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## Avila, Jose Francisco Interview Part 2

Bronx African American History Project  
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Lisa Betty (LB): This is Lisa Betty with the Bronx African American History Project. It is February, 17th 2022, and I am interviewing Jose Francisco Avila. I'm here with Dr. Mark Naison as well. Thank you for being here for part two Mr. Avila. – and so I think what we ended... we ended around– the Bronx. We talked about it a little bit, I saw your interview with– Elena Martinez and Sanabria, and you mentioned a lot of things that I do want to ask you about as well. So when did you arrive in the Bronx. –Was it specifically to just live in the Bronx around more Garifuna community members? Or was it to do more community organizing and kind of push in that type of way. What was it, or was it both?

José Francisco Ávila (JFA): Ok, that's a multiple choice question and the answer is all of the above. [laughter] Actually if you remember Bobby did ask me– he said so when did you... yah yah about doing it, and were you in the Bronx? And even, yah it was about, talking about the Happy Land Social Club Fire when he asked the question and I explained to him that “no”, I said, “Bobby I was still in Dallas, Texas”.

And I explained to him that I started this in '88/'89 and I was flying to New York just about every weekend cuz I was in corporate America, I was traveling all across America, and back then believe it or not connecting flights were cheaper. So that was my justification to– it didn't matter if I was going to L.A., I was connecting to New York so you could get back to Dallas, and so forth. And that was cheaper for the company so I never really made an issue of it.

But that was what I did. And I would use to come to New York like, every weekend I was here. I was still in Dallas when we did the first Garifuna Summit Meeting in 1991. But again, and I kept coming back because as I mentioned in the book, is that I knew that the largest Garifuna community was right here in New York City. And specifically, in the Bronx.

But, I had a family to sustain, I had a son, and by then I had a son and a daughter. And my employment was in Dallas, Texas. So it allowed me the convenience, as I said, to basically travel to New York. So my family is out there, and I keep doing all of this— when my family did join me and when we did the first Intercontinental Summit in 1991... but other than that it was just me taking advantage of the weekends to come to New York.

And all of that was organized and working specifically with the late Miss Dionisya Amaya Guanya, who became my right hand person. And I'd like to make a clarification because there is this tendency, well, and I know of the history, the Bronx is the largest Garifuna community. But the modern Garifuna movement really starts in Brooklyn. And I explain that because for instance the first meeting that I organized in New York that I mentioned previously was February 5th, 1989. So that was like, what, 33 years ago just two weeks ago. It was right here in the Bronx, it was at the Club Cubano Intercontinental and it was organized by my friend Lesely Avrilla Reyes. It was at that meeting that I met Lesely Alvireyes it was at Ms. Dionisia, Maya Guaniya, Lydia Hill, and they had just organized Mujeres Garina en Marcha.

I mention that because after that, all of the other meetings really took place in Brooklyn. And I made that distinction because in the book I make that distinction. I actually start talking about what I describe in Dallas and what everything that I was doing, and I stop by saying, so now that I have... before I move on to what I did and with this modern Garifuna movement, let me explain where I found the Garifuna community in the Bronx. And basically it was mostly hometown associations and I mention that to Elena and Bobby said “oh yeah, the Boriquas do that, all immigrants... that's how we start our organizing, is hometown association, it's

organizing fundraising activities here to help the community or origin back home. And that was basically what existed back in the Bronx and continues to exist today.

Mark Nasion (MN): Now when a hometown association holds a fundraiser, would they do it in a club, a church or in an apartment?

JFA: Oh, all over. Depending on the season. Right now it's mostly in halls, uh well for the past two years there haven't been too many because of COVID, but now it's picking up again. But during the fall, during the winter, it's really indoors, it's really in halls. During the summer it's actually in the park or beaches, you know there's beach tours, bus tours, and so forth, so there's all kinds of activities depending on the season. But the point is that the assistance is back to the country. What I was looking for, which is where I started working with Mugama, Mujeres Garina en Marcha, was the fact that it has always been my position in continuing to be, yes that I am Honduran, I'm a Garifuna from Honduras. Yes, I'm a Garifuna from Cristales, Honduras and so forth.

And the fact of the matter is that I live here in the United States. And therefore I always felt that yes, there are issues in my country, but this is where I live. And those same issues that we're trying to resolve in the home country were still here in the Garifuna community, and no one was really paying attention.

We mentioned one specifically, which we're gonna discuss further as we move down the interview. The fact that up until now we don't have a Garifuna community center, and there was none at that time, and no one was really looking at that. And what Mugama and what we did was say again, we live right here, we have issues, whether it's economic, whether it's cultural,

whether it's political, whether it's social, we have all of those issues. And as a matter of fact, guess what, we have the same issues that every New Yorker has.

But again, I'm still in Dallas, Texas and my view is really, all of this is coming from observing the African American, Black Power Movement. The Black... that Black is Beautiful, and all of those movements that was a result of the Civil Rights Movement. That's what I grew up in in Boston and that's what I was looking and seeing across the country. As a matter of fact in the book I mention that my inspiration on 1988 was actually watching Jessie Jackson run for president in '84 and in 1988. And basically in my mind I was going you know what, African American issues are the same as us. So they could be our role models and that, they became my role models.

—Because again, the model that I was, that's why I explain and separate the hometown association. That's what existed. But what I was looking... what I was seeing around me was the fact that communities were uprising and basically challenging the system to empower their community, to empower their people, to provide resources for their people, right here. Because this is where the problem existed.

So that's again to sort of establish the distinction, and so, but all of that, again, all this time I was in Dallas, Texas, we did the '91 here and then the '92, and it was with the same people here, and New York was the center of this modern movement. And the reason we ended up— we went to L.A. was because we attracted the attention of all Garifunas. Not just in New York but across the United States and across Central America. Because what we were doing hadn't been done before.

Again, and we were looking, we were just talking about creating a national organization. And why? Again, my role model is the African American community and I keep hearing NAACP and there's an NAACP chapter in Dallas and there's another NAACP in Boston. And in my mind I'm saying, why couldn't we have the equivalent of the NAACP for the Garifunas with chapters in every city where we are and chapters in every community back in the Diaspora. The only country that had something similar was Belize.

And still, amazingly, still it's the only country that has the National Garifuna Council. So from looking at the NAACP I started looking at the National Garifuna Council, the NGC, and it's like that's what we need. We need an umbrella organization that can advocate loudly for the benefit of the Garifuna community. And we need one of those, just like in Belize, we need one right here in New York. We need one in every community, whether it's Los Angeles, Houston, or whether it's Corozal in Honduras, or whether it's La Bruga, in Guatemala or whether it's Orinoco, in Nicaragua, and so forth.

So that was the vision. That's why the title of the book is *Pan-Garifuna* And I joke...

MN: Afro-Latino, yes.

JFA: Yes Exactly [laughs]. And I joke when I do presentations among my people I joke, I say "Pan" is not bread in Spanish, okay? "Pan" means "all". Just like the Pan-African movement, or the Pan-American game. So my idea was let's do an all Garifuna organization.

MN: That's interesting as you are talking about this I was also thinking about the Universal Negro Improvement Association.

JFA: Exactly.

MN: The Marcus Garvey movement that captures all throughout the Caribbean...

JFA: That's Right.

MN: Central America...

JFA: Exactly.

MN: –Um, so there are precedents.

JFA: That's another fact of mine, and when it comes to Garifuna's heroes, it's Thomas Vincent Ramos in Belize. He was the one that founded and created the Garifuna Settlement Day. The first Garifuna holiday in the world in Belize. That was regional and up to today it is a national holiday, it's a paid bank holiday as they call it in British countries. Well, Dr. Naison, the reason I mention Thomas Vincent Ramos... he was a disciple of Marcus Garvey.

MN: Ahh [Nods head]

JFA: As a matter of fact he created two organizations in Belize around the NAACP and so forth. So yes, there are precedents. And I take this opportunity to say that I mention all of that because one of my tendencies... I don't believe in reinventing the wheel, I don't believe in reinventing the wheel I believe in doing, what they call now, re-engineering... looking at the wheel and figuring out how does it apply to the Garifuna community? And as a matter of fact I explained that in the epilogue of the book where I detail every chapter... how the idea for every chapter and everything that I did over the years came about, and it was from reading, from being aware. And back then, there was no such thing as Google, it was going to a Library or going to a bookstore and sitting in the magazine section and reading there, and eventually Barnes and Noble came and made it a whole lot easier, then I could just lounge there for as long as I wanted to and most of the time I would figure out what magazine applied and I would subscribe to it

and... and again it was listening to television because there was not the internet, and listening to the radio listening to the news, but being aware of current events and wondering how what's going around me affects my community. And what can I do to prepare my community to deal with the effects of the changes that are taking place.

So, and again that was the overall... vision of a national organization came about. And this went on and on to 1997, we did celebrate, in La Ceiba, Honduras back in April of 1997, the 200th anniversary of the arrival of the Garifuna to Hondurans, when we became known as the Bicentennial, what is still considered the biggest event... the biggest Afro-descendant event in Latin America of that time, was the celebration commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the arrival of the Garifuna to Central America, which is why, as I mentioned before, I let young people know that the Afro-Descendente movement started with us, and it was because of our organizing skills we have been one of the most organized groups in Latin America when it comes to Afro-Ascende.

So that took us to 1997 and we came together as a group, we worked with our organizations across central America, mostly in Honduras, where it happened, and by that time I was in... I was still in Dallas, Texas, and then I started having marital problems and actually got a divorce and at that point I decided—I started contemplating what was my next move and I decided that you know what, I've been doing this uh, long distance, so I gotta figure out a way to move to New York City so that I can continue to follow my mission and my calling.

And I was working for computer language research that by then had been acquired by Thomson Reuters and I took advantage of that merger to request a transfer to New York City and that came about in late 1997 and by January of 1998 was when I moved to New York City. And it was just



proposed because I moved in January and now the same people that are organized to celebrate the 200th anniversary are trying to figure out what else can we do to join forces and continue to work together, just like we did for the previous 5,6,7 years, and so forth. And that's when we came up with the idea of creating the Garifuna Coalition USA Inc. Which was really the realization of that umbrella organization that I had envisioned as part of the first and second Garifuna Intercontinental Summit meeting. It was 21 organizations that had come together and basically organized the Garifuna Coalition.

And the interesting thing again, that interplays between Brooklyn and the Bronx— the organizing meeting actually took place in Brooklyn, but the headquarters of the Garifuna coalition is right here in the Bronx. The registration with the New York Department of State is in the county of the Bronx. Again, the tendency that we know what this is, where the power base lies. But again the sort of ingenuity as far as organizing has always been coming from Brooklyn or from myself, coming all the way from Dallas.

And a lot of it, I guess, needless to say comes from complacency of humans, right, we kind of get used to what we're doing and we get to the point where we feel that there is no need to change. You know, whereas I don't feel the need to reinvent the wheel, there are other people who feel that if it's not broke, why fix it? Well- I believe that even if it's not broken, sometimes we have to figure out what modifications we need to do.

So again— because I realized that there are reasons why humans think differently, there's a lot that's involved. And that's my way of saying I'm not accusing anybody, I'm not criticizing anything, I am just analyzing the situation, which is usually what I do. As an accountant I'm of a belief that what is not made sure cannot be improved, so therefore I am always looking for ways

of measuring the success, the impacts, of whatever decisions I make or whatever activities I decide to get involved with, and figure out a way of making them relevant.

– It was January 1998, when I finally made the decision to relocate from Dallas, Texas. And I mention my personal life and my employment because I've made it very clear from the time that I started doing this I'm blessed, that I have a profession that has allowed me to provide for myself and my family, but at the same time has provided me with flexibility to do what they call now, a side gig. Able to basically follow in my passion and more than that, my calling. And that's also what I love, to transfer from Dallas to New York City and continue to have a way of providing for my children specifically, myself and so forth. And now it made it a whole lot easier because now I was here on a full time basis.

And again, so the first year, the first six– ya the first year of my being here it was, my side gig was The Garifuna Coalition USA. And then along with that was helping Mujeres Garifuna en Marcha. And along with that was of course working with other Garifuna communities and basically training their leadership to adapt this new way of organizing, and sort of expanding the Garifuna Coalition and expanding the reach of the Garifuna community. And that took place up until 2012 which was when I finally retired from corporate America and sort of started slowing down my participation with the community. But that hasn't really stopped me from continuing to contribute and continuing to stay in touch with what's going on.

Having said all of that, there is, I mentioned earlier. There is no question that the biggest impact when it comes to organizing and when it comes to the Garifuna community in the United States, is right here in the Bronx. And I mentioned that in the book, there is a chapter that I included called "Aftermath", of Happy Land Social Club Fire.

I've spoken to a few people and I've done a few presentations and I explained that the reason I separated that chapter is, I talk about the 1990s and the Happy Land Social Club Fire, I think it's chapter 3 or 4, when I talk about all the organizing that was going on, but I just describe what was going on there, and I intentionally decided that, you know what, I need to have a separate chapter where I can discuss deeper the ramifications of the Happy Land Social Club Fire within the Garifuna Community right here in New York City. And that's why I called it "The Aftermath".

Because after the Happy Land Social Club Fire which was March 25th, 1990, it generated a boom of new organizations, I mean, most Garifuna organizations in New York and in the Bronx, especially nonprofits registered with New York State. That boom started as a result of the Happy Land Social Club Fire. Up until 1990 the only Garifuna organization that had been registered was Mujeres Garifuna en Marcha. And then after that again there was— I keep track of every Garifuna organization registered with New York State and when I talk about a boom, it was a boom, and so forth.

But now what— I really want you to understand what I'm saying, and I explain it. The biggest problem after the Happy Land Social Club Fire was the fact that the Garifuna community didn't have a community center. As a matter of fact, there's an article that I quote from the New York Times. The title of that article was "Garifuna Community Doesn't Have A Place To Mourn Deaths". That was the title of the article. Now there was another article right after the fire that discussed, basically described the Garifuna community as the most disorganized immigrant community they had ever dealt with. Because again, and that was with this whole idea of a central organization came about, and that was the basis of the criticism. The fact that every

organization was actually trying to fundraise for their relatives or their family members from their communities, but there was not a central organization responsible. Like the Red Cross working for the Red Cross and so forth. So what I had envisioned and what I had proposed was coming true. It had become a reality. And on and on.

And these new organizations were coming across and being creative with no connection with the existing organizations, Muguma being the main one, and so forth. Within all of that, every article that I've mentioned and every article that came about highlighted the fact that – the New York Times is the one that I quote – unlike the Dominicans, unlike the Puerto Ricans, unlike the few Argentinians and the few Columbians that exist, the Garifuna community, the Honduran community, didn't have any landmarks, didn't have any restaurants, we didn't have any places of worship where you could say, "Ok this is where the Garifuna community exists".

And from the fire what came out, which is again, to really expand on the aftermath. What came out of the fire was the need for a community center. As a matter of fact the bishop, I forget, the bishop of that time during a mass in memory of the victims at St. Patrick's Cathedral, actually, which was attended by then President of Honduras, Leonardo Callejas, during the whole celebration, actually proposed that he would donate \$1,000, if the President of Honduras would match it.

He took up the challenge and said that he would match it. Former, now late mayor, David Dinkins, proposed donating a lot for the construction of a community center. One of the co-owners of the Happy Land Social Club Fire, as part of the proceedings, offered to donate \$60,000 towards this fund for a community center. And it was to make sure that a tragedy like the Happy Land Social Club Fire wouldn't ever happen again.

That was the idea. I understand and there is proof that as part of donating, the land of the city of New York also contributed \$275,000 towards that project. Which the Garifuna community was supposed to match for the construction of the center. And on and on.

But again, the center of the aftermath of the Happy Land Social Club Fire, was the construction of a community center. I mentioned it in the book in the middle of that chapter, that created major friction. Not just within the Garifuna community but within the Honduran community. Because all of a sudden non-Garifuna Honduras decided to join in, and I mentioned that in the book and I, that's a reality that I know and I'm not afraid to say it which is why I wrote it in the book.

So, there has been this tendency which is also what I was resisting, as a Garifuna, which is part of this whole anti-Blackness attitude of Latin America. And it's the fact that, yes we're Garifuna, yes we're Hondurans, but all of a sudden a project like a community center comes about and everyone raises their hands— "Oh, we're Hondurans and we want to participate". But because we are Mestizos we should lead that project, and we should be the leading voices of it. And again, that has been one of my attitudes that I have challenged over the years.

Well, that came full force as a result of the Happy Land Social Club Fire. The Mestizo community from Honduras came out, they actually forced themselves, they actually forced Garifuna members of the board to silent and they took over the project. And all of a sudden a Mestizo that lives in Queens is elected President of a federation of Honduran organizations in New York that was known as FEDONI.

That is the aftermath that I refer to. Well, the aftermath is that 33 years later, there is not a Garifuna community center. 33 years later, all of those people were gone. And that fact is that

within that period when all of that was active, it was managed by non-Garifunas that didn't live in the Bronx, and so forth.

So that's why I refer to it as "The Aftermath". And I just did an interview with a radio in Washington DC and it was actually about the Happy Land Social Club Fire. But it was in reference to the fire that we just had here in the Bronx in January. And I kept reading and watching the news and they kept referring to the Happy Land Social Club Fire because all of a sudden, well this is the worst fire since Happy Land Social Club Fire, and I was explaining to them the Happy Land Social Club Fire was the biggest tragedy, fire tragedy, in New York State since 1911.

MN: The Triangle Fire.

JFA: Exactly. And now it's the Happy Land Social Club Fire. But again, that's what I mean when I talk about the aftermath. And it's the fact that we still don't have— that hasn't stopped us, because we're resilient, we're creative, and we always find a way. In my case the way I solved that was I actually established new partnerships with different associations.

Well first, I was able to get funding for the Garifuna Coalition to actually open a center on 149th St. And that was funded initially by the New York Foundation, and eventually I was able to get funding through the Union Square Awards and also Simon Bolivar Foundation to basically be able to operate it. I started pulling back and passed it onto the next generation who I basically felt needed to continue it. Unfortunately, they did not, and eventually the office closed.

MN: So what year did it close?

JFA: 2014.

MN: Damn.

JFA: 2014 it closed. But I was also able to establish relationships through the Garifuna Coalition with Phipps Neighborhoods, and basically be able to provide resources for the Garifuna. And of course established relationships with elected officials, and other power to be as resources. So that's the way we have navigated this aftermath.

MN: –Right. It's interesting because for the last 30 years, I've been involved in similar debates about creating a hip hop center in the Bronx. And different people were fighting with one another, and it seemed hopeless, and then in the last 5 years, a group came together with the fundraising capability and enough connections with the original artists so that it actually is gonna open in two years.

JFA: Exactly, yah. [smiling]

MN: –I mean my gut instinct is, there should be a Garifuna center, a physical space in the Bronx.

JFA: Absolutely.

MN: And perhaps, this is a more auspicious time, to bring together people who could make that a reality.

JFA: And thank you for relating it, I do know because I read, in addition to that I was... 2017 I was named by Mayor De Blasio to the first night life advisory board, and Kurtis Blow was a member of the board, so.

MN: Right.

JFA: And he used to talk about the museum and everything. But you also were right, it's a perfect example as I keep trying to help a community and– but eventually, that gives me hope, what you just described with the museum so... and as Jesse Jackson, again my hero, my inspiration, he believes and I do believe this, that we gotta keep a hopeful eye.

LB: So I have a question about is trying to figure out this timeline. So El Club Cubano closes its doors at 671 Prospect Ave in the '90s. What is the exact date? Do you know the exact date? Is it before or after the fires?

JFA: Actually it was after the fire.

LB: It closed its door after the fire?

JFA: Yes, and the reason... yes, and the reason I know is because when I moved to New York in 1998, one of the first activities that I attended was at Club Cubano.

LB: Oh, okay, okay so it was still around

JFA: Yes.

LB: In 1998, still around.

JFA: Correct.

LB: So 199– was it 1991 or 1993 is when you had the meeting at El Club Cubano the Garifuna meeting at El Club Cubano?

JFA: 1999.

LB: Oh it was 1999, okay.

JFA: '89.

LB: Oh, '89, sorry.

JFA: '89.

LB: Okay, okay. So '89 we have the meeting at El Club Cubano, um the Happy Land Social Club Fires happened in 1991–

JFA: 1990.

LB: 1990 so the early 90s–



JFA: March 25th, 1990.

LB: 1990.

JFA: Right.

LB: 1990.

JFA: Right, so practically, the meeting was in fact, practically, a year later after, that's when the Happy Land Social Club Fire happened.

LB: Wow.

JFA: And I remember it well because that's the reason the Summit meeting was happening in '91. It was supposed to be in '90. So the first meeting was in '89 at Club Cubano and the plan was that in 1990 once we were planning to organize the Intercontinental Garifuna Summit meeting, then the fire happened, and then it consumed all the resources, all the organizations for Garifunas dealing with the aftermath of the fire, the initial aftermath and so forth, and that's why we decided to move the Summit to 1991. But again that was February 5th, 1989.

MN: Now what's remarkable to me is also that you say that there are no churches in the Bronx which are predominantly Garifuna.

JFA: There were not.

MN: Is that still true?

JFA: No, there are now. As a matter of fact since then, what has happened is that there is, there are various: St. Augustine Church and how can I forget... but there are 2-3 churches now where actually Garifuna whole, Garifuna masses on a monthly basis.

MN: So now there are Garifuna masses in the Bronx.

JFA: Right, in addition to that, since that time, there are evangelical, there's the evangelical Garifuna council... the Council of Evangelical Garifuna Churches.

MN: Wow.

JFA: And that, there are, they have about 15-20 members. They have churches throughout New York City. There's a church in Manhattan, there's a church... there's multiple here in the Bronx, of course it's the largest community, and there's actually one or two Brooklyn. So we have gone from having none to actually holding Garifuna masses, but at the same time again, the Evangelical Council has created new churches. The Garifuna Church, the original one is located on, uh, Brook Avenue— and that is where the council is which actually coordinates all the other churches.

MN: And this is— a Garifuna Evangelical Church on Brook Avenue.

JFA: Yes.

MN: Does it call itself Garifuna Evangelical Church?

JFA: It's called The Garifuna Church.

MN: Woah!

JFA: —It's on the sign, look it up man! [laughs]. And it's Brook Avenue, I think it's right— 145th and 146th, around that area, uh yes and that's the first one and that's the one that kind of serves as— again creates the council. They start training pastors and working with other Evangelical organizations and so forth. And today again, there are over 15, and they have also expanded across the United States. I know there's one in Houston, there's one in Ohio, and so forth.

MN: And how– in Central America, are most Garifuna Catholic? Or are there Evangelical influences there as well?

JFA: It's just like here. The majority of Garifunas are catholic, but the fastest growing memberships are actually with Evangelicas.

MN: Yah.

JFA: And it's happening here... but here it's still the majority are Catholic. But in Honduras, again and in Central America it's growing. You've heard of Alverío Martínez right? Alverío Martínez actually blames the Evangelical churches for the demise of the Garifuna language. And it's the result and the impact– but yes the majority are catholic. As a matter of fact when I speak in public, I have relationships with all of them. That's one of the things that I was able to do, because again I recognize that we have Catholics, we have Evangelicals, and I recognize that we also have our own idiosyncrasy, our own spirituality, and I recognize all three of them. And I have relationships with all of them. As a matter of fact part of my work in the Bronx was to sort of reconcile those groups, and I was able to do that through the Garifuna Coalition.

MN: Well that reminds me, is there something in the Garifuna tradition equivalent to Santería? An African derived spiritual practice in a somewhat organized form.

JFA: Oh well absolutely, it's called The Dugu.

MN: Is there a name for it–?

JFA: Yes, The Dugu.

MN: How do you spell it?

JFA: Dugu: D, U, G,G, U.

MN: D, U, U, G, U.

JFA: Yah.

MN: Dugu. And so that's—

JFA: The equivalent of the Voodoo, it's the equivalent of Santeria, it's the equivalent of Candoblé, and all the African traditions that are practiced throughout Latin America. Yah, we have our own.

MN: Now do you have any equivalent of those stores, Botanica?

JFA: No, no. But we do have a Shaman, which we call the Boyue. And the Boyue is basically the medicine man or the medicine woman— actually woman because as a matter of fact there is a Boyue Shaman organization right here in the Bronx. Which is women and men, mostly women, who practice the Garifuna spirituality.

MN: Ahh.

JFA: See when I talk about the Bronx being not just the largest Garifuna community but the epicenter— as a matter of fact I've said it, the first time I said it was in Honduras in 2009. I attended a meeting out there and I was in the Capital Tegucigalpa and I was at a Garifuna event being celebrated. And a young lady during lunch said, “you know, I wish we could have events like this on a regular basis and not just once a year.”. This is a lady from Honduras, and I said, “really?”, I said— and she said, “yah this is once a year every April”. And I said to her, “you know in New York you can attend a Garifuna event every week?”. And she's like, “Really? Are you sure?”, “I'm telling you I live right there”, I said. And I said this, which is the first time I said it. And I repeated it, I included it in the book, and I followed it by saying, “you know I would dare say that today, the epicenter of the Garifuna culture is New York City. She's like “ehh—”, and I said, “I'm telling you, and I have lived through—”

MN: Now if you're talking about 15 different evangelical churches.

JFA: Exactly.

MN: Plus Catholic masses, plus Dugu ceremonies, you're talking about a very, sort of, rich, complicated spiritual life.

JFA: Absolutely.

MN: –But you mentioned also before there weren't restaurants.

JFA: And there still aren't.

MN: And there isn't any club that's assumed what Club Cubano and Duramericano was.

JFA: No and that is actually interesting, and Bobby mentioned– it during my interview and, which was really interesting which shows how communities are really interconnected, especially here in the Bronx where within the same neighborhoods you have all different types of ethnicities. I had always spoken about the Happy Land Social Club Fire from the Garifuna perspective, which I met Bobby and Elena, I'll never forget it during one meeting we were talking and Bobby said to me, “you know, I heard you say that quite a few times and it just clicked, cuz you talk about the Happy Land Social Club and its impact, but there's another aftermath.” And he said, “And it was the destruction of New York's nightlife, and in particular, the Bronx nightlife.”

MN: Ahh.

JFA: Cuz as a result of the Happy Land Social Club Fire clubs were closed. I did the research, over 1,000 clubs in New York were closed as a result in the aftermath–

MN: As a result of the Happy Land Social Club Fire– Ok I gotta tell one of my students is doing something on club life, and this was 1,000 clubs closed after Happy Land Fire.

JFA: Exactly. And the reason that I know is because when I was lobbying to become a member of the New York Night Club Advisory Board, I did my research and it was like again, I was able to validate what Bobby had mentioned to me through research.

MN: Well one of my students may contact you to talk about this, because she's doing New York music clubs in the '80s through the early '90s.

JFA: Sure, I'll talk to her I did the research, and again, it's amazing because— and that was my justification for applying and seeking the support of the Borough President and all the politicians, it was like most of the victims were Garifuna so I— so we need to have some representation—.

MN: Are there any Garifuna elected officials in the Bronx?

JFA: No there are not. However, as I mentioned in the book, because of the work of this new movement, I was just talking to a young lady recently and I said, “You do realize the impact that we've made, right?— Because when we started this, there was no elected officials and there was no Garifuna in political positions since then, and I have the list and I included the list in the books. There are 12 Garifunas employed by politicians including the legal counsel of the former Borough President Rubén Díaz Jr. His legal council was a Garifuna young lady. And all of that happened as a result, again, of all this activism, advocacy, and so forth. And we did get someone on the ballot for a State County Rep, but that was as far as I'd like to remind her, you're the first Garifuna person to appear on a New York State ballot for a campaign. But no, we don't have an elected someone, but it's gonna happen.

MN: Mhm.

LB: The question I have, going back to CCI, because this was all having a safe space, having a space where night life can occur, having a space of cultural exchange, or multicultural exchange, particularly for Black people in particular is really important in these cities.

JFA: Yes.

LB: –Like the Bronx, Brooklyn, Boston, however, so my question to you is, how did you find CCI? When you first came in ‘89– and you had the international council, and then in ‘98 when you went back for a meeting of some sorts, but how were you connected– and what did you think of CCI? Was that kind of like a good example of community organizing? Or was it a space where it was– because it’s not necessarily– ‘89 and ‘98 aren’t necessarily the height of the organization, but the organization is still in existence and still has a space.

JFA: Exactly– Again, I mentioned Jesse Jackson as my inspiration, and again just being aware of what goes around– but actually I came across it to my partner, Lesley Alvireyes. And the reason she had that relationship is again, the Blackness. You know, being, identifying as Black, and we’ve always had a close relationship with Cubans overall. And here in the Bronx, because again, there have been some social clubs, as a matter of fact, I’m sure you’ll relate, if you’re on the number 2 train going to– once you reach 174th street, over to the left there is a red building there like a 2 story, and right around there there was a social club that was actually operated by a man that I knew back in Honduras as a child before we both migrated, his name was Santos Batiz.

So there’s always been clubs, but they haven’t really lasted. As a result we’ve always had relationships with– Club Cubano and even some of the Puerto Rican clubs– latinos, because again even whip lag but at the same time when it comes to cultures, that similarity with the other

ethnic groups from Latin America and so on. –So Lesley had, she had one of those hometown associations from her hometown. So she had used it for social events. So that was my connection. And when I actually moved here it was the same thing, it was actually a Garifuna social event at Club Cubano, but it was because again, as a part of all of these resources to hold social events, it was in the list of the Garifuna people.

And as I mentioned I always well, Cuba is really the first country other than Honduras that I can associate culturally. And why was that? Because my parents listened to Radio Cuba at night– I was telling Bobby this, yah I think I mentioned this... at night we would listen to Cuban Radio Stations. In the morning my parents were listening to Cuban stations. The music other than Mexican that I heard was Cuban. And my father was a big fan of Cuban music. Even from Honduras he had an album collection: Fajardo and all the big bands from those times and so forth. So culturally and as a Black latino, that was really my first connection, was with Cuba.

And when I got here, other than Jesse Jackson, and again, there's this whole combination about Blackness but at the same time being from Latin America. So it's like you look around and yes there's Jesse Jackson but then again ok so what are the Latinos doing and how do we fit into all of that. But again, it's being aware, and being in the same space, and being–having similar cultures. The key to it being the language, being able to communicate with them.

So as a result I kind of started admiring the Cubans also, because in my opinion they have been the most organized latino, hispanics in the United States of America> They were the first ones that I saw truly achieve political power and economic power in this country. I know why, there's a big distinction between them and us, but still I did look up to them, and I was still in Dallas when the Mariolitos came, and I was able to there, I met quite a few I was able to assist and



develop a relationship with them. And now, I was disappointed when I went to Cuba back in 2017, but yes, I have— that relationship has always been there and again with the Club Cubano—

MN: Did you say you were disappointed? What were—

LB: Yah [laughter] Me and Dr. Naison were like what?

MN: Yah— cuz we both have visited a few times. So what disappointed you?

JFA: Well maybe I went to a different place but I didn't see many people that looked like me. I saw some—

LB: Wait where'd you go?

JFA: I was in Havana.

LB: Oh yah, well it depends on where you are or where you were in Havana.

JFA: Well, yah I was at a conference which I was able to meet—

MN: Oh yah, oh boy yeah if you were at like a University—

LB: Yah, but there's places to go where you see more people like Central Havana, but when you go to Eastern Cuba, you're gonna feel like these are Garifuna people these are Jamaican people, these are—. [laughter]

JFA: Oh really? Okay, Okay.

LB: These are Haitian people like this is Black Black, this is like the epicenter of what Blackness is in the Caribbean that's what Eastern Cuban feels to me.

JFA: I need to go there, like I said I—

MN: I organized the tour, believe it or not, for Fordham Alumni, for hosting on a Santeria and Afro-Cuban culture.

JFA: Really?

MN: Yes.

JFA: Wow—

MN: And we saw all these community centers and went to performances and dance troupes—

JFA: You need to take me the next time, that's what I want to see.

MN: If we ever get back I'm gonna bring y— you know— I'll never forget seeing the National Ballet Company where people did you know, a combination of European ballet moves and African dance all to drumming.

JFA: Really?

MN: And a national— you know the elite dance company, everything is done to African drums.

JFA: Just like the Garifuna.

MN: The movements vary between classical ballet and other forms of dance, I was transfixed. I felt like... when I went to Cuba I thought everyone in the Bronx has to come here.

JFA: I need to go where the two of you went.

MN: The music—

JFA: I was there and like I said and I realized— cuz I was kind of limited as far as where I could go and that sort of, because of the conference. And I told my wife, “well it's like being in New York, pretty much”. But I gotta go back— bug again, and exactly what you described, it has been my admiration of Cubans, as that identification with the whole Afro-Latino, well as I tell people let's not forget what their music was called. Before it was called salsa.

MN: Afro-cuban music.

JFA: Afro-cuban music, exactly.

MN: I mean, we went to an orchid farm where, at 10 am the musicians came out with the drums and we were dancing and drinking rum at 10 am on an orchid farm.

JFA: Really wow.

MN: All to the rhythm.

JFA: Okay, okay.

MN: It was— now this is true, they knew we had a very multiracial group. You know, and it was very specific. But there was no shortage of places for us to visit where African traditions both spiritual and secular were being highlighted.

JFA: Wow, I need to take that tour.

MN: And yah, and also marketed. I mean, before Trump cut it off, they were being marketed to African American tourists groups. You know, the African— this was—

JFA: This conference that I attended was actually, because I was promoting Garifuna music at the time, and it was about Cuban music and that's what I expected. But again it was like... but anyways, I need to take that tour.

MN: Okay [laughing]

JFA: But I do have a great deal—

MN: We still take you to Santiago.

JFA: Alright, alright [laughing]. Ok, what else can I tell you?

LB: Yes, so we'll have one more question. Um, and this is gonna be about El Club Cubano – Americano again, just because I want to understand the connection of like particularly incoming or, let's say not most recent but critical mass. Recent critical mass, you know what I mean, there's ebbs and flows in the migratory stream, but of, um, Garifuna community members and

their connection to Black Cuban community members and the infrastructures that Black Cuban community members created within the Bronx and how they're in that lineage, in that space with them. But how, were there any other ways, like how did you for the first conference, how did you know to go to El Club Cubano? How did you know to go to El Club Cubano? Just was it always part of the running list? Did, like did you have to talk to someone? Was Melba Avarado the person that you spoke to? Was there other people? Like what was the context.

JFA: No, as I mentioned, my contact was, and again cuz I mentioned her briefly, but I'll put it into context. What I started all this, again, the whole idea started in Los Angeles. I went back to Dallas and explained it to my wife, the same week that I returned to Dallas, I got home and my wife said, "this childhood friend called me and said she's in Dallas and she'd like to come visit us." I said, "okay, that's fine", and she did. This is my wife's friend. And they did, they, well she did and to our surprise, when she shows up, she shows up with another Garifuna lady.

They were actually Mary K. Cosmetic representatives and the headquarters of Mary K is actually in Dallas, Texas and there was a big convention, so they were attending a Mary K. Cosmetics convention. So she showed up with a friend, and we started talking with my wife's friend and so forth, but then I really connect with Lesley, who was the stranger at that time. You know, we weren't expecting— but I start connecting with her, and I start sharing with her uh what, that experience that I had and what my plans were, and being that she's from New York, and we connected to the point that she agreed that, you know she said "you know what, I like what you're thinking, and if you don't mind I'd like to work with you". And I said, "well sure, cuz you know I'm here and you're in New York".

So we agreed to work together. So she went back and we'd communicate by telephone. And we agreed to hold this meeting on February 5th, 1989. So she did all of that, all of the discussion. She was the one that had the connection with Club Cubano. And basically she just told me she just had found a place, this is the place, I said "sure, let's do it", and then I showed up and there we were! So I never really got to talk to anyone at Club Cubano, Lesley did all the— she was my connection, And she was the one that had the relationship and she was the one that got the place, we organized the meeting, we showed up early to help her set up the place. And that's why as I mentioned before that the local Garifuna community had Club Cubano in the list of places, resources, and she did. Cuz as I mentioned she led, her, the name of her organization was, Pero con mi te premejoramiento la travesía pero metra, was the name of her organization, the hometown association that she led. So they held activities, and the Club Cubano was one of those places that she did. As a matter of fact she's still around and I might put her in contact with you.

MN: Oh please!

LB: Oh please do, yes, this is the kind of— yes exactly.

JFA: Okay, I'll do that. I will reach out to her.

LB: Do you remember how the event went? Like, was there music? Did you— like how was it, was it mostly speakers?

JFA: It was an organizing meeting, and quite a few people showed up, and believe it or not, there was no music, it was just discussions. I presented the idea and you know, basically the vision and what we were looking for, and people had the opportunity to ask questions. And most of the meeting was going back with answering questions, because it was— and the reason we decided to do it this way, because it was again, a totally new concept, it was totally different than anything

that had been done in the Garifuna community, so we knew that we had to explain it because it was not the traditional meeting. And again, it was well attended, and that was where Ms.

Dionisia Amaya, the late Dionisia Amaya, was an attendant, and she was there with the entire board of the organization that they had just created. Yah because this was in February, and actually they— it's called Mujeres Garinagu en Marcha por Educacion. Garinagu Women for Education.

And the reason for the name was the fact that Ms. Amaya was a teacher, but the purpose of the organization was to help Garifuna women who were teachers in Honduras, but were not exercising or working in the field here. And she also created the organization in 1989, that was February 5th, 1989. The launching of the organization would be in March as part of International Women's Month. So that's why she was creating it, and she was creating it to help Garifuna women obtain their equivalency of their degrees in Honduras so they could teach here. So she was one of them, and at the same time there were other hometown association leaders, so it was a very diverse group, it was well attended, but it was mostly conversation. We had some food that went around, but mostly again it was— the meeting lasted about, from what I remember two— at least three hours. And it was three hours of just conversation and explaining, presenting to them and then them asking questions. And that led to other meetings, the follow-up meetings that were afterwards and expanding on all of them until again, we kind of put the idea together that what we needed was a bigger meeting. Where we could invite more people and more Garinagu from different parts of the country if possible. And that's what became the first Intercontinental Garifuna Summit Meeting. But, the beginning of all of this, again was February 5th, 1989 at El Club Cubano at 671 Prospect Avenue. And I describe it as, that was the launch of the modern

Garifuna organizing movement. But Lesley was the one that— and I'm gonna put you in contact with her.

MN: Good, yah.

LB: Thank you so much. I don't know if I have any other questions but if you want to kind of end off with anything particularly regarding your goals for the future, what you foresee, we know a Garifuna center is in the works.

MN: Yah, and we're also here to help with, you know, we're not just scholars, we're contributors.

JFA: Absolutely. Yah I've said it before, thank you for the opportunity. I have enjoyed it and more than enjoyed it I am happy of the connection, because I've always understood the power of academia when it comes to communities, and so forth. And I am happy and thank you for the opportunity to be able to do this oral history, because the reason, one of the many reasons of writing the books is actually, and I actually reference 1997, when I say this, the Garifuna Bicentennial in Laselvia, and there I told a group of Garifunas in a meeting, "the time has come for us to write the next chapters of our history, because all previous chapters up to now, the 200-year, have been written by others. So we need to start writing our own chapters". I mean by then, I had been writing my own newsletter for eight years because I started in '89. But that was my message to my people, and so forth.

MN: And by the way I love these email sayings that you send out.

JFA: Thank you, thank you.

MN: They're just wonderful, the historical statements, they're just wonderful.

LB: The newsletters, do you have some of those early ones, especially from the first meeting?

JFA: Yah, yah I have the physical copies that I have scanned, but yes I do have the original newsletters. And actually people have asked me when they say about how long did it take you to write that book and I say 18 months, and they say, “18 months?!”. And it’s like well I’ve been writing for 33 years, and fortunately I was using the computer so all I had to do was update some of my information and transfer the files.

MN: Oh, oh but this reminds me, have you donated your personal papers to the library yet?

JFA: Nope, no.

MN: Okay, let me put that B in your Bonnet. Because, I was prodded by an activist named Kevin Powell. I have a long history of activism going back to the ‘60s, to donate my personal papers to the Brooklyn Historical Society, and he has signed four high school students to work with me all summer to organize those papers.

JFA: Really?

MN: And I think your personal papers should be donated to the Bronx County Historical Society.

JFA: Well, and that’s what I was saying, and that’s why I’m grateful to both you, Lisa, Mike and Lucy, and again, this opportunity. So I said that, and again I’ve been writing, and I have documented and now I have the book, but in addition to saying that, it is my knowing that Garifuna history has been passed orally, not in organized manner like this.

As a matter of fact, one of my standard jokes, you know, there was a famous comedian that used to say, Bromiendo Serio, seriously joking, and I said, “you ask a Garifuna about history” and they’ll say, “well my father told me that my grandfather told him that my great grandfather told him”. And I know that’s usually how we start as humans, but here we are in the 21st century and for instance, the reason the book ended up being 400 pages was because you know what, I don’t



know if I'm gonna have an opportunity to expand on whatever, so I'm just gonna be as comprehensive as I can and put it all in perspective, I put it all in a timeline for the current and future generations.

MN: It's incredibly detailed— But those newsletters need to be in a location where people can have access to them.

JFA: Absolutely.

MN: As well as all those things that you're posting now. All those documents are important historical documents.

JFA: Thank you, thank you.

MN: And I will even help assign some of my students to work with your personal papers.

JFA: And like I said Dr. Naison, that's why I'm so pleased to— again, I've enjoyed it, but again that's why I'm so pleased. Because, well what is President Obama working on right now? Building his library right? [laughter]. But like I've said I've always been aware of again, the significance and the importance of institutions to preserve history.

MN: Right, yah and that's exactly what I was thinking of. The importance of building institutions like the Universal Hip Hop Museum, A Garifuna Center. Your papers, or being in a library where they can be digitized and made accessed to the public to scholars like Lisa. I mean she should get access to it right now, but it's the Lisa's of the future. You know, so you know I see lots of areas for us to keep collaborating.

JFA: Oh I'm looking forward to it. I'm receptive and I'm looking forward to continuing the conversation. Because again, that is, that has been part of my vision, again, I hear this phrase a lot lately, but with me it's always been like that, I was told it's not about me, it's about current

and future generations. Again again, and we will continue that conversation. But that is why I am so grateful to you for giving me the opportunity to participate in your project and with this initiative. And again, as far as I'm concerned this is just the beginning of a long relationship.

MN: And I do want to say that Lisa is an extraordinary leader.

JFA: Yes she is.

MN: Somebody who's had a tremendous impact on us at Fordham— and also in terms of building these connections and— you know so— I'm gonna write you both when I write to the Gray Shen about this student Carmen Santiago, and the deed to create a program for people interested in studying Afro-Caribbean History.

JFA: Great, great, yah. But that's what I'll say again, thank you both and again, I look forward to continuing the relationship and the conversations and expanding these interviews.

MN: Ok great.

LB: Yes exactly, thank you so much and we'll be in contact in say, the next two, three weeks with the link for your interview cuz it will be online. We'll also, I'm gonna also send you some justin formation for you to sign off so it can be online, no problem. I have a link.

MN: And I will have my student who's doing research on club life, reach out to you.

JFA: Ok, fair enough, and I will reach out to Lesley and I will connect you with her Lisa.

Everyone: Ok thank you so much, bye bye!