, when I talk about we don't just survive we thrive. But absolutely, I don't want to take it over, I am enjoying this and whenever you feel that you can continue, and Betty, and I can make myself available again, whenever we can talk individually, I'm receptive. Dr. Naison, I really appreciate and value your feedback and support after reading the book, each one of you your support and participation. I make myself available for whatever you need to keep this project going, count on my support.

MN: I just feel honored to be part of this discussion and was so inspired by this book, for all sorts of things I hadn't explained, for so much of the history it presents that has to be reinterpreted that history that I had only a dim awareness of. So, Lisa and Lucy, thank you for setting this up, this is an amazing project, this initiative. Jose, you're an amazing person, you light up every room you're in. it's so inspiring to be in your presence. And Lisa, you've gotta write your book.

LB: I've been working on the dissertation.

MN: Don't worry, I'll keep reminding you. *laughing*

LB: But this may not be a book, this may be a few articles. It probably won't be a book, it will be a few articles.

MN: Well, let's see.

JFA: Lisa, it's ok. That's how I started, with the newsletter.

MN: Whatever it is, it's gonna be important.

LB: It's gonna be something. Maybe a documentary at this point.

MN: Whatever it is, it's important to put these transformative ideas out for an audience, other than academics.

LB: It's gonna be public knowledge. What I'm writing is not going to be for the archives, exclusive archives and exclusive journals. It's going to be open access.

JFA: That reminds me, can I speak quickly. I don't know if Lucy has done it, but you know what I'm going to send you? I'm going to send you a write up I did about what I just said about Lucy and what she represents. I'll forward it to you.

MN: Yes, please.

LB: Thank you so much.

MN: And if anybody can send me a list of all the Garifuna restaurants in the Bronx.

JFA: Which one? Seis Vecinos.

MN: Seis Vecinos I go to all the time. It's my favorite restaurant.

JFA: That's the one area we haven't been in. You know what's so ironic? Dr. Naison, you mentioned it before, it's your favorite restaurant, and it's mine. What's amazing is that there was a Garifuna restaurant in that location, where Seis Vecinos is located, but it didn't last. Maybe for six months or a year. And since then, there hasn't been, maybe one off, but we haven't really been able to establish our own.

MN: Well anyways, thank you so much.

JFA: You're welcome.

MN: This was wonderful. To be continued, in all sorts of ways.