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Denis Garcia Reyes
University of Vermont

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Concentrando en Las Voces Afro-Latinxs: The Validation and Uplifting of Afro-Latinx Students in Higher Education

Denis García Reyes

To center the voices of Afro-Latinx college students and their Blackness, I am centering their excellence and persistence in higher education spaces. Through using the theoretical frameworks of self-authorship and “Blackimientto”, and within a critical and cultural lens, I implore that the validation and uplifting of these students is a priority for all student affairs professionals who are looking to create inclusive environments where students are encouraged to have their identities manifest holistically during their college process.

Keywords: Afro-Latinx College Students, Identity Development, Latinidad, Anti-Blackness

Blackness in Latin-American populations has always existed. However, the word “Latinx” has become a term for discussion, as it has been used to erase the experiences of Black and Indigenous populations in the community. In every facet of society (e.g. in families, the media, politics, history, entertainment, arts), Blackness in the Latinx community is an unspoken taboo. (Mozee, Espinoza, & Arce, 2020, Salazar, 2019). In the field of higher education, student affairs professionals and researchers who work with Latinx college students succumb to the societal white supremacist notions that exist in the “one story” narrative and perpetuate anti-Blackness by violently erasing the experiences of Afro-Latinx students.

In this manuscript, the critical frameworks of “Blackimientto”, and self-authorship to push forth the narratives of Afro-Latinx college students and their experiences. In the analysis of the literature, I emphasize the need to call out Anti-Blackness in the Latinx community, in higher education spaces, and beyond. Then, I center the narratives of Afro-Latinx scholars that have broken the academic glass ceiling and made strides with efforts to center Blackness in Afro-Latinx college students. Furthermore, I look at current events and college and university websites that have centered Afro-Latinx college students. With the vast erasure that exists in research and practice, and the rise of anti-Black violence in this country, I implore student affairs professionals to acknowledge and nurture Afro-Latinx students’ Blackness through intentional identity development strategies.

Denis Garcia Reyes (He/Him/His/Él) is a Stonehill College alumnus and is currently an Assistant Residence Director and Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration master’s candidate at the University of Vermont. He is a proud first-generation Latinx graduate student who is committed to the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Language and Terminology

Before my positionality, I will define some terminology that I use recurrently to contextualize the words and phrases throughout this manuscript. Latinidad has been used in the majority of Latinx culture and beyond to make a fabricated ethnoracial indicator to encapsulate an entire group of people with a variety of racial identities. Latinidad in its most concise definition is a consequence of the United States' white supremacist efforts to try to stray away from Blackness (Mozee, Cihuatl Espinoza, & Arce, 2020).

In higher education spaces, Latinx is used when scholars research the “Latinx experience” and focus their energies on Mestizx and white Latinx experiences (Torres, 2019). I will use this term frequently to deconstruct it before recentering Blackness in the Afro-Latinx college student experience as it is so often erased under Latinidad. More often than not, the word community, like Latinidad, is used to make this broad group of people into a “one-story” narrative (Salazar, 2019). Therefore, I use the concept of community or communities, found in conjunction with the indicator “Latinx” often to signify the vastly fabricated ethnoracial group that so often is used to erase Blackness and Indigeneity. I use it as a form of resistance by pushing forth Blackness and Afro-Latinidad so that when folks think about community, they think of Black Latinx folks primarily.

Another term that I have found frequently within my interpretation of the research is Mexican Hegemony. In my own words, Mexican Hegemony is the notion that exists within Latinx communities where a Caribbean, Central American, or South American person is assumed to be Mexican because of how predominant their ethnic makeup is in the United States. Mexican hegemony is a consequence of white supremacy and nationalist, imperialistic ideologies that exist in both the United States and Mexico (Bicho, 2017). These words and phrases have an immense prevalence in the narratives I focus on.

Positionality

As a white Salvadoran cis man, first I need to recognize the privilege I have as a member of what is considered the Latinx community. In my undergraduate institution, I was involved in the Latinx student organization, *Mundos Apartes, Tierras Unidas* (M.A.T.U.), in which I held various leadership positions throughout my four years in an undergraduate institution. Throughout my experiences in this student organization and my exploration for affinity on social media, I learned so much of the varying factors that made a person Latinx, and the complexities that are included in each person's identities within these spaces.

One thing that I remember having a lot of difficulties with as I navigated my

positions, was trying to hold space for people of various ethnic and racial backgrounds. As a Central American, I had a hard time finding affinity with my peers who came from more predominant Latinx populations in the U.S. including Dominicans, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans. I fought to be acknowledged as a Salvadoran in meetings and learned that a major component of this conversation that I did not know existed was the concept of Mexican Hegemony. My feelings of being dismissed in my Salvadoran identity was a consequence of this hegemonic notion, and people assumed because of El Salvador's proximity to Mexico that I was of Mexican descent. The notion of Mexican hegemony was a big part of my experience in this student group, and because of a lack of Central American population, I found a community on Twitter, to learn more about my people on #CentralAmericanTwitter (Central American Art, 2017).

#CentralAmericanTwitter was where I first learned that Garifuna people, an Afro-Indigenous group, exists within Central America, primarily in Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama. Up until this point, I had no idea that Black and Afro-Indigenous people existed in communities so close to mine. I started to question why this was and asked the people around me (my peers, family, mentors) and they had no idea that Garifuna people exist and live in the communities that I for so long have claimed as mine. This realization was when I decided to take learning more into my own hands and am very thankful for my Latin American Studies minor. The minor allowed me to study who, what, and where within Latin America I wanted. I see this as one of two pivotal moments in my development where I realized the harsh realities that existed within the broader Latinx community.

For me, it took an awakening when thinking about the immense sense of urgency there is to recognize the violent erasure and dismissal of Afro-Latinx people in the United States' societal contexts. As a white Latinx person, I have an internal push to do self-work to continue to learn more about the various aspects of oppression, and disparities that exist for my Black and Afro-Latinx counterparts. Up until this point in my academic journey, I have spent a lot of time through graduate school, reading and writing on my own Latinx college student experience, and tying it with the literature that is out there. It was not until January of 2020 that I realized how barren the amount of research truly is when glancing at Afro-Latinx college students. To push forth Afro-Latinx narratives, I decided to take a significant amount of time doing my research across disciplines (journal articles & institutional websites) to find work that would convey my message in my manuscript. As a future student affairs professional who looks to be an identity development and social justice-focused practitioner, I want to be able to learn more about the narratives of Afro-Latinx college students so that I can best serve them in my daily work. As a way to contextualize and name the structures of power and privilege that exist in academia and research, I will conceptualize the theoretical frameworks I will be using (Abes, Jones, & Stewart, 2019).

Conceptualization of Theoretical Frameworks

To center Afro-Latinx college students' narratives and the centering of their Blackness, I use three theoretical frameworks to analyze the research in this manuscript. Those theoretical frameworks are critical theory while incorporating a cultural lens, "*Blackimienta*," and self-authorship. These three frameworks are used to unravel the complexities of the ethno-racial identity that is Afro-Latinx. Also, these frameworks will be used to examine progress when it comes to the identity development opportunities offered to Afro-Latinx students.

To achieve a level of understanding of the Afro-Latinx narratives and their complexities, I use critical theoretical frameworks to present a historical context that is intertwined with intersectionality and critical race theory (Duran & Jones, 2019). At the focal point, I used a critical lens to be able to question why it is that Afro-Latinx students are not centered in narratives around Latinx college student development. Notions of anti-Blackness, and white supremacist ideologies overall, are some of the main reasons why Afro-Latinx people are violently erased. Without noting the root of the problem at large, one cannot scrutinize the research in a specific societal institution.

To move from the erasure to the centering of Afro-Latinx students and their narratives, Dache, Holly, & Mislán (2019), came up with the theory of "*Blackimienta*." Dache et al (2019) center their own Black experiences, critique the research and history out there that rejects Blackness, and push forth a narrative where Afro-Latinx individuals are at the center. In my manuscript, I will be using it to reject anti-Blackness in higher education spaces for Afro-Latinx students. There are so many instances where I find that Afro-Latinx students are invisible (Garcia-Louis, 2019) and white supremacy, anti-Blackness, and *Latinidad* are all to blame. The next framework that I use is self-authorship, and even here there is an immense emptiness when it comes to identity development for Afro-Latinx students.

I use self-authorship to unravel how student affairs professionals are or are not giving Afro-Latinx students the necessary tools to conceptualize their Blackness and their ethno-racial identity. Self-authorship was created by Baxter Magolda in 1992, to help students ask important questions around who they are, and how they conceptualize their identities, social environments, and values and beliefs. Baxter Magolda's initial intentions within this theory were not meant for racial or ethnic identity development and rather the broader college-aged population (Baxter Magolda, 2007).

Studies have shown that when Black students have gained a significant amount of self-conceptualization of their racial identity, their GPA's increase drastically (Strayhorn, 2014, Clark & Brooms, 2018). I am using these articles as a way to

frame that self-authorship is possible to center the Blackness of Afro-Latinx folks in higher education spaces. Seeing the various articles that I use in this section and beyond, emphasizes just how important self-authorship has become for racial and ethnic identity development. These conceptual frameworks will allow me to understand and critique the research that is out there as I move through analyzing the literature.

Analysis of the Literature

The problems of Latinidad show up predominantly in higher education research spaces. The level of presence for Afro-Latinx college students on higher education journal search engines is drastically low. White supremacy and anti-Blackness are at work here. Prominent journals perpetuate the same oppression that some student affairs professionals claim to try and dismantle. Hence, they display that white supremacy is very much alive and well in the research and in practice. Latinidad and the centering of proximity to whiteness are what one sees when it comes to journals that specifically study Latinx college students and their experiences like the *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education* or the *Journal of Latinos and Education*. Afro-Latinx college students have existed in higher education spaces for decades so the fact that the research out there is only at the surface level is jarring. Before moving forward with the centering of Blackness and Afro-Latinx narratives, I will contextualize Latinidad and its historical implications of white supremacy and anti-Blackness.

Deconstructing Latinidad and Calling Out Anti-Blackness

Abes, et al (2019) focused one of their chapters on the importance of contextualizing topics. Contextualizing, in their viewpoints, means focusing on the power and privilege that is underlined in the topic. Latinidad and its historical context are prominent to see the ways white supremacy fabricated this ethnoracial indicator to continue to erase Blackness and Indigeneity (Abes, et al, 2019). Therefore, the United States was experiencing an inundation of immigrants who were coming from Latin America including, Cubans in the 1960s, folks from the Caribbean in the 1970s and 1980s, and Central and South Americans in the 1980s, and 1990s. The influx of immigrants led to various efforts to recognize folks from Latin America as one broad ethnic group, Latinx folks. In the 1960s, Hispanic Heritage Month was created after many efforts were observed in Latinx folks and their contributions to the Civil Rights Movement. It started as a week and moved onto a month when the country saw how much value Latinx folks brought to movements, with the population increasing immensely year to year. This population became the new political goal for the country as the population started to rise. (Garret, 2020).

Today, the concepts of Hispanic Heritage Month and Latinidad are intertwined.

(Salazar, 2019). The ethnic indicator Latinx became one that only fit for white and Mestizx folks. Several reasons contextualize why the fit of the ethnic indicator only privileges the white and Mestizx people. One reason that has been argued by various activists like Rosa Clemente, and Alan Pelaez Lopez, in the Black and indigenous communities, that this single narrative has been used to erase their entire existence in the United States. Latinidad is insidious in the ways that it erases Blackness and Indigeneity across different societal institutions (Salazar, Pelaez Lopez & Clemente, 2019).

In higher education research specifically, one can read the book title, “Understanding the Latinx Experience” and assume that the book encapsulates the various narratives that exist within the Latinx diaspora including Blackness and Indigeneity. However, I look at the research participants that Torres, Hernandez, and Martinez (2019) chose to work with, 21 out of 33 of them are of Mexican origin. One has to question how Latinidad, Anti-Blackness, and Mexican hegemony play a role in this staggering data. The ethnic identity development of Latinx people matters. However, it is a problem when it is assumed that Latinx identity development is one narrative because it rejects Blackness as a part of the conversation. Mexican hegemony is a reason why I argue that there needs to be more intentionality behind the efforts to identity development for Afro-Latinx students.

Centering Blackness in the Afro-Latinx College Students

Centering Blackness in Afro-Latinx college students is a concept that has not yet been grasped as seen in the previous section. Intentional identity development research on Afro-Latinx college students has barely made conversations in the last five years. Furthermore, this does not mean that literature is completely non-existent. There are a few authors that have broken through the glass ceiling that seems to exist in academia when examining research on Afro-Latinx college students and their development (Garcia-Louis & Cortes, 2020, Mozee, Cihuatl Espinoza, & Arce, 2020, Dache, Haywood & Mislán, 2019, Garcia-Louis, 2019).

Garcia-Louis (2019, 2020) is a prominent scholar in pushing Afro-Latinx narratives forward. She used “Blackimiento” as a framework to emphasize the need that Afro-Latinx college students have to find themselves, then implores student affairs professionals to provide intentional identity development programs and workshops for Afro-Latinx students. (Dache, Haywood, & Mislán, 2019). Garcia-Louis and Cortes (2020) focused specifically on the rejection of Blackness and the rejection that students enact as a form of resistance in a term they call anti-Afrolatinidad. Their main argument in this article is that Afro-Latinx students are stuck having to negotiate between identity and belonging on campus (Garcia-Louis & Cortes, 2020). Furthermore, Hordge-Freeman and Vera (2019) found that for a lot of Afro-Latinx college students, this battle of negotiation between identity

and belonging on campus existed before they even stepped foot onto a college campus. Colorism and Anti-Blackness are concepts these students have known their whole life through K-12 education, at church, and primarily at home with their families. For Afro-Latinx students, this battle of negotiation between identity and belonging on campus is exactly like Baxter-Magolda's (2007) description of the second phase; the crossroads.

Here, Garcia-Louis and Cortes (2020) also argue that there is a lot of research out there that juxtaposes the experiences of Latinx and Black students. The problem here is that it indicates that students can be one but not both, which becomes a problem when Afro-Latinx students identify as both. This article seems to continue from another prominent article that focuses on the (in)visibility of Afro-Latinx males in higher education research and addresses this juxtaposition (Garcia-Louis, 2019). Hordge-Freeman and Vera (2019) argue that this exists when Afro-Latinx college students have to choose to study either African/ Africana studies or Latinx studies to gain affinity and identity development. One of the students Hordge-Freeman & Vera, (2019) studied mentioned that at a predominantly white institution this choice is hard because there are often not that many students that exist who look like them (Hordge-Freeman & Vera, 2019, Baxter-Magolda, 2007).

The examples shown so far indicate that Afro-Latinx college students endure an excruciating amount of anti-Black racism, colorism, and oppression in many facets of their life (Garcia-Louis & Cortes, 2020, Hordge-Freeman & Vera, 2019). Haywood (2017) indicates that when Afro-Latinx college students choose to identify with their Latinx ethnicity, that those spaces they enter with their white and Mestizx counterparts are the most violent. Latinidad, white supremacy, and anti-Blackness are all concepts that exist at predominantly white institutions (Hordge-Freeman & Vera, 2019, Haywood, 2017). Beyond higher education, the Latinx community has not fully reached the place where they can offer identity development for Black Latinx folks holistically when fostering their Blackness. Identity development programs do exist today. There are student affairs administrators who are making many strides in this area today, and they deserve the acknowledgment and modeling of action to push forth the narratives of Afro-Latinx college students and their development.

Current Successes in Recognizing and Uplifting Afro-Latinx Students on Campus

Fields (2020) focused on Afro-Latinx students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and the reasons why they chose the institution versus a historically white institution. For many Afro-Latinx students, one of the main reasons they choose HBCUs is that their Blackness has been invalidated throughout their life within their families, at school, in their home community, and at church

(Hordge-Freeman & Vera, 2019, Haywood, 2017). HBCUs are a safe place for them to exist as both Latinx and Black. At Howard University, Fields explains still misunderstood, Afro-Latinx students can still exist as both and have their culture appreciated through student clubs and programs offered to them. At HBCUs, Afro-Latinx students start to become the authors of their own lives naturally (Baxter-Magolda, 2007). Other areas in which student affairs administrators have found success at uplifting Afro-Latinx college students are intentional events and programming that calls out the problems of Latinidad and anti-Black oppression that Afro-Latinx college students deal with.

One of the instances that I found significantly impactful was the efforts made by the folks who work in La Casa Cultural and Afro-American Cultural Centers at Yale University. La Casa Cultural has a theme for this academic year that is called “Unpacking Latinidad: Race, Colorism and Radical Solidarity.” The theme is dedicated to Afro-Latinx students and their belonging as a form of resistance against the perpetuation of Latinidad and Anti-Blackness that exists on Latinx/Hispanic Heritage Month and beyond.

Student affairs professionals have also made strides in an effort of resistance by reclaiming what was once known as “Hispanic Heritage Month,” as Afro-Latinx, Indigenous, & Latinx Heritage month, to put Afro-Latinx folks and Indigenous folks at the forefront. Folks at institutions like Saint Mary’s College of California, Pacific University, Yale University, and Swarthmore College have all pushed forth this narrative. The changing of the name allows for Afro-Latinx students to feel safe in being their authentic selves. The name change resists the notion in which Afro-Latinx college students have to make decisions around which parts of their identity to uplift and recognizes them as holistic individuals (Baxter-Magolda, 2007).

Discussion and Implications

Much of the research has mainly shown that activists and research scholars are still spending a lot of their time calling out the Anti-Blackness that is ingrained in every facet of society. Previously, I named that there were a few authors who have broken the glass ceiling in academia that focus on the topics at hand. I argued and continue to state that it is in fact that white supremacy is ingrained in the ways that research in academia is scrutinized so that only the privileged can exist in the field. To look at present-day strides in student affairs, one must delve into websites and see the programming and signature events that student affairs administrators home in on at their institutions.

As a white Latinx man for the last year in the University of Vermont’s Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration program, I have felt invigorated to know that people like me have had their stories depicted in academic journals. Out

of the narratives that are out there of Afro-Latinx people, the predominant theme is that Afro-Latinx college students are fighting every day to be seen holistically and whole in their ethno-racial identity (Garcia-Louis, 2019). The fact that Afro-Latinx students even need to choose between two of the intersectional identities that they hold at predominantly white institutions is disheartening (Garcia-Louis & Cortes, 2020, Hordge-Freeman & Vera, 2019).

A lot of the articles that focused on Afro-Latinx students talked about just how critical the effort of giving identity development opportunities is towards the academic achievement of these students (Garcia-Louis & Cortez, 2020, Hordge-Freeman & Vera, 2019). There have been significant findings that have suggested that students who can find themselves and center their Blackness, while having it uplifted by the people around them, can succeed academically because they find that sense of belonging, they have been yearning for (Strayhorn, 2014). I look at the implications on what work needs to be done, the findings affirm my argument that there is a need for this student population to be uplifted, valued, and intentionally developed through programming hosted by student affairs professionals (Strayhorn, 2014).

Research is vastly needed on Indigenous Latinx people in higher education spaces. I am interested in seeing how Indigenous Latinx folks are being offered intentional identity development strategies to acknowledge the Indigeneity that exists beyond the U.S. context. I cannot imagine that the results are any different to their Black and Afro-Latinx counterparts, just by how violently erased their experiences are. There is value in being able to name and research the concept of their erasure though and I want to spend some intentional time looking at this population soon.

As I conclude this manuscript, I found myself having some tensions on whether intentional identity development was a viable aspect to look into for Afro-Latinx students. I had tensions with the idea that to do this Afro-Latinx students had to first find their place and sense of belonging at a university. The tension came from acknowledging that the system of higher education in the United States was created to serve the white cis heterosexual man and that anyone who does not fit in this mold has to endure traumatizing experiences to find themselves and others like them on college campuses. I do not want to be complacent in the systems and structures of higher education that are in place today, as I believe someday higher education will be a transformative place for everyone regardless of the various identities people hold. As a form of resistance (Abes, et al, 2019), I delved beyond higher education to inform me about where Afro-Latinx folks stand in their identity development within society. There is a lot of work to do to truly uplift the narratives and experiences of Afro-Latinx college students in higher education. I continue to implore student affairs professionals who are looking to create inclusive environments to read the scholarship out there across disciplines

to gain better perspective on the narrative and experience. Without the intentional work done to serve Afro-Latinx students and give them the identity development opportunities they deserve, Afro-Latinx students will have to continue scrutinizing parts of their identity to feel safe on campuses across the country.

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