Winter 1-29-2024

Luz Solis Interview

Mark Naison

Luz Soliz

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Lisa Betty, Lucy Blanco

Transcribed by Amy Rini, 12-10-23

Betty: Hello hello hi how are you?

Soliz: I'm very well.

Pause waiting for others … waited and chatted for 15 minutes. Lisa mentioned editing it out.

Luz Soliz: I mean, we are busy women, and we are all balancing it all without our necks falling off, feeling busy and trying to orchestrate so many things

Betty: I appreciate you for one, Lucy Blanco connecting us, giving you as an interviewee for the BAAHP, a community initiative that we have created, the BAAHP, which is almost 20 years old, it was created by Dr. Naison and other community members and faculty leaders at Fordham. It serves and was created as a bridge, a collaborative bridge between the university and the black community and the greater Bronx community. We have a lot of public engagements; it's political, like some of the issues with immigration and repression. If it's associated with art and music, we have a lot of artists who come by and Lucy knows a lot of artists, it's very collaborative, figuring out how to engage, particularly with the Spanish speaking community so right now, we have a good engagement with African communities, English speaking Caribbean communities in the Bronx but I think a space we want to grow in is black Spanish-speaking communities and Black LatinX communities however people identify, people in the Caribbean diaspora communities because we know in the Bronx and there is also diaspora a part of the

Black community in the Bronx in New York, and there are more Garifuna in the Bronx than in Belize and a part of the community and also looking at it not as something recent, but something that is a lot bigger than 15 years or 20 years but something has been going on for almost 100+ years. So you all know, but I will get to know.

Betty: I'll be facilitating the interview. I am a PhD candidate at Fordham. I'm heading into my last year and my work is on a basically English speaking Caribbeans diaspora to Spanish-speaking Caribbean Caribbean and then that diaspora then to places like New York, and how we move around the Caribbean and places in Central America and what that means when we come to places like New York City or Boston, how our identities how the multiple languages we speak and different cultures come together under this umbrella called Blackness so that's where my work lies, and so you all I'll ask Luz to introduce yourself.

Luz Soliz: My name is Luz Soliz and I was born in Colon(?) Honduras. I came to the United States when I was 15, went to school here, later I taught in the public school of education for 12 years. 9 years ago I started teaching as full time faculty at Boricua college. Liberal arts and sciences a four year college and so I'm presently there now as a full-time faculty. I am into the arts, like Lucy I like arts, my area is in performing arts, however I run a company along with my daughter Kathryn who is now a great choreographer of this dance company. I founded the dance company in 1992, so we have a not for profit as well as we have the Dance company within

a school to help young people to learn the singing, dancing, song the whole trilogy within the culture. Since COVID-19 we have not had the opportunity to come together, so we communicate by phone and the members can't wait til we can come together again. We miss each other. I miss the young people. The company is 27 years old. We have at least 4 generations, they come, they

grow up, they organize their life, get married, they leave, another group comes, they get trained, they learn the songs and drumming and everything and all of the members … The name of our company is Hamalali Wayunagu Garifuna Dance Company, which means the voices of our ancestors, folklore. Recently we changed it to Wabafu, so we can have this interview and I will answer to the best of my ability.

Betty: Thank you Luz. Here is Dr. Mark Naison. Maybe you can introduce yourself.

Naison: hi, I am Dr. Mark Naison, a professor of African American History at Fordham University. 18 years ago I founded the Bronx African American History Project which would explore the history and culture of the people of African descent in the Bronx. It has grown into a globally renowned project. We have done over 350 interviews, all of which are preserved in the digital database of Fordham libraries used by scholars all over the world. We are very proud that a new project based on Garifuna culture in the Bronx is being started and Lisa Betty, who is writing a dissertation focusing on Spanish-speaking people of African descent, both Caribbean and In the Bronx is taking it to a new level and we are glad this is taking place.

Betty: Nice meeting you go ahead and give you a brief introduction.

Blanco: I am a New Yorker of Garifuna descent. My parents are from Santa Rosa….

My parents came here to give us a better life. We were, everything was still Garifuna tradition. We spoke we were everything was still very good tradition we spoke to and I spoke Garifuna until I went into school and got assimilated, and then became culture and I spoke until I went into school and got a simulated, and then became culture traditional Garifuna went and my Spanish went. My traditional Garifuna is still very present. I'm very proud of my heritage, and

Garifuna tradition is still very present. and I see my Garifuna in jazz ensemble as a part of giving back to the community and giving back to what they offered. The reason why I'm here doing what I'm doing is because they were doing that is the crux of what I do.

Betty: You say you were born in Honduras, so when did you come to the US?

Luz Soliz: I came at the age of 15, quite a while ago.

Betty: I wanna be respectful, but I also wanna know your age, so what year was that?

Luz Soliz: It was winter, and I saw snow, For the first time. And I thought it could be eaten. I touched it, and will never forget that. It was February 12, and I will never forget that day. The difficulty here was that in New York there was no gasoline.

There was some kind of strike about petroleum and all that stuff so the oil situation in 1972, so finally I got here and it was the trees that looked like I had ever seen. It looked like they were old and then the spring, the leaves turning green was like "oh my God this is beautiful."

February, so 4 months from February to June, I was in junior high school. It was near the Bronx campus. They have developed that whole area, it used to be burnt out buildings in that area that used to be called South Bronx and now it's downtown Bronx. It is really awesome how it has developed in such a way with beautiful brand new construction and multifamily units. They developed Yankee stadium, so now that area is prime real estate.

I went to 4 mos of junior high school and then I went to James Monroe HS for four years and then I moved to Marist College for 2 years, and I changed my major to performing arts and Bard College had a full spectrum of performing arts and dance dance education.

I just wanted to be on stage even though my English was still wobbly. I still wanted to perform. Laughs hard

I went to Bard College. I graduated with my degree in dance and performing arts. I graduated from there.

I wanted to be a writer, but a friend said you're not gonna be right or you're not gonna get published so I figured Dance would be my way.

I eventually wanted to be a choreographer even in Disney and Broadway, but what happened is I had a friend who was teaching in the public school and she said "come to my public school you can teach." I was taking classes on Broadway. I was taking dance classes, character classes to be on Broadway, but I'm only 5 feet so I knew I was too short, in my heart "who is going to take me?" however I had so much talent so I never stopped trying, but eventually she convinced me. She said "come to my school and be the music teacher and you will be the dance teacher and you will be able to work and get out at three and still dance" and I said "are you sure?"

And I went to the school and they were lacking teachers during the early 1980s. I graduated '81 in the beginning of the year I'm giving you the year you asked me my age. The early '80s I worked in the school with the notion that I would teach Dance. And you know they were lacking teaches for education ESL and then it was Alton(?) Avenue right up there by University Avenue

The school is probably still there today the principal was happy to see one more person that could take care of third grade children so they said to me "OK take this children just for this week and after the teacher comes, you will have the dance program" so they threw me in the room with the kids and close the door And I was like oh no.

Laughing I'm trained to teach Dance not ABC so now the children were all over the place and they got in my head because they were everywhere and they were a wonderful bunch of children. I think there were at least 30 kids in one room - second graders. They were busy, they did everything except pay attention, I said "I wasn't trained to do this. I'm trained to say up and down and around come down and all this this is what I'm trained for" (demonstrating her dance moves with her arms) and he said "well the teacher didn't come yet, so we need you for one more day" one more day ended up being a year.

The next year, the following year I was happy because now I'm gonna have my dance program. He threw me in the kindergarten classroom, so I spent another year with the kindergarten classroom. My students usually do so great I don't know what I do with them, but they do great. From there I went to a PS 70 where I spent the next 10 years

Naison: what street was that on?

Luz: 174th St. and Weeks Ave.

The principal family of the arts, so I took second grade same thing was happening with the second grade. These were the reasons in my life and I realize there was a reason for all of this because now I'm working with my spirits in the past, although I didn't get to do a choreography for Broadway or for Disney I started my dance company had a gun there. I wouldn't have the folk dance Company. my mind and thoughts would be in a different lane. I stayed close to my people. I taught dance at PS 70 for a long time. The children enjoyed it. They loved it the best thing that I enjoyed about it, they would say look Miss Soliz and they would put on their clothes and turn and they were feeling great.

Because they were gonna be on stage I did Swan Lake with them. I did the nutcracker ballet with them. I brought- I wanted them to understand the whole scope of classical modern dance African dance, so they can be versatile about that. And I enjoyed that.

From there then eventually from teaching elementary school, I taught at the Morris high school briefly for one year. I thought right before I went to college I was at the junior high school we met the most wonderful dancers on earth. The kids wanted to go home after school. They didn't want to go to the cafeteria for lunch to just sit there so I used to listen to classical music very much so they kept coming – and they cut my program.

Naison: where is this high school Albert Einstein?

Luz Soliz: Albert Einstein is on Story Avenue between White Plains and I can't remember the next street – White Plains and Story Avenue. In Soundview. I told Dan there for one year about nine years ago right before I went to the college. I wanted the program so bad I thought that was gonna be my program. They had a big, huge enormous room with mirrors and bars and everything but the principal didn't want it eventually and I was crying and crying, but eventually, when years later, after being at the college, I realize the concentration I was to do at the college I'm a full-time faculty facilitator in the area is helping students understand the intellectual skills. The effective skills, the psychomotor domain, I began to realize this whole skills and be able to transmit them to students. I said "OK it was my destiny to come to this college" because I realized my OWN intellectual skills in a way that I didn't realize before.

That I need in life. It's a wonderful teaching to work with the cognitive domain, the effective domain, the Psychomotor domain, are awesome studies at Boricua College,

Betty: I'm gonna go a little faster, back and going forward. You said your dad was in Miami, what family did you come with and what family did you encounter when it came to the Bronx?

Luz Soliz: my mom had been here. My father, - the immigration situation in Honduras started in the 1950s working with the merchant marines and began to bring some of the family members with the opportunities to work in industries of the garment industry here in New York so my father took the opportunity to come to New York City, because my aunt and her husband lived here and my mom and my father had nine kids. I'm in the middle of all of them. I'm the fifth child. My father kept going because he has seven daughters and no boys so my mom had my oldest brother first but he wasn't my father's son, and then he wanted one more of his own blood. She kept having every year a girl girl girl so people started snatching the girls. One aunt took Gloria one took Martha and the aunts were taking them. My mom is looking for her girls because they said you have too many girls.

My mom said no no no, but they're mine. It's a custom that an aunt can take girls to help around the house. My mom took her to La Sabre to visit. My mom met Gloria later on in New York. Gloria was already 18 or 19 from five years old that she took her. But anyway, this is a custom of the Garifuna people we know who we are, we know who my mom is, my mom and my father came this way first, then they brought Gloria, Martha and Lino the youngest boy, when she arrived here she had one more we always call him the accident, she was already finished and she joined my father, so they did what they have to do. Anyway, Gloria, after my mom, Gloria, Martha, and Lino came, and then I stayed behind as the oldest to Drina (?) and Olga came - three of us. Me and my aunt, she came to bring us because she was already here, so we were the last three in Honduras. My oldest sister was supposed to travel with my mom, but those days it wasn't easy she had been anemic and told my mom and my mom didn't understand, … she was

anemic she had to drink some tonic to get her blood and strength so they did an x-ray, and if you weren't totally healthy immigration wouldn't give you a visa. My mom didn't understand because she spoke Garifuna in the Garifuna community, if you didn't go to school, you didn't speak Spanish. Spanish is our second language, so instead of fixing her papers when she arrived here, they just left it. It took her a long time when I started working with those kids and at PS 70, I fixed her paper. It used to be very expensive to get your papers together, so I brought her by the time she had already had three kids.

Naison: So have you always lived in the Bronx?

Luz Soliz: yes I like the Bronx

Betty: What were the jarring differences between Honduras and the Bronx. Initial differences and sustained differences?

Luz: The only thing for me was the language - it took a little while to learn the language. I learned the English pretty quickly, but language takes a long time to really get into the belly of it. So when you're speaking with American people during that time when I went to college there weren't many people who spoke Spanish, and I didn't speak Spanish so well either, because my first language is Garifuna, so I did until sixth grade in Honduras, so if you don't have college level, you're not gonna speak Spanish, so well either. So I spoke like I spoke Spanish fluently. I learned it here plus I did Spanish literature briefly at Marist, so that kind of helped tremendously.

Naison: What was life like for you at Monroe high school? You had been to junior high four years. Did people help you? Were there teachers who helped you learn English and took you under their wing and encouraged you because clearly you had intellectual liability but did teachers recognize that?

Luz Soliz: oh yeah, they probably had something called AP. I didn't understand at that time. I just knew that I wrote a story about a little sister of mine who is five years old and I used to take care of her and her hair when she woke up. One night, her belly was hurting and she passed away. My mom couldn't do anything at that time and our village, even today, a lot of villages don't have hospitals or clinics. My sister passed away and I thought to write a story about it when I was at high school my first semester and my teacher teacher felt that it was a good story and this particular program had students who were learning to read in the New York Times in the morning, we had our own courses, we were trying to have so much knowledge, I don't know what happened to the other students, I never went back to Monroe. I know that our guidance counselor the entire time was on top of us to do our homework. We had reading in the morning all the different courses that the other side didn't really have, I had 8 periods. I worked after school and had a special librarian for ESL. (44:40) I went to her every day so I could learn English really quickly because I was supposed to go to college. This was my dream. My dream was that I would go to college away from home. I didn't know how it was going to be done because no one in my family had done it but I wanted to go to college away from home. Our guidance counselor was preparing everybody in that program so we all could go away to school and I was happy about it so the first school that accepted me away from home I went there.

Naison: the program you were in was it ENL students only or was it the whole student body?

Luz Soliz: it was mixed. There was a homeroom for specialized reading so by the time I went to college I was really able to speak and read English, not proficiently like I wanted it only four years in the country but enough to understand what was going on around me?

Naison: well, that's an amazing story, and it was the story you wrote that the one teacher said you have potential put you in the program

Luz Soliz: right and I wanted to be a writer but then my librarian she was really nice and she told me that there was no way I could help my family if I became a writer, she said I was too poor and I was really poor. I had to go to work after school. I worked all the way in Manhattan 125th St. I got out of school at 3 o'clock. I ran to the bus, took the bus straight all the way to 125th St. and Broadway in the supermarket. That's where I worked and I would come home at 10 o'clock. I got off at eight pm. I got home around 10 PM and that's the time I had to do homework for all those classes every day. Every day I went to bed about 2 o'clock in the morning. I'm on Sandview. It wasn't far I was living at Sandview.

Naison: That was far to the bus wasn't it?

Luz: My mom is still there on Stewart Avenue. She takes the 26 bus and I was running to the bus at 7:30 am. Literally I can't even run like that anymore, dashing for the bus in the morning because my class is at 8 o'clock, so it only takes about 15 minutes to get there.

Naison: so every night you came, and went to bed at two and then woke up at six to get to the bus at 7:30

Luz: I always marveled, and I'm always giving away notebooks to students. My mom would knock on my door every single morning. My mom would wake me up Luz Luz. She woke everybody up all the time, all the way she came two or three times left to the door and I was so lucky because I went to college. I had a roommate from James Monroe because a few of us went from James Monroe to Marist College. She would say Luz Luz wake up wake up. And when I

went to Bard my friend Linda, we are still friends today she was from Liberia. She would come to my door and say come on Lucz it's time. I always had somebody waking me up.

Betty: Who were your friends growing up, who were they but also what were their ethnicities? Were they Garifuna? I hear you have a Library and friends and friends are all over so who were you friends growing up?

Luz Soliz: I had friends from all different places growing up. I didn't really have many because I had to work after school. I came home at 10. It was very hard for me to make friendships. I just know people from Honduras and wasn't really going to my friends house. We didn't have that - my father was very strict. My mother was very strict. We didn't really have many visitors to see us because my father would sit there and he wouldn't even give us a time to have a conversation. And so when I went to college, I had friends from different areas my friend Linda from Liberia and Jackie. She's African-American and I have friends everywhere internationally because I started to join organizations … organizations Latin America with Mr. Colon so we travel now as adults, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Los Angeles communities for people are working in health issues or immigration issues situations… Race issues… so people ask me to be their friends on Facebook. I think it's because I'm not nice but I can only have 5000.

Naison: (Raises his hand) that's me. I have to run. I have something in the oven so I'll be right back. I'm cooking.

Betty: so you went to Marist and then Bard, so how was that transition being from the Bronx to going away from your family? from your community?

Luz Soliz: no a few Spanish and a few blacks – very few at Bard College so I liked it because it was quiet and I stayed on campus. I didn't have to travel to work and back. It was easy simple. I

didn't have money to go back-and-forth to the city anyway so I did on campus for my first year I worked on campus, you know they had – I can't remember. I worked in the cafeteria. I stayed that summer and I worked on campus whenever I came. I had my space in the supermarket to work in the summer but I liked it upstate because of the quietness. Yeah

Betty: and then how did you after college and then then creating your dance troupe and initiating all of those kind of dance collaboratives, and being creative in that way how did you keep on track with that with all of the issues: of having to work, having postgraduate issues, keeping task on your dream is difficult, so how did you keep your dream?

Luz Soliz: when I started teaching dancing in the schools, I was teaching modern dance ballet African dance, dances that I learned here, and then later on I realized, wait a minute, I belong to the Garifuna community and we have dances as well, so what I'm gonna do on the weekends on Saturdays I'm going to start a Dance company of Garifuna dances, so we met once a week on Saturdays later on there were people who decided they wanted to meet on Thursdays on Saturdays gave us longest hours and then Thursday two hours from 7 to 9 2 hours, however I continued teaching in the school and in the school, they teach modern dance, Cunningham technique, Jose Leon technique, Martha Graham, the state like sometimes needs to identify (53) particular techniques that the children are learning, and learning the role Roberto Bautista he loved the arts, so I could mix it with the Afro Cuban, Afro Brazilian painter, a punta from time to time in there, and we do an assembly of multiculturalism at PS 70.

But when I formed my company in 1992, I felt that we have beautiful dances as well that people need to learn about our culture. And so I decided that we'll do this through the arts. We can reach people in a maximum capacity faster through the drumming, the singing and dancing. And it

was… it was not easy because our people were not accustomed to going into a studio to practice what we have, they were accustomed to dancing, because it's part of their culture. They know the dance, but they're not accustomed to following a pattern or following patterns on the stage. They just want to dance. So what made it difficult was the ability to –the wanting to be there to learn the choreography. People just want to dance, they just want to sing any song to anything. So my idea was to create a pattern for a particular dance, give a color for cotton costumes, and then bring the song a particular song that uses saints, Afro jazz, so if she's singing a Garifuna song in a jazz flavor, you know, I like to put movements to that and this is the thing that I have to teach our members to get accustomed to get out of the same thing and open up the box to see the innovation that we can create with our dances, OUR culture.

MN: Were the people in your company almost all from the Bronx, or they were in other parts of the city as well.

Luz: They've been from different parts of the city. They're even the people in Manhattan, Bronx, Brooklyn, they're at least 200,000 altogether right here in New York City.

Naison: Wow.

Luz Soliz: A lot of the Garifunas live in the Bronx 1000s and 1000s. One of the things that I've been, you know, trying to get everybody you know, like, get educated, you know, we have land issues back to Honduras. I know Belize have the issues to Guatemala, but mostly Honduras. We have our young people just like the way you see black lives matter here, that's happening in Honduras right now as you sit here speaking, land you know, people were given land, in early time, the time they arrived to the north coast of Central America, but it's prime land beach area. So we are losing a lot of our youngsters now. To people who want to develop the beach area for

their own selves. Rather than working with the people so that development can be done. And so the young people are fighting for their land. And just last week or two weeks ago, they kidnapped five young people from the Comunidad grupo de la Cruz because they are leaders of the community. And so people were protesting in front of the United Nation here as well as it is by the United Nations in Honduras in the capital in Honduras. Because they want the youngsters to be returned alive because a lot of times they will just take them and and they never come back, you know?

Naison: And so send us materials so we can publicize this. One thing that the Bronx African American history project can do, you know, is publicize these kidnappings and these attempts to remove historic plants of the people in Honduras, so, okay, keep sending those things to us and we'll, you know, we'll circulate them.

Luz Soliz: Okay.

Lisa Betty: How in addition to that trauma, because it's also the pandemic so, you know, how, you know, is COVID-19 affecting the Garifuna community and your perspective especially since you are a community activist and of create creating these kind of spaces of convening and spaces of hope and happiness, we know that there are things happening in Honduras and Belize and other spaces in which there's repression and oppression. So how does how is COVID-19 affecting the Garifuna community in your perspective?

Luz Soliz: They are affected just like everybody else, we in the beginning in March and April, we lost quite a few people. Garifuna the people who are least 70 Right here in New York City. You know, mostly the elders and then back home, people are trying their best to social distance to stay safe in it, but this the safe and so it's not so much in the community unless somebody

leaves the community to go to this big cities, or Garifuna communities are isolated from the main cities of Honduras. And so they they cover them so they try they wear masks on and so here in New York, we have quite a few people that are very sick, very ill, quite a few people lost their jobs. A lot of people suffering right now with the unemployment situation, hoping that the $600 remains, you know, like they're bringing it to $200 now, because they were given the, the incentive. But, you know, hopefully that will save us a lot of people are still unemployed. And they don't have no other means they really don't have anything. So I helped the Republicans sign so that people will continue to get those $600. However, we are practicing social distancing, we haven't been able to practice with a dance group. However, we do small groups, sometimes with maybe two drummers and to continue with the song and we do zoom. So everybody you know in their home was saying, practice a song I was sending my daughter Catherine and she says to send that particular song for the week, and they practice the song that is not the same as coming together. We were at the doctor childs junior high school so we occupy the space on Saturdays because they have the beacon program that they give us the space, is … I don't have a key to a place that will belong to Garifuna Heritage Center for the Arts and Culture. We are aiming towards eventually having a center of our own – we don't have one. We work from the school, found the junior high school charter during high school in 169 3rd Avenue. They have the program where people in the community can utilize the space after school for useful programs like that with the youth. And so I'm always thankful for that program, which started during the … David Dinkins, was the mayor who gave that opportunity. Even though when Giuliani came he closed a lot of those centers they which they opened them up everywhere so that people will have access to the auditorium when the school is finished at three. The community should be able to use the areas, and we do that at childhood.

Betty: That's wonderful. Wonderful, but you know, still stressful but it's wonderful to know that, you know, at least technology, all different types of people are using technology to maintain, it's tough but technology is actually working in our favor, you know when it comes down to this and a lot of a lot of elders are also learning, you know, how to use technology I had, I went to a zoom funeral early in the pandemic, you know, and it was interesting, but it works. I could do this. I mean, I don't want to do any more funerals, but I can zoom with community elders and a family members from abroad and so forth. So how was the communication between the Bronx and Honduras at this time. How are you getting, you know, some of that information, especially with government repression, but at the same time, people aren't able to kind of go back and forth, make calls as often, send resources as often. So how is the communication?

Luz Soliz: The communication is really good. It is amazing that everybody has a cell phone, back home, they have iPhone, they're able you can do zoom. You know, like right now, we are working on language institutions. We have a very clear language written. The same way even dude, what am I Belize. Belize was colonized by the British and Hindus by the Spanish so pronunciation a certain vowel sounds different or even via consonant and so that we work with you on the way in which he will be written you know, the same the same way so we do it by Zoom is really amazing as if everybody's in different country. Sunday for that is really great. And if I call anyone back home sounds as if they just right here right around the corner, no problem. I can call to messenger, I call to you know, card messengers, and we'll take you a call at any moment, which is great. And so it's easy. It's very simple. We can send money through Western Union and you can save money right from your computer and they get it right away or any will go also to the bank, directly in the bank because they have the Visa cards now. Our community where I come from through here used to be so small –now is expanded in such a way

that you can send the money to the bank account and they can go to the store and shop right away. It is really great. Yeah. I remember when we had our initial conversation, because my work is about the English speaking Caribbean kind of traversing and moving through the circum-Caribbean and Spanish Spanish speaking Caribbean. So you told me some interesting kind of dynamic of how English speaking Caribbean people within Honduras and Belize and the kind of, you know, somewhat kind of conflicted type of relationship they have with the Garifuna community. So if you could tell us about that. That would be because we were talking for a long time well, (laughter)

Luz Soliz: um, that's kind of always conflict. That that's going to be there because people were you know, you talking about colony colonizing the land, but the mind is also like the land. So when you are told certain things you pass it on, so that's probably even very more difficult than anything else. You know, like a mango is always going to be a mango and you can't change unless you like, do some kind of experiment to to the seed and then maybe you can have mango pear. Who knows? Yeah. However, people were told in the early time, if they were brought, (1:06) it's really a complicated situation that people are working on, … we have black organizations in Honduras now. Like __ (inaudible)Ofrane?__ running, and they possess unifying…like people in general, not just very different, but in the old times, yes, we were, we were totally marginated in certain areas, because they were told. People, other people were told not to come together with different people. That is the people came from the island of St. Vincent and the Grenadines and they fought for a long time to keep their island. St. Vincent and the Grenadines were the last island to be called colonized. In the Caribbean. And it took it took a lot of a lot of fights. The British I don't like to really mention who what where but, you know, I always like to tell people just study and be able to do the things that you have to do stop looking

at who did this because that's not going to bring us any anything back. However, since you're asking the question, the British had to send batallions from Canada, with cannons to the islands St. Vincent to finish up in front of people. I don't know if the doctor, the doctor probably knows this information more than I do. And and so they killed their leader. Maybe the doctor is more up to date- Chief Justice empty today- and to the people into an island is still empty today. The island by itself you look it up the island of BALICEOS … is empty today. That's where they the British people, chained them up, take them there and waited eight months for ships to come from Great Britain to then take the people to Central America out of the island of St Vincent because they were great warriors. Then they brought in slaves into the land of St Vincent, and the few variables that would escape this whole panorama, they became a marginalized away in the dry land, and this is still there today. But they didn't speak the Garifuna language. You speak the language that was spoken in the Caribbean before Columbus came. So long story. When the people were taken out, everybody else was told don't get close to them. Because "they are barbarian they eat people," they they no good so people, who are they, when they come to Honduras, the united front company, I think, needed people who spoke a little English. So they brought people from Jamaica, to work in the United for company or the lumbar region in Belize and things like that. And they were always warned. They were black on the slaves. Who spoke broken English. They were always warned not to get close to this path. They called us "caribs" carried from the Caribbean. I don't know why they call us "caribs" because from the time I know my grandparents always say they were that integral I didn't always Garifuna. But the people who wrote books like "young shepherd" and all these people, writers, they call this black "caribs" (1:11). So the people that came to work in the United Food Company or lumber to cut the trees, they were told not to get close to the parents, to us, because we were supposed to be we were

barbarians. We were meat eaters, and we were – which is all kinds of different bad things. So when these people that came to work, stayed in the country of Honduras different area away from the different always away. And so they learned and they spoke English. So they call themselves their black like us, you know, they were black, like we were they they felt that they were different, because they were told to be different because they were told they were English. So if you go in Honduras there's you find somebody that's black tonight you as you guys know they'd say "no I'm English." Right. And so we call them in Ingleses, because they didn't – we didn't mix. I think they mixed more in Belize recently, because even in Belize, they will tell you the same thing. If they see a view of anything you merge that with in the city, you can be arrested during those time –- long time. This is long time. And that's why I say you can change a mango unless you do something with the scene so to transform it into something else and eventually get something new. So this tradition is going to be a long time for people to begin to realize, you know, wait a minute we all African descendants, you know the different is that we speak the Arawak language of the Caribbean are what came from the basis of the Orinoco River from Venezuela. So they mix with a blacks that came from the kingdom of Mali many many years ago. From the we were always told that the king of Mali sent the expedition to the Americas now 2000 years ago, and these are some of the people that stayed, They Came Before Columbus. The language that we speak is predominantly indigenous to the Americas, right? This very little Africa I met quite a few African people and I always ask them certain words and nothing, maybe Nigeria friend of mine in mind for Nigeria, some words in Garifuna are in Nigeria, but they mean totally completely different things. Totally. I said, except the word "mutu." "Mutu" means people in one of the languages, they have so many different languages. And for us Mutu means people, but it's, I speak the Arawak language our a mixture is Arawak and African, they came to

the Americas before Columbus. That's the difference. So this division that you asked me about Lisa has been there many years ago, any kind of you know, we have to like work to break it because those are the people who speak English were told that they were better because they spoke English. So they called themselves in English. And we were no good because we were Caribs, we spoke Carib, Garifuna language.

Lucy Blanco: I mean, breaking stigmas.

Mark Naison: Has anyone thought of starting at a university, a Garifuna Studies program of all of these issues, with all of this history, of where it could be a concentrated effort to bring together the history, the culture, the arts. It sounds like this is something that you know as a possible project aspire to?

Luz Soliz: I am sorry, your question. What is the question?

Naison: Has anyone thought of starting a Garifuna studies program of all these issues of the history from St. Vincent to Honduras and Belize, who you know, to the United States. There's so much here that most people don't know and also that there, you know, it could help with resisting what is going on in Belize and Honduras to have something concentrated that way.

Luz Soliz: My husband is my … his name is Weddington Dramus. He's from Dangriga Belize He's a historian, he began his study here too. He's, he's a historian who taught American history in the at **politico** (?) College, and in others taught American history Urban Studies. He knows the story so well that you know, I've been after him to keep writing a book right now but there isn't a history that I have been after him to organize something of that nature. We don't really have, we have different people with so much knowledge that what you're talking about that doctor can be

organized so that we can have different studies that way. Maybe through Fordham, you know, it'd be Lisa can start it always you maybe have like a Garifuna studies program. Yes.

Lisa Blanco: I think that there are between the three of us are just between you and me and the people we know we can when I was living in Los Angeles. I was taking getting my class is in Los Angeles. And while I was in LA, just before I left, there was an interest in this study and the Garifuna culture and universities were interested in our culture. So they had programs where our culture was being featured at the university, it was a Hispanic University in San Bernardino, I think if I called some of the people that I know there that were teaching over there, they could that could be a link to developing a program to teach the studies because there are people teaching it, but it's not very well known. I mean, right now I'm taking data from a class with Milton, Milton, and he's doing zoom classes. Where people tuning in from California Chicago, Boston, learning about the Garifuna language. Yeah, so that would be as a matter of fact, we've been featuring (shows poster of Soliz) you can see this, I don't know if you can see that. A little bit. Yeah. Learning ready for now by Miss Luz Soliz. So, her students are buying copies of his book and using it along with the teaching that they were getting from Milton.

Betty: That's awesome. So we talked about and I think even a part of that. What I'm noticing is a lot of Central American erasure, kind of Mexico, you know, gets it and then we get from Mexico all the way to Panama, and like the entire central America is lost. So we also have to deal with that black erasure central American erasure. Bring out this story. Because there's so the the erasures are just so intersectional with compounded with other other, spaces that aren't even given enough, you know, do as well, but I think I think it's important because Garifuna culture and studies is at the intersection of all of this. And I think when people started to at least through the black lens, you know, get a phone it's better to come up more often within just the faces of

lack of internet and just black Caribbean within itself. That's when issues within central America were even given some light, so I feel like Garifuna may even pave the way for other other kind of a studies that are fields that are erased to come about and actually get even more exposure because it also allows us to understand how you know the United States and Britain is also a part of some of the erasure within the central America Neo colonialism and you know, all of that stuff. So I think it's interesting and I definitely want to be a part of this conversation. And we have Garifuna community members within our collective of researchers that Dr. Naison has put together, so they will definitely be Michael Partis.

Blanco: Yeah, definitely. Yes. Yeah, I'm yet to meet him. Yeah. And I'll include him. I know he recently got a new position.

Naison: Yes, It's a very demanding, but, yeah Cooperative mobilization. It's a very difficult and prestigious position.

Betty: Yeah, so we're trying not to whisper from people but be, be involved, but be where they can be. But we know that, you know, he's our He's our ace in the pocket. Ace, joker and 2,

MN: Are there Facebook pages that celebrate Garifuna culture?

Luz Soliz: A lot. A lot of them Yeah. It's just type Garifuna and you get a lot of organizations that are there. Yeah. (1:21)

Betty: So with these new with the new wave of migrations that are coming through, what is the difference between your you and your parents wave like the 1950s. And then there's this new wave because they know more about the United States for the Bronx probably than you did when you came in the 70s. So, what is the difference between like that the older waves and newer

waves and even when it comes down to traditions, or changing traditions or transitioning traditions?

Luz Soliz: The question is, what is the difference between the 1950s and now?

Lisa Betty: is that there was the migration, the migration replays and realize the difference between get a phone that you see or that you experience

Luz Soliz: like changes?

Naison: people who've come in, let's say the last 10 years, how are they different from the people in the 50s 60s and 70s?

Luz Soliz: Well, people in the in the 70s when I came, I noticed they were they were more united. They work with each other. They meet in one place they all knew each other together. The newcomers they are very progressive as well. But they there's there's so many people now that is easier to go here or they don't get lost in the city somewhere else. When we were in the beginning, it was only not that many people. So everybody knew the whereabouts of whoever was missing. And what if we have to meet somewhere if there's a dance, almost everybody that you knew was going to be at that dance? And now you can have 10 dances in one night and still get people not in the old time. You have one dance and everybody would work together so that if I program my dance, the other person is going to wait then a few more weeks before they program their dance - now nobody cares. You know, I'm gonna do my dance. I'm gonna invite my people and whoever comes they don't come to your dance. That's your problem. That's the kind of attitude there is now. People used to be very considerate with each other. We helped each other more. Although Garifuna people still weren't helping each other but it's now MORE people you know, when you talking about in the 70s when I came, if there were 50. If there were

20,000, maybe 10,000 Garifuna here in the ground. Then now it's 100,000. So you have more choices. And so you don't have to stay here because everybody's here you can go somewhere else and still get the result that you want. So there's still people are united the other day I was I did a GoFundMe for Ontario?(inaudible), my hometown community because when they called it was going on very strong. People were they were giving out food but they weren't giving to this particular community. So I did a GoFundMe. Sorry. And a lot of people from Ontario, gave money we raised about $750 incentive. So tomorrow, the leader he said they're gonna give chicken and potato to the people right? Nice.

Naison: Excuse me. I gotta get some water, I'm sorry. No, no. Let me get some water. Let me check on my ribs. Um, I was cooking

Blanco: there's always something good cooking in your in your house. Yeah, we try. We have to keep ourselves happy and this bacon wrapped shrimp that I think was my son. Shrimp. This is my special ribs with barbecue sauce, duck sauce and hot sauce

Blanco: there are resources so glad that I think you're you're getting just the tip of the iceberg because, you know, I've known Luz for a long, long time, but I didn't know she had all this behind her. I've just seen her in the community and work, learn the community. And I know that she was a very well recognized activist from from the community. But this is the first time that she and I have sat down like and see exactly what her background is

Naison: I am amazed at how she became a … doing that story about Monroe High School here is this. I am amazed that you know, she is in the country for four months going to high school and an ESL program and a teacher reads a story and puts her in this special program.

Betty: Yeah,

Naison: with all these people who are in those primaries, and the ESL teacher makes sure she gradually is able to keep up and that sounds unbelievable. Do you still have the story you wrote about your sister Luz?

Luz Soliz: I'd like to instead of .. I know I am. I was I know I I was I had just been in a country with like a year or something. So I don't know what I wrote that plastinated the lady say wow just wrote really great. Let's put her in this special program.

Naison: That is … as a professor I know that that you're sometimes you're a talent scout. And somebody wrote I remember someday this is even in the 1980s the students in a class of 100 wrote this paper from the end it was the only eight plus paper in the course. And I asked him "Have you ever thought of being a historian and being a professor?" And he said, "No," and I said you want to and today some of these? His name's Craig, Steven Wilder, and he's one of the most famous professors in the country. He wrote a book called Ebony and Ivy about how the Ivy League schools have faced a lot of their development on slavery. As teacher that's what you should always be looking for or a professor. And so that's that's, I'm never going to forget that story because you know, that's that's what teaching is about, you know?

Betty: Yes. Yes. Oh, go ahead. Yeah. On the ask if there's any final questions as we're kind of moving through anything, you know, pressing that we want to ask, you know, as we as we move into concluding our interview, any final questions Lucy, Dr. Naison?

Naison: Can I take a picture of the whole thing so I can tell what a great interview this was on Facebook. I'm gonna take, one second I'll say thanks, sir. Okay, can everybody smile? I have 5000 Facebook friends, so a lot of people are gonna see that, so this is no this was a really extraordinary interview and stay in touch with us. And it's particularly about, you know, this

ethnic cleansing that's going on and because that's what it sounds like in Honduras and Belize as a combination of gentrification and ethnic cleansing. And it you know, people should know about this, because this is also part of Black Lives Matter. And it's, you know, this should be, you know, people should intervene and try to stop this and get these people returned to their families and their community.

Luz Soliz: Yeah. Definitely. Yeah. I've just wanted to let you know that I'm writing my second book now. It was the first the one that Lucy showed, right. Okay. It's written in three languages that is Garifuna, second, English and Spanish. It's called Learn Garifuna and now Yes.

Naison: Can you get it on Amazon is in Amazon,

Luz Soliz: yes, and it's in Barnes and Noble but if you go to your logon page, even have that, you can get the audio book. We have the audio book on CDs as well as mp3. So you can listen to it on your computer. I don't have the audio book in the Amazon yet - is almost there. We're tweaking some things and we just haven't had much time to finish it there. It's going to be there soon. But the book definitely is there. What is the new book you're writing? The new book is a is a that the Pictionary for the young people. Let me see if I can show you - Hold on please.

Naison: This is amazing. Like thank you for Lucy for referring us and thank you Lisa for setting this up. This is a welcome. Thank you Lucy. We appreciate it. It's,

Blanco: I'm happy to do it and these kinds of exchanges are the important exchanges that where seeds grow into something much bigger, because it's getting sunlight. getting water, it's being cultivated. These kinds of conversations are definitely important conversations to have and can branch off into something very, very significant that makes us make our world better.

Naison: Yes, that's beautifully said.

Luz Soliz: The next one is gonna be titled… I don't know I had it wrong. I was showing it so I probably placed it somewhere else. Garifuna Pictionary book. So it's for a younger generation. However, whenever the adults hear about it, they want to preorder and I keep telling them that is for the young ones. And they say no, that's for me too because they see the picture in three languages so English and Garifuna is the gallery for non English and Spanish. Nine page nouns nine nouns in the page with the pictures

Betty: buying from my nephew, my nephew, Garifuna. He's half half Jamaican, well, he's a quarter Jamaican a quarter African American and half Garifuna. It's gonna be published in August. This has been sitting there for since last year. It's been sitting waiting. So we're gonna put it out soon. So that whole thing about being a writer was there from the beginning. I didn't get back to it. Until now at this age.

Blanco: What happens is perfect.

Betty: My last question is how can Fordham support you know your organization and your work and collaborate with you? You know, way more other than Dr. Naison in the Bronx African American History Project, me you know and coordinating with you. How can Fordham kind of create a more of a dynamic where we're it's community collaboration

Luz Soliz: there's so many things that we need that we can collaborate with. We have quite a few youngsters here that lead to you know, I don't know if you have the programs for scholarship, but so they can study we can do a few conferences with the young people who want to be engineers or want to study nursing or whatever it is that they … philosophy. I work with __ College, because we have three majors which is Business Administration, education, and human services

to their students that want to be engineers that want to do different different things and how we can collaborate. We also want to study something else like biology or whatever it might be and have or even history, Garifuna historians have conference with them. Bring them because I had spoken to the anthropology. My husband and I had a visit there in the class with the director of the anthropology department. And we did talk about having a seminars where the students can come in and hear about Fordham and how we can bring them together but then the COVID started. Saw him in February.

Naison: Dr. Benevides ? Yes. Okay, he's a good friend.

Luz Soliz: So that was the agreement that then COVID started and nothing has been …we have not been able to come together, but I can guide parents or students who already have their high school diploma. And now we can get them mobilized students to start studying – or even adult education. Where adults work can those who want to study somehow got into do you think they think everybody has to be a nurse. Yeah, they see back home teacher and nurse. Other things that they can have and you know, mobilize people for education. You're not educated, you're not going to do not gonna be have the capacity to stand in the ground that you want in a way that studies was going on in Honduras that people were marginated for so many years, our parents you know, my father was only allowed to go to third grade. That's how it was even they were only allowed to third grade. My mom was away for two two because she didn't have the means to uniform, a uniform. You have the uniform so we come from people who have very little education a lot of intelligence with very little education. And so our generation, I went to graduate studies, you know, I went to all the way to Columbia University, a master's in dance education, my brother, or my brother is a lawyer, the other one has the one. The last one ask him. He has his own business but is retired. And my sisters were in teaching our our, our our

youngsters working… My daughter just graduated from St. John's in business. And our my sister's daughters, they teachers they have their costumes, you know. So we have, we have come a long way from that beginning where our parents were not allowed education to now guide our youngsters and our family. They can't even think about dropping out because we approach education. Right so I'm not worried about the youngsters in my family because they already have died, but I'm with other other people's children, that I can help the parents to infiltrate that into the mind of the youngsters to study. That's very important. If you become a historian now you don't teach or so we need that you know, my husband is writing a book about the recent history needs. This study needs to be in the in the universities all know about history. I realized that that too. Do you know about the American history before? This question before we

Naison: I knew very little about Garifuna history before we started doing these interviews. I knew there was a significant Garifuna population in the Bronx. I knew that people came from Honduras and Belize but I also knew that there was some issues regarding ethnic cleansing, but the whole hisotry that you've described of the relationship with the Jamaicans brought over. These were things that I've only heard, you know, very recently so you know, one of the things that came to my mind is maybe at the you know, over the next year organizing a conference, even if it has to be remote out of Fordham on Garifuna history and culture. See, aim for a year from now. And really, again, this well, you know, with performances, lectures, readings, so that everybody's sort of you know, it's a lot of different types of knowledge and are brought together. You know, we've had been doing this for African immigrants in the Bronx or we have this great scholar Dr. Jane Edward, who is you know, has done all kinds of programs highlighting the experience of African immigrants, but it seems that we now have a critical mass of people, you

know, be able to do the same, but you know, it would probably take a year of planning. is that something that you think makes sense?

Luz Soliz: Yes. Yeah.

Naison: Lisa you like this idea.

Lisa: Oh, I love it. And you know, I'm a master conference organizer.

Naison: So the History Department appears to owe you so and I, you know, and I do have some funds that could be used for for this as well, that we've raised, you know, for the Bronx African American history project, but, you know, but also get Dr. Benevides involved and and the chief diversity officer, so maybe we can sort of say okay Fall 2021 2022. We're in 2020 now, right. and that makes sense.

Lisa: And I'm going to be planning to be finished by them maybe August 2021. That's my plan. But I'm still in the you know, I'm still this is still my community forum community Bronx Community.

Naison: So let's let's start thinking about that. We all have one another's email addresses. I will contact Dr. Benevides about it and you know, see, you know, and and Rafael Zapata. And let's see what we can do. Right. My husband's name is Wellington Ramos. He's a historian, he has a MA degree. he's Garifuna. He has a master's degree in history. So we saw that the benefit as you will remember, my name is Luz Soliz, Soliz. And we can see him and we were going to work on that project with the youth. What really needs to focus on bringing the branches because that's lacking as well. From Fordham University.

Naison: We all know that we… the gates, the famous gates for so I think that first of all, I want to thank you so much. For telling this amazing story for thank you for spreading knowledge that Lucy for bringing Lucy here and Lisa, for great job setting this up and doing interviews. This is exciting. And I'm a person who doesn't sleep very much so email me. You know, I will respond. Hey, that's awesome. Thank you. If you're not my Facebook friend, you should. And are you on Facebook, Luz?

Luz Soliz: Yes, I am.

Naison: Send me an invitation and I'll get rid of somebody to add you because you also opened on Friday Lucy's my friend now but send me a friend request and I'll get rid of somebody inactive and add new so because that's the way to communicate about this. I'm gonna do the same thing. Yes, I will get rid of somebody to get your request. Oh, so 5000 Okay.

Naison: So we're the two 5000 club here. Great. Thank you, Luz. Thank you. Thank you. No, see. Thank you. And your organization is the graphic of a Garifuna folkloric company

Luz Soliz: if you type me, if you go to YouTube and you type in a word we're mindful is W A BA The A F as in Frank . Garifuna dance theatre… bankfull Garifuna Dance Theater. You go to you go there. Good. If you go to YouTube, and we're all in there, okay.

Naison: Wonderful and I will look for some of the videos to

Luz Soliz: please do. Oh, this is

Naison: I have a lot of homework to do.

Luz: Believe me, you're gonna enjoy it. If you go to YouTube, you're typing in a music you get a lot of stuff. Right? That isn't a history. You get a lot, a lot of fantastic. Thank you. Thank you,

Lisa. We'll be in touch. Okay. Thank you for connecting me , Lucy. You're always and I have three others that Lucy that we're going to connect.

Mark Naison: So this is going to be even bigger. And I'll be in touch with Dr. Benevides, we have a lot of problems at Fordham right now. But there's always room for this. Take care. Bye