

“If you are going to say you’re Afro-Latina that means that you are Black”:

Afro-Latinxs Contesting the Dilution of Afro-Latinidad

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The second half of the 2010's has brought an increase in the visibility of, and conversations about, Afro-Latinx identity in the United States. Afro-Latinx, in its simplest definition, is a term that describes Latin Americans and Latin American Descendants who are of African Descent. While Afro-Latinidad as a concept and an identity has existed for decades, both in Latin America and the United States, the current decade has brought many advances in terms of the visibility of Afro-Latinidad and Afro-Latinx people in the United States.

Univision, one of the five main Spanish language news channels targeted towards Latinxs living the United States, in late 2017 promoted Ilda Calderon, an Afro-Colombian news anchor, to main news anchor on their prime-time news program *Noticiero Univision* (Hansen 2017). This promotion makes her the first Afro-Latina to anchor the news in Univision's history as well as the first Afro-Latina to anchor in any major network in the U.S. The decision comes at the heel of the networks airing of Calderon's interview with a Ku Klux's Klan Leader in August of 2017 (Univision 2017). The interview was particularly interesting because it showed the complexities of Afro-Latinidad to their Latinx audience. The network has historically been criticized for their exclusion and erasure of Afro-Latinxs in both their coverage of news that occurs in Latin America and the U.S. and the staff they hire. These recent decisions by the network show attempts to be more inclusive, or at the very least attempts to appraise critics.

In the realm of music, Belcalis Almanzar, better known by stage name Cardi B, is rapper of Dominican and Trinidadian descent that gained prominence in 2017. Her debut single "Bodak Yellow" reached number one on the *Billboard* Hot 100, which made Cardi the second-ever woman artist to reach that position with a solo after Lauryn Hill in 1998 (Kreps 2017). Another artist, Diana Danelys De Los Santos, better known by stage name Amara La Negra, also gained popularity in the U.S. near the end of 2017 and beginning of 2018. Already having a fanbase in

Latin America, Amara is working to transition to the U.S. music market. Both artists embrace their Afro-Dominican ancestry in their music and don't shy away from discussing their Afro-Latina identities, bringing to light the complexities of the identity to new audiences.

Many Afro-Latinxs have also created blogs and social media spaces to carve out spaces for Afro-Latinx empowerment, visibility, and education for those unfamiliar with the Afro-Latinidad. Blogs such as *Ain't I Latina?* And *#IamEnough* are run by Afro-Latinas who are creating spaces to uplift and showcase other Afro-Latinas. Instagram pages such as *theafrolatindiaspora* and *afrolatinos.siempre.palante* serve as educational spaces. They showcase facts about the history of people of African descent in Latin America and address issues that affect Afro-Latinxs in both the U.S. and Latin America. These content creators made these pages in response to the exclusion and lack of visibility they saw in traditional media and have developed new spaces for consciousness raising and education.

All of these developments have spurred new conversations around Afro-Latinidad in the United States. One of these conversations is who is allowed to claim Afro-Latinidad. Latin America is a region with a long history of mixing between individuals of diverse ancestries and continental origins and therefore many people have known and unknown African Ancestry in their family. However, those who advocate for Afro-Latinx visibility are questioning whether simply having some African ancestry is a sufficient criterion to claim membership as well as the consequences of expanding or restricting who can claim the term and be the face of Afro-Latinidad in the U.S. The increasing relevance of Afro-Latinidad in the United States has brought into sharp focus identity formation and gatekeeping practices in the U.S. and challenges how we have been socialized to understand identities framed, experienced and named as "Latinx" and "Black".

My position

I come at this research as a Peruvian/Salvadoran American undergraduate student who has fairly recently come to identify as an Afro-Latino and Black Latino. I am the son of a dark brown skinned mother who is a Peruvian of African descent<sup>1</sup> and light skinned mestizo Salvadoran father. Growing up, I solely identified as “Latino”. However, my claim to Latinidad was always meant with suspicion, with many assuming my particular brown skinned appearance meant that I could not be “Latino” since I did not look like the other “Latino” child in my school. I have various anecdotes of being asked to “Say something in Spanish” in order to “prove” I was Latino and of people being surprised when I would let them know my parents are Latin American immigrants. When I would tell my parents, particularly my mom, about these incidents, she would often reinforce the idea that I should be proud of my Latinidad, but there was never a discussion about Blackness or African ancestry. I viewed myself as a Latino that was often mistaken for being Black, so for most of my life I believed the two categories to be mutually exclusive.

It was only after entering undergrad that I became familiar with the term<sup>2</sup> “Afro-Latino”. A particular moment that sparked my interest in the term was the Latino USA podcast episode “Afro-Latinos” from 2016. Listening to stories of various Afro-Latinxs that were featured on that episode, I realized they experienced many of the same anecdotes that I had experienced growing up. This project started the following year, motivated by the personal interest in exploring whether

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<sup>1</sup> I would classify my mother as Afro-Peruvian, though I know that she has never officially defined herself in that way. When I have asked my mother how she identifies, she has told me that in Peru she would pick the racial classification of “Mestiza” or “mixed” on official documents. She says in the U.S. she usually identifies as Hispanic/Latina/Peruana and that she is often mistakenly assumed to be “African American”. When I have asked if she would ever identify as Afro-Latina or Afro-Peruvian, she stated that she acknowledges she has African ancestry, but that she does not feel a strong enough connection to a sense of “Africanness” to feel compelled to claim the term, at least in the U.S. However, in Peru she and my other family members often make reference to each other’s blackness. When I would bring up this project with them they often would respond by saying that I am basically doing a project about “them” or “people like us”, which means they do identify with the term to some degree. I use this phrase in an effort to acknowledge that my mom does identify in Blackness at least in part.

<sup>2</sup> When I use “term” I am referring to the concept of Afro-Latinidad and how people interact with the concept. When I use “label” I am referring to the way people will choose to identify as “Afro-Latinx”

I could claim that I too was an Afro-Latino. As a consequence, much of my analysis has been shaped by a desire to deeply understand what Afro-Latinidad has meant to Afro-Latinxs and how people came to identify as Afro-Latinx in order to understand if I can call myself Afro-Latino and what type of political work I would promote if I actively identify as “Afro-Latino”.

I toe the line between being an insider and outsider. As I have slowly come to see myself as an Afro-Latino/Black Latino I have become attentive to issues raised by Afro-Latinxs, such as addressing anti-blackness within Latinx communities and fighting the constant erasure of Black Latinxs, as issue that are also important to me and issues I want to address in my work. While the project has always been personal to some degree, it has become more personal over time during my time as a college student who has only fairly recently become familiar with Afro-Latinidad. Many of the people I have been following for this project have been advocating for Afro-Latinidad and engaging with other Afro-Latinxs for years now. Conversations that are new to me might be conversations Afro-Latinxs have been having for a long time. All of that is to underline my position as a partial outsider, since I have not been engaging with Afro-Latinidad for as long as others have.

### Defining Afro-Latinidad

Academic and popular definitions of the term “Afro-Latinx” range from short and simple, such as “A black person from Latin America” (Remezcla 2018a), to the more encompassing definition offered by Roman and Flores (2010) in their introduction to *The Afro-Latin@ Reader*: “They are people of African descent in Mexico, Central America, and South America, and the Spanish Speaking Caribbean, and by extension those of African descent in whose origins are in Latin America and the Caribbean” (1). Even Roman and Flores’s definition does not fully encompass the many ways self-identified Afro-Latinxs have defined the term and what the term is supposed to represent. For many the term has represented a challenge to invisibility of Blackness

within Latinidad, a demand for the acceptance of a complex and nuanced identity, and dedication to addressing the structural issues that Afro-Latinxs continue to face in both Latin America and the United States. In the following section, I will detail each of these aspects of Afro-Latinidad brought up by self-identified Afro-Latinxs and scholars who study Afro-Latinxs.

Many Afro-Latinxs have used the term to challenge the historical erasure and continuing invisibility of Latin Americans of African descent. This invisibility is the result of the political project of *mestizaje* present in many Latin American countries. *Mestizaje* posits that the inhabitants present during colonial times intermixed and over various generations created a new population of “mestizos”. The current inhabitants of Latin America are said to be the descendants of these mestizos and many Latin American countries have created a national image around the idea that they are a nation of mestizos. *Mestizaje* is seen as a way to achieve “homogenous nationalism and elevated global status” (Mollett 2014:32) and perpetuates the idea that color hierarchy does not exist, because how could it if everyone is one and the same.

Scholars and activists have critiqued the concept of *mestizaje*, arguing that it is really about the process of “whitening through race mixture<sup>3</sup>” (López Oro 2016:66). If the end goal is whitening through race mixture, then there is a need to exclude and erase Blackness from the national imagery. While indigenous peoples are said to be “ancestral contributors to the new mestizo nation” (López Oro 2016:65), people of African descent are erased from national histories which perpetuates the idea that people of African descent are foreigners. One sees this function in the

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<sup>3</sup> An example of phrase that can imply whitening through race mixture is “*mejorar la raza*” which translates “improve the race” (which I make reference to later). The phrase is often invoked by a parent or grandparent when they see their child, grandchild, or a similar younger relative dating or in a relationship with someone with a darker skin tone. The idea behind the saying is that the younger relative should find a partner that is of a lighter skin tone than themselves so that their future child could be a lighter skin tone and have straighter hair. This hypothetical child would then be “better” than their parent and their parent’s family since they are higher up on the color hierarchy and would be seen as more “beautiful”. (Maybe come back to this one)

way people of African descent born in Latin America are automatically assumed to be foreign, such as Afro-Mexicans, the Garifuna in Central America, and Afro-Argentines to name a few<sup>4</sup> (Jones 2013; Mollett 2014; López Oro 2016; Fortes and Ceballos 2003). As opposed to eradicating a color hierarchy, Afro-Latinxs see Mestizaje used as a tool to shield a color hierarchy that rewards status based on one's proximity to whiteness, with light and medium brown skinned mestizos being seen as the true members of the nation.

Mestizaje has also made its way into the United States, specifically in the 1980s by U.S. Latinx scholars who borrowed the concept of mestizaje to say that “there is something uniquely mixed about Latinos that both give them collective meaning and transcend national origins” (Rivera-Rideau, Jones, and Paschel 2016:10). Mestizaje became the way U.S. Latinxs tried to define themselves, and remnants of this continue to persist in the ways U.S. Latinxs will state that Latinos are a mix of Europeans, Africans, and Indigenous peoples.

By using the term “Afro-Latinx”, Self-identified Afro-Latinxs are challenging ideas of racelessness and mestizaje by highlighting the continuing existence of Afro-descendants and the different experiences faced by these afro-descendants in comparison to other Latinxs. For many, the term has been used to address the anti-black racism present in Latin American and Latinx communities (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Cruz-Janzen 2010; Hinojosa 2017). This often starts in the home, addressing the way families will treat children with darker skin differently than their relatives with lighter skin and promote marrying people of light skin tones than oneself in order to “improve the race” (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Cruz-Janzen 2010). Many Afro-Latinxs also use the term

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Blackness being framed as foreign leads people of various nations to argue that any people of African descendant that they come across in their nation must be from another Latin American country. Examples would include Mexicans assuming Afro-Mexicans are actually from Cuba, Argentineans believing that no Afro-Argentines exists and that Afro-descendants only exist in Brazil, and Chileans assuming all afro-descendants in their country are from Haiti or the Dominican Republic. Blackness is always “over there”.

to challenge Anti-Blackness at the structural level. Afro-Latinxs bring to the light the ways the exclusion of Afro-Latinxs has led to political, social, and economic marginalization and the need for Latin American nation states to address the concern of their African descendant constituents.

Self-identified Afro-Latinxs also use the term as a way to advocate for the acknowledgement of their complex identities and challenge the fictitious illusion of distinct categories. In the U.S., Latinidad and Blackness have been constructed as distinct categories, implying that one cannot occupy Blackness and Latinidad at the same time. This construction erases Afro-Latinxs and many use the terms as way to bring the light the multifaceted nature of their identities. Afro-Latinxs often discuss how they are never feel fully accepted by any one community. They are measured as “not Latinx enough” and “not black enough” and are constantly having to negotiate their identities depending on the context (Cruz-Janzen 2010; Hinojosa 2017). Afro-Latinxs will also acknowledge the nuances of their blackness, by claiming that while their experiences of blackness are not the same as those of Black Americans, they are still Black in the sense that that are descendants of the African diaspora<sup>5</sup> (Hinojosa 2017).

By advocating for the complexity of both the ways they are identified and the ways they choose to identify, Afro-Latinos are also challenging the construction of identity categories. Laó-Montes (2005) argues that Afro-Latinidad has the potential to “recognize hidden histories and subalternized knowledges” while challenging dominant notions of “African-ness, American-ness, and Latinidad, along with the forms of power and knowledge embedded in these categories” (118). Jennings (2010) similarly argues that Afro-Latinidad questions the way the term “Latinx” has been

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<sup>5</sup> Blackness here is being used as an umbrella term to unify subjects of the African Diaspora who experience discrimination based on color and ancestry. The ways this discrimination manifests will vary based on the region of the world these subject’s lives (i.e. anti-black racism in Brazil will differ from anti-Black racism in the Unites States)

constructed and, by extension, makes us consider the way other racial categories have been constructed and for what purposes, both in the United States and in Latin America.

### Afro-Latinidad in the United States

#### *Historical Presence of Latin Americans of African descent*

Latin Americans of African descent<sup>6</sup> have been in the United States since the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the majority of which came from the Caribbean, specifically Puerto Rico and Cuba. Around the 1880s, many Cubans of African descent immigrated to Ybor City, Florida and Tampa, Florida to work in cigar factories, such as the one owned by Vicente Martinez Ybor, a Cuban immigrant who created the first cigar factory in Tampa and who Ybor city is named after (Mirabal 1993). Around the same Many Puerto Ricans of African descent and some Cubans of African descent immigrated to the New York City in order to organize for their nation's independence from the U.S. (Hoffnung-Garskof 2010).

While anti-black racism and de facto segregation existed in the Latin American countries of origin of these immigrants, the new variable was coexistence with Afro-American communities, and for those who moved to the south the existence of legal segregation. Latin American immigrants of African descent often lived within or near established Afro-American communities and would go to school, use public facilities, access services and, when drafted, fight alongside Afro-Americans (Mirabal 1993; Grillo 2010; Hoffnung-Garskof 2010; Greenbaum 2010; Busey and Cruz 2015). For some, the consistent interaction with Afro-Americans<sup>7</sup> lead them to try to

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<sup>6</sup> I use "Latin Americans of African Descent" in this section because the people presenting during this time period would not have seen themselves as "Afro-Latinx" since the term had not been coined yet.

<sup>7</sup> I use Afro-American in the section to make reference to Americans of African Descent. Similar to the choice to use Latin Americans of African descent, it is because they probably would not define themselves as Black Americans at the time.

integrate into these communities, particularly through marriage (Grillo 2010; Greenbuam 2010; Busey and Cruz 2015; Hoffnung-Garskof 2010).

A motivating factor behind integrating into Afro-American communities was the acquisition of social citizenship (Grillo 2010; Hoffnung-Garskof 2010). Within the context of segregation, the only option for acquiring social citizenship, or a social recognition of belonging to the nation, was through Afro-Americans, who held the status of being citizens. Integration in these Afro-American communities would also serve as pragmatic way to develop their social networks. Over time, the Latin American of African descent who integrated themselves within these communities began to identify as “Black Americans” (Grillo 2010; Hoffnung-Garskof 2010). Of course, Integration within these communities was not a given, as these immigrants were still seen foreigners. While many lived in the same parts of the city as Afro-Americans, they would live in neighborhoods within these communities that were strictly comprised of other Latin Americans (Grillo 2010). Also, even if Afro-Cubans or Afro-Puerto Ricans would begin to identify as Black Americans, that did not necessarily mean Afro-Americans would not contest their claims to Blackness (Grillo 2010).

Some Latin Americans of African descent choose not to integrate into existing Afro-American communities. The Cubans of African descent that lived in Ybor City lived in an area that were mostly made up of Cuban immigrants and that didn’t abide by the same Jim Crow laws that Tampa did (Mirabal 1993). When Cubans of African descent would interact with Afro-Americans when they went to school, got medical treatments, or went to the movies, but once they returned to Ybor city, they would resist any “formal interactions or alliances” with Afro-Americans (Mirabal 1993). They viewed themselves as primarily Cuban and privileged interactions with fellow Cubans. While some Afro-Cubans might have responded this way because

they believed their stay in the U.S. was temporary, and thus it was important to maintain national ties, others recognized the negative ramifications of being “black” in the U.S. and tried privileging their national origins to alter their social status<sup>8</sup> (Mirabal 2015).

Many Latin Americans of African descent often engaged with their fellow Latin American immigrants in the context of national independence movements. Puerto Ricans and Cubans would often form clubs that all Cubans or Puerto Ricans in the area would attend to mobilize and advocate for independence from the United States. In these spaces, a shared nationality identity was of primary importance, often at the exclusion of anything that could be seen as divisive. Discussions surrounding racism, as well as discussions on sexism, due to their divisiveness or were put off as something to be addressed once independence was secured (Hoffnung-Garskof 2010; Mirabal 1993). However, racism and sexism continued to exist within these movements. Cubans and Puerto Ricans of African descent often faced various forms of exclusion, such as not being invited to certain events, never being given the opportunity to hold leadership positions, and at times being barred from joining certain clubs (Mirabal 1993; Mirabal 2010). While it is unclear if these practices were a result of the color line in the U.S. or if the color line simply exacerbated the divisions that were already present on the islands, what is clear is the second-class status Cubans and Puerto Ricans of African descent in these clubs. These experiences would often compel Cubans and Puerto Ricans of African descent to form their own organizations.

Cubans and Puerto Ricans of African descent would form smaller organizations within larger Cuban and Puerto Rican ones, such as La Union Marti Maceo in Ybor City, Florida or Club Cubano Inter-Americano in New York City (Mirabal 1993; Mirabal 2010). In other cases, they

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<sup>8</sup> An interesting thing to point out here is that for many years, especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, being “Spanish” or “Foreign” allowed for Latin Americans of African descent to avoid some of the negative implications of being identified as Black in the United States.

would form clubs within larger Afro-American organizations, such as forming their own mason lodges within established Black mason lodges (Hoffnung-Garskof 2010). Forming organization in clubs within established Afro-American organization not only worked to differentiate themselves from other Puerto Rican and Cuban organizations but also served as a way to differentiate themselves from monolingual English Afro-Americans. While most of these clubs focused on participating in existing independence movements, some served for community building. The later was the case for the Club Cubano Inter-Americano, which ended up being a space for people of a variety of nationalities who shared African ancestry and descent, such as Haitians, Jamaicans, Puerto Ricans and Afro-Americans (Hoffnung-Garskof 2010). In these clubs, Cubans and Puerto Ricans of African descent often held the leadership positions, something that was not possible in the larger immigrant organizations.

The experiences of these Puerto Rican and Cubans of African descent show that the exclusion of Latin Americans of African descent has been going on for a long time. Therefore, while the conversations being brought up by Afro-Latinxs might be interpreted as “new”, they are issues that Latin Americans in the United States have been contending with for decades.

#### *Creation of a Collective “Hispanic” and “Latino” Category*

Prior to the second half of the twentieth century, Latin American immigrants and their descendants did not identify under a collective identity label. It was in the 1960s and 1970s, in response to Black power and Black civil rights movements that labels such as “Hispanic” and “Latino” started to be used to represent descendants of Latin Americans in the United States as a group (Mora 2014; Gutierrez 2016; Meraji and Demby 2017). By the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the terms became commonplace, and often used interchangeable, to represent a marginalized U.S. population.

The three major Latin American groups present in the United States by the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans, often mobilized for their concerns separately. Mexicans and Mexican Americans mobilized around worker exploitation in agriculture and the service industry, housing and educational segregation, and contended with questions to their legal status (Gutierrez 2016; Meraji and Demby 2017). Puerto Ricans, while dealing with similar issues, were also considered with the political status of the Island and their rights as U.S. Citizens (Gutierrez 2016; Meraji and Demby 2017), while Cubans were focused on ending the communist regime in Cuba (Meraji and Demby 2017). Since each group was mostly concentrated in different geographic areas of the country, there was no want or need to form a collective idea. It was not until the 60s and 70s, in response to the political context of the time, that Latin American groups started to mobilize behind a collective identity. While “Hispanic” and “Latino” are often used interchangeably, each emerged as a collective identity in different contexts.

The first use of “Latino” for mobilization appears in Chicago in the 1970s. Modeled and inspired by the Black Panther Party and Black civil rights activism, Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans defined themselves as marginalized populations within the United States that demanded a remedy for their subjugation. In Chicago, this laid the groundwork for the emersion of a “Latino” collective identity since the city’s Mexican American and Puerto Rican populations realized that they could increase their political power if they worked together to advance common goals (Gutierrez 2016; Mora 2014). They formed the “La coalición Latinoamericana de Empleos” [The Latin American Coalition for jobs], whose main goal was to increase the work opportunities available to “Latinos” by pressuring Illinois Bell Telephone and Jewel Tea Company to hire more “Latinos” (Gutierrez 2016:44). The coalition was successful in pressuring both companies to change their hiring practices and commit to hiring more Latinos in their company. The coalitions

success further strengthened the unity between Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago, which led to the formation of the “Latino strategies for the 70s conference” in 1973 as well as the creation of the “Latino institute”, a program that taught Latino parents about bilingual education and how to advocate for it for their children (Gutierrez 2016:44).

Unlike “Latino”, “Hispanic” was a term that was created by the U.S. Census Bureau, in response to pressure by Mexican American and Puerto Rican activists to take a better count of the population of Latin American immigrants and their descendants living in the United States (Mora 2014). The United States government’s attempt to count the number of people of Spanish speaking origin began with the 1960 Census<sup>9</sup>. For the 1960 Census, five states in the southwest- Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico and Texas, had a “Spanish Surname count” (Meraji and Demby 2017, Census 2016). A list of Spanish surnames was compiled from last names found in the Mexico City, Mexico and San Juan, Puerto Rico Phone books (Meraji and Demby 2017). For the 1970 census, the Bureau added a question asking, “Is this person’s origin or descent...” and then included “Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, Other Spanish, or None of these” (Census 2017a<sup>10</sup>). However, this question was only asked to a sample of respondents, was never explained, and was not available in Spanish (Census 2017a; Meraji and Demby 2017). In response, Mexican American and Puerto Rican activists, knowing the value of having census data that can show patterns of discrimination, demanded that the Census Bureau do a better job counting the number of people of Latin American descent in the country (Mora 2014; Meraji and Demby 2017).

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<sup>9</sup> The census has asked about national origins for years. (Return to this footnote)

<sup>10</sup> For this citation and for (Census 2017a), (Census 2017b), and (Census 2017c), I am referring to a scanned copy of the original U.S. census of the year mentioned in the sentence. The copies come from the U.S. Census Bureau website which last updated the page where I am retrieving the scanned copies from in 2017.

As a result of the increased pressure from Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans, the U.S. Census Bureau formed the “Spanish Origin Advisory Committee” (SOAC) which included Mexican American Leaders from The National Council for La Raza and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, Puerto Rican activists from New York City, and some Cuban American leaders who had ties to Spanish- Language media in Miami (Mora 2014:190; Meraji and Demby 2017). The SOAC’s goal was to create a better method for counting people of Latin American descent on the Census. The members of the board wanted to make sure that the new catchall term would include those who do not affiliate themselves with a particular Latin American country as well those with parents of two or more national identities (Mora 2014). At the same time, they wanted to make sure people could still claim the specific national identity within the category they associated with, so that they could advocate for specific groups within the larger category as well<sup>11</sup> (Mora 2014). The latter would alleviate concerns that having a collective term would prevent specific groups from advocating for their particular concerns.

After much deliberation, they agreed on the terms “Hispanic” and “Spanish Origin”. Terms like “brown”, “Latin American” and “Latino” were suggested, but ultimately were not chosen due to being vague or because they were deemed “too foreign” (Mora 2014; Meraji and Demby 2017). It was not a term that everyone liked, but it was the best option that allowed them to count as many people as possible and differentiate themselves from “Non-Hispanics” (Meraji and Demby 2017; Gomez 1992). The question that appeared on the 1980 census was “Is this person of Spanish/Hispanic origin or descent” with the available options being “No (not Spanish/Hispanic), Yes: Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano, Yes: Puerto Rican, Yes: Cuban, and Yes: Other Spanish/Hispanic” (Census 2017b). Social movement leaders as well as Spanish-Language media

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<sup>11</sup> It’s important to note that post-1965 race categories on the census functioned as a bureaucratic tool that was used for the distribution of resources

networks, specifically Univision and Telemundo, began campaigns to disseminate the term “Hispanic” and get people to answer the question on the census. For social movement leaders, this data would allow them to make claims about the discrimination faced by “Hispanics” and make claims to the State for redress (Mora 2014).

This also led the same social movement organizations and Spanish-language media outlets to reshape, from representing particular communities in specific regions for the country to representing a national group who exist across the country (Mora 2014). An example would be the National Council of La Raza, which started as the Southwest council of La Raza, representing Mexican American issues in the southwest, that morphed into a national organization modeled after the NAACP with the aim of representing the “entire Hispanic population” of the U.S. (Gutierrez 2016:48).

While the terms “Latino” and “Hispanic” have different origins, by the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the terms started to be used interchangeably. This is seen in the 2000 U.S. Census where the “Hispanic/Spanish Origin” question was turned into “Is Person X Spanish/Hispanic/Latino” (Census 2017c). This format of the question appeared once again in 2010 census, then as “Hispanic, Latino or Spanish Origin” (Census 2017d).

#### *Media, Marketing, and the creation of the color of Latinxs*

While activists were the most vocal about the need to create a collective term, Cuban American advertising executive were also invested in the creation of a collective category. These advertisers knew that if there was data available on the size of population of Latin American descendants they could use that data to claim there was a sizeable “Hispanic” or “Latino” market that they knew how to market to (Gutierrez 2016; Mora 2014). “Hispanic” and “Latino” started to be widely disseminated through various ad campaigns in the late 1970s and 1980s, which

resulted in the creation of the “Hispanic Market” and the “Hispanic consumer”. This consumer needs to be clearly distinct from already existing consumers (i.e. White and Black consumers) in order to justify the creation of a new market. Considering the wide diversity of people who make up the “Hispanic market”, advertisers had the task of creating a Hispanic consumer that was distinct and generalizable enough to represent people of various Latin American nations but not so generalizable that it ignores the diversity of the population.

Spanish-language media and advertising companies responded to this task by creating the “Latin Look”, a taken for granted marketing image that is supposed to represent typical U.S. Latinxs. This look is often described as someone with “long straight hair” and “olive skin” that is olive enough to not be read as ambiguous but distinctly as “Hispanic” (Davila 2012:110). This “look” creates an image that lies between being as light as “White” consumers and as dark as “Black” consumers and is thus distinct enough to not be confused for either one. When the image first emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, most of the actors and models chosen to represent the look were specifically brown to medium-brown in order to not be mistaken for “White”. This choice was informed by advertisers believing that the “Blonde and Nordic types” that predominated in Latin American media would not work for U.S. Latinxs, since they experienced marginalization and therefore would not see themselves represented since “Whiteness” was associated with status and power (Davila 2012:110). However, over time the Latin Look got progressively lighter, approaching a more Mediterranean look, that tries to avoid looking particularly “Ethnic”, such as appearing “Black” or “Indigenous”, while simultaneously privileging Whiteness.

Currently, the “Mediterranean Latinx” is seen as having the most generic appeal, with Black and Indigenous appearing Latinxs being relegated to either only showing up in group shots meant to represent “all Latinxs” or not being shown at all. The latter can be seen in action when Latinx

actors and models who are identified as either “Black” or “Indigenous” are not given roles for “Latinxs” for fears that having them in said roles would create ambiguity and then threaten the idea that “Latinxs” constitute a distinct population and market (Davila 2012). At the same time, the unacknowledged color hierarchy that exists among Latinxs allows for the ambiguity of Latinxs who are identified as “White” to be more easily accepted. Therefore, only particular forms of ambiguity are a threat. The unexamined color hierarchy also plays a role in when darker skinned Latinxs are shown and the ways they are shown. For example, the choice to feature lighter skinned Latinx when it comes to ads for consumer goods and darker skinned Latinxs for social services, such as PSA about drug abuse or sexual health (Davila 2012:214). Such marketing choices reify the idea that lighter skinned Latinxs, like the commodities they advertise, are desirable while Darker skinned Latinxs represent poverty and illness, and thus are undesirable.

In response to the increasing “whiteness” of Latinx media, many Afro-Latinxs have needed to develop oppositional understandings of what “Latinidad” means to them. Some choice to identify with their particular national origins instead of with “Latinidad” and others have chosen an “anti-Hispanic” Latinidad that is “rooted in a mixed, black, and mestizo culture that, more important, was grounded in the United States” (Davila 2012:211). On that note, I now want to turn to more examples of U.S. Latinx Self Advocacy, specifically in the work Afro-Latinxs have engaged in with getting more Afro-Latinxs to “mark both” on the census and with using the internet to create spaces of advocacy, education, and empowerment.

### U.S Afro-Latinx Self Advocacy

#### *The Case of the Census*

While Afro-Latinidad has gained a certain level of visibility within the last few years, Afro-Latinxs have been demanding visibility and fighting against anti-black racism for decades. An area

in which many have been fighting for visibility is through the census in both the United States and Latin America<sup>12</sup>. As discussed earlier, the census is an important bureaucratic tool used by the government to measure patterns of discrimination and to make policy and funding decisions. Mobilizing a community of people to make their presence visible through the census is important because then community leaders can use the census data to show patterns of discrimination and make claims to the state. In the case of Afro-Latinxs, Afro-Latinx activists and academics aim to increase the number of people checking both “Yes” to being of “Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin” and checking “Black” for one’s “race” with the end goal of having the data necessary to show particular patterns of discrimination that affect Afro-Latinxs

Afro-Latinx activists and academics have argued that U.S. Afro-Latinxs have been undercounted in the U.S. Census. This has been due in part to the way the Census has come to be interpreted as about how one chooses to identify as oppose to about a government tool that can be used to measure discrimination. Barbra and Karen Fields define this phenomenon as an element of “Racecraft”, a set of pervasive beliefs in U.S. society that work to mask racism by make the illusion of “race” seem as if it is an objective fact (Fields and Fields 2012). In the case of the census, a bureaucratic tool used to measure patterns of racism has over time been interpreted as a form that measures how people identify racially. If the census is understood as a tool to measure how people identify, then the undercount of Afro-Latinxs would be due to a choice by those from Latin America and those who are Latin American descendants to mark other categories to represent how they identify as well as an aversion to identifying as Black

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<sup>12</sup> While for this paper I will focus on the case of Afro-Latinxs underrepresentation in the U.S. census, I do want to mention that Afro-Latinxs in Latin America have been fighting for recognition in various Latin American census at the same time. The key issue in Latin America is that many censuses do not ask questions about one’s “racial identification” or ancestral background, so much of the work has focused on getting the option to check one is Black on the national census. A successful example is the case of Mexico, where in 2015, for the first time Afro-Mexican were able to state that they were “Black” on the Mexican census.

As mentioned earlier, *mestizaje* has been central in the way U.S. Latinxs have come to define themselves as a “mixed people”. That in conjunction with the discrimination and marginalization they experience in the United States has led many to come to identify racially as a non-“White” population. When confronted with the census which first asks if they are of “Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin” and then asks them to mark a racial category regardless of their answer to the previous question, feeling that none of the available categories represent how they “identify racially” many U.S. Latinxs choose to mark “some other race” and write in Hispanic, Latinx, or their respective national origin. One sees this in the 2000 census, where 42% of the people who marked that they were of Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin also marked that they were “some other race” (Gonzalez-Barrera and Lopez 2015). In an attempt to limit the amount of people who responded with “some other race”, the U.S. census bureau for the 2010 census specified that “Hispanic origins are not races” (Census 2017d). However, even in that census about 37% of Hispanic/Latinx<sup>13</sup> respondents picked “Some other race” (Gonzalez-Barrera and Lopez 2015). Therefore, part of the reason Afro-Latinxs are often undercounted is that if the census is understood as form that represents how one identifies racially, then some Latinxs of African ancestry, in a similar fashion to Latinxs in general, may be choosing Hispanic, Latinx, or their national origin as their “race” instead of “Black”, believing that the “Black” does not represent how they identify.

In a related note, another reason why Afro-Latinxs are often undercounted is due to the erasure of African ancestry within Latin American and the aversion to identifying as Black. In their 2014 National Survey of Latinos, The Pew Research Center asked “Do you consider yourself to be Afro-Latino, Afro-Caribbean, or Afro-(country of origin) or not?” And found that about

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<sup>13</sup> When I use “Hispanic/Latinx” I am making reference to those who marked they were of Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin on the Census

24% of Latinxs in the study stated that they identify as one of those three categories (Lopez and Gonzalez-Barrera 2016). However, when those same respondents were asked how they reported their race on the census, only 18% said they checked “Black”. 39% said they check “White”, 24% said they write in “Hispanic”, 9% checked 2 or more races, and 4% checked “American Indian” (Lopez and Gonzalez-Barrera 2016). The results from this survey make clear that even when Latinxs acknowledge African ancestry, there is still a reluctance to identify as “Black”. This means that identifying as “Black” holds particular meanings that these self-identified African descendants do not believe represents them. It could be that they associate “Black” solely with African descendants from the United States or negative associations with Blackness and choose not to mark their racial category as “Black”. As a result, census data of the number of Hispanic/Latinxs who mark Black as their racial category is most likely a significant undercount of the number of Latinxs in the United States who have African ancestry and are often identified by others as “Black”.

In response to this undercount, some Afro-Latinxs, such as Miriam Jimenez Roman and other Afro-Latinxs working for the Afro-Latin@ forum, have done campaigns encouraging Afro-Latinxs to “check both” Hispanic/Latinx and Black on the 2010 U.S. census. In anticipation of the census, the Afro-Latin@ forum, and education non-profit based in New York City, ran a series of bilingual PSAs urging Afro-Latinxs to check both that they are of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin, and check “Black” as their race. Roman (2010) writes that the end goal of the project was to bring “attention to a social group that has long been invisible and subject to ongoing social and political marginalization”. Each of the three short PSAs showcase Afro-Latinxs speaking in Spanish and English and then end with a sentence that reads “Are you Afro-Latino?” followed by various people filing out census forms checking both Hispanic/Latinx and Black (Afro-Latin@ Forum 2010). The PSAs try to challenge the way the census has been interpreted to be about

identity by stating that the reason for why it's important to check both is because it's about getting an accurate count or about receiving the resources they deserve. At the same time, By showcasing various Afro-Latinxs of different national origins and skin tones in their PSAs, The Afro-Latin@ Forum was aiming to reach Afro-Latinx who are identified as others as "Black" but who did not "check both" in the previous census and have them see someone who looks like them. The desired result was that by seeing someone who looked like them telling them about the importance of getting counted by checking both, then they would also check both in the upcoming census. The case of the "check both" campaign is just one example of the ways Afro-Latinxs have been advocating for their visibility for years.

#### Fighting for visibility: the digital space

While the fight for visibility is not new, what is new is the spaces where Afro-Latinxs can engaging in the work needed to increase visibility and bring attention to issues that affect Afro-Latinxs. The expansion and widespread use of social media platforms, and digital media platforms in general, has given Afro-Latinxs spaces to advocate for and celebrate Afro-Latinidad.

Many Afro-Latinxs state that part of the reason they created spaces online to talk about Afro-Latinidad was because mainstream outlets overlooked and ignored them. Janel Martinez often references that a reason for why she created her blog "Ain't I Latina" was in response to popular magazines, like Ebony, who marketed to and represented Black Americans, and People en Espanol, who marketed and represented the Spanish speaking population in the U.S., always representing parts of her experience as a Black Latina but never providing representation of Afro-Latinas. She created her blog in order to provide a space where she could highlight women like her and show that they exist (Hinojosa 2016). Online spaces allow Afro-Latinxs, especially Afro-Latinas, to recognize each other and support each other in ways they do not find in popular media

representations of Latinxs, *as discussed pervious*, as well as highlight the diversity of hues, hair textures, and nationalities that make up the Afro-Latinx community in the United States (Alford 2018).

These platforms also serve as educational spaces, where Afro-Latinxs can challenge the erasure of people of African descent throughout Latin American and U.S. Latinxs history in ways that are often not possible in traditional media outlets. Instagram pages like Theafrolatindiaspora and afrolatinos.siempre.palante highlight different prominent Afro-Latinxs and show how Afro-Latinxs have been central in the development of music, dance, and food in Latin America. As Sessle Sanpy, one of the founders of Theafrolatindiaspora states in an interview with the PlotTwist podcast that the new generation of Afro-Latinxs are using online spaces to “encourage people, you know, that it’s ok to be Black and that there is nothing wrong with it” (Coronado 2018).

### The Dilution of Afro-Latinidad

As Afro-Latinidad has gain more visibility, especially online, more people are beginning to identify as Afro-Latino. However, The Afro-Latinos who identified as such prior to the recent increase in visibility have taken issue with the way some people are using the term. Many believe that the term is being misused with people claiming Afro-Latinidad without consideration of the political meanings behind the term simply because it is highly visible.

I argue that the increased visibility of Afro-Latinidad has unintentionally also lead to the dilution of Afro-Latinidad. I define this dilution as the way the term “Afro-Latinxs” as come to be understand by some as simply any individual from Latin America with some degree of African Ancestry. Not only does this understanding of Afro-Latinidad allow for many people from Latin America to claim the term, but it also works to erase the politics of addressing anti-black racism and centering Blackness within Latinidad which many Afro-Latinxs argue is central to their use of

the term. In effect, Black Latinxs, especially dark skinned Latinxs, are being erased, often at the expense of lighter brown skinned Latinxs within an identity that was supposed to center the former.

Afro-Latinxs have used their online platforms to respond to the dilution of Afro-Latinidad. I have seen two major responses, the first being trying to police the boundaries of who can claim Afro-Latinidad. Boundary policing has taken the form of arguing that one's phenotype must be identified by others as Black and that one needs to practice a pro-black politics in their everyday lives in order to claim Afro-Latinidad. The second major response has been arguing that the term has become too far removed from its original meanings to be productive and that it would be more productive to use other terms as one's primary identifier. While these responses differ in their approach, both are trying to address the concern that Latin Americans of African descent will be erased once again, one by trying to restrict who can claim Afro-Latinidad and the other by picking new terms that make their Blackness even more explicit.

#### Responses to the Dilution of Afro-Latinidad

##### *Phenotype: Being Identified by others as "Black"*

When Afro-Latinxs are asked to define who can claim Afro-Latinidad, one of the first answers to come up is a person who is identified by others as "Black". Many Afro-Latinxs have stated that their use of the term is making reference to the fact that they are read as "Black" and navigate the world the world as a Black person. Janel Martinez, founder of the website *Ain't I Latina?* in a video for Remezcla states, "When I walk into a space you know I am a Black Women. Right? So, when I use the term I am acknowledging how I appear, how I look" (Remezcla 2018b). Similarly, Sessle Sanpy, one of the founders of the Instagram page "The Afro Latin Diaspora", in a podcast interview states "When you look at me, you see a Black person, obviously" (Coronado 2018). Both Martinez and Sanpy highlight that, for them, the term is used to make acknowledge

their physical appearance, specially how they are often identified as “Black” as soon as they walk into a room or meet someone for the first time. The term Afro-Latinx functioned to account for their “Black” appearances while simultaneously acknowledging their families come from Latin America. Since Physical appearance is central to how they used the term, both Snapy and Martinez, and other Afro-Latinxs, use physical appearance as metric for deciding who can and cannot claim the term so that the term can continue to serve the function of acknowledging their appearance.

One sees the way physical appearance is used to police the claiming of Afro-Latinidad in the way Afro-Latinxs will respond when ask directly who can claim the term. M. Tony Peralta, artist and owner of the Peralta Project, in a panel discussion for Latino USA when asked about who can claim an Afro-Latino identity begins by saying “I think anybody who has the lineage of the places where the ships stopped, the slave ships. Its who has African blood in them” (Hinojosa 2017). When asked then if having any degree of African ancestry was all that was needed to claim the term, he qualifies his previous point by adding that physical appearance was important for claiming an Afro-Latino identity, “Me Personally, it’s what you see visually...To me where it is visible it is somebody who could claim that, because when it is visible that is kind of when you are discriminated against” (Hinojosa 2017). In the same discussion, Marjua Estevez, senior editor of Vibe.com, follow up by stating, “I think aesthetics play a huge part in how you move in the world, how you are allowed to move in the world, and how people digest you and how they receive you. Colorism is real. You can’t be a Becky<sup>14</sup>and call yourself Afro-Latina or Afro-whatever.” (Hinojosa 2017). Jamila Brown, Owner of HUE, who was another panelist later states that what is most important to calming Afro-Latinidad is having what she terms a “black experience”. Brown

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<sup>14</sup> “Becky”, in this instance, is probably a stand in for a White, White-Passing, or Light-skinned woman, probably with straight hair. Considering the interview came out in 2017, there is a chance that it is a reference to Beyoncé’s use of the phrase “Becky with the good hair” from her 2016 album *Lemonade*.

states, “What’s most important is that we, as Afro-Latinos, we do have Black experiences in our home countries and we do face the same barriers and discrimination and its really about that” (Hinojosa 2017).

Peralta, Estevez, and Brown each make the point that one must navigate the world as a “Black” person to have a right to claim Afro-Latinidad. Physical appearance is important to them in the sense that people who are racialized as “Black” have assumptions made about them, navigate the world in particular ways, and either can or have faced discrimination. Claiming Afro-Latinidad then brings to light the fact that Latinxs who are identified as Black experience discrimination that other Latinxs do not because of the unacknowledged color hierarchy in Latin America and in U.S. Latinx communities. For the three panelist, people who claim to be Afro-Latinx but are not identified by others as Black are diluting the term since one of the functions of the term is to acknowledge the forms of discrimination faced by those identified as Black. Someone who is not identified as Black cannot experience that particular form of discrimination.

An example that highlights the way one’s physical appearance is used to police one’s claim to Afro-Latinidad is the response made by Afro-Latinxs to the inclusion of Gina Rodriguez on a list of Afro-Latinxs to celebrate for Black History Month. In February of 2018, Mitú, a Millennial-Gen Z Latino digital media website, posted a list of “25 Inspiring Afro-Latinos to celebrate for Black History Month”. The list consisted of a mix of celebrities and artists of various generations. What caught the eye of some Afro-Latinxs, especially those who run The Afro Latin Diaspora Instagram page, was the inclusion of Actor Gina Rodriguez. Rodriguez, star of the sitcom *Jane the Virgin*, has stated in the past that her father is Afro-Latino, though she has never publicly stated that she herself identifies as Afro-Latina. Nonetheless, Mitú staff put her on the list stating: “That’s right. You might not have known this, but Gina Rodriguez is Afro-Puerto Rican. The TV comedy

sensation revealed her Afro-Latina roots in an Instagram post tied to her #MovementMondays. Her father is Afro-Latino” (Mitú 2018). What’s interesting about this article is that the Mitú staff are describing her as Afro-Latina simply because her dad is Afro-Latino and they are assuming anyone with African ancestry, regardless of physical appearance, can be classified as Afro-Latinx. The response by Afro-Latinxs to the article then while targeted at Rodriguez is also addressing others understanding of who can claim Afro-Latinidad.

The Afro Latin Diaspora, in response created a post addressing why they do not think Rodriguez should be identified as Afro-Latina. In a post on their page they write “Just because you are mixed with Black does not mean you are Black, nor will it mean you will walk this earth and have to deal with the same struggles as a Black person” and that Gina Rodriguez “has “pelo bueno”[good hair] she is very light, and her Latinidad will NEVER be questioned, her appearance screams “typical Latina”<sup>15</sup> [emphasis in original]. In this post, the founders of the page are making similar claims to what other Afro-Latinxs have said, stating that “being mixed with black”, or put another way simply having a degree of African ancestry, is not enough to claim Afro-Latinidad. Many people can claim to have African Ancestry, but not everyone will “walk this earth” as someone who is identified by others as Black. If they are not racialized as Black, then they will also not experience the same forms of discrimination those who are face in both the United States and Latin America.

In the second quote, there is a reference to Rodriguez’s hair. They state that since she has “good hair”, not kinky or curly hair, and is light skinned she fits within the “Latin look” and as a result her claim to Latinidad will never be questioned by others. By saying her Latinidad will never be questioned, they are pointing out that people will take her claiming to be Latina a face value

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<sup>15</sup> The Afro Latin Diaspora’s Instagram page accessed March 12, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Be3nYo7Bd7R/>.

because her physical appearance does not challenge the image of the prototypical Latina, a brown skinned or light brown skinned person with dark, long, and straight hair. Implicitly here is a reference to another reason why physical appearance is so important to one's ability to claim afro-Latinidad: being identified by others as Black has resulted in Afro-Latinxs having their claim to Latinidad questioned because they do not conform to the "Latin Look" that exists in media.

As mentioned earlier, Latinxs who were read as Black were almost never given roles as Latinxs because the potential ambiguity that could result from having them in those roles was a threat to marketing executives' claim that Latinxs comprised a new, distinct market. As the Latin Look permeated other areas of popular culture, Latinxs who were read as Black continued to be, and to some degree still are, excluded from "Latinx" roles. Having a physical appearance that is read as Black and claiming Afro-Latinidad works to challenge the fictitious "Latin Look".

For the founders of The Afro Latin Diaspora, putting Gina Rodriguez on the list erases that fact that Afro-Latinidad tries to center Latinxs with dark brown skin and kinky hair who have been excluded in the construction of Latinidad in the United States. Categorizing someone who fits within the established image of the "typical Latina" as an Afro-Latina simply because she holds some degree of African Ancestry works to decenter dark brown and dark-skinned Latinxs once again and erases the way Afro-Latinxs use Afro-Latinidad to challenge their historical and contemporary exclusion. Afro-Latinxs use physical appearance to police the boundaries of who can claim Afro-Latinidad for fear that brown and light brown skinned Latinxs will become centered once again within a term that was meant to do the opposite.

While limiting who can claim Afro-Latinidad to those whose physical appearance is identified by others as Black appears to create a stricter boundary around Afro-Latinidad, the question becomes where is the line drawn between someone who is identified as Black and

someone who is not? Also, who gets to decide where that line is drawn and how does place shape where that line is drawn? There appears to be a sense of obviousness the surrounds claim of who is and is not read as Black. As mentioned earlier, both Sanpy and Martinez see their Blackness as obvious. This is mostly likely due to both being dark skinned and as a result being seen and first identified as “Black” before anything else. At the same time, Peralta claims that being read as Black does not necessarily mean being dark skinned. When explaining what he meant by “What one sees visually” (quote from above), he says “...it’s not skin tone per se because there are people que son jabao that are super light skin...[when asked to clarify what jabao means] a jabao is a word we say in the Dominican Republic that is somebody who is very light skin but who has black features, they have a think nose...” (Hinojosa 2017). For Peralta, even super light skin people can look black along as they have “black features”, which is left semi-ambiguous with the only concrete example being a think nose. Therefore, the range of who is read as “black” is wide depending on who one is speaking to and the line of who is and is not read as black would depend on each person’s own understanding of what it means to “Look Black”.

This is even further complicated when considering a person’s understanding of who can be identified as Black is geographically specific. Take the case of Jabao, the term Peralta uses in his comment. The term is a word used in the Dominican Republic that describes a particular phenotypical appearance that Dominicans would recognize. However, that does not necessarily mean that people outside of the Dominican Republic would see a person with the same phenotypical appearance and classify them in the same way. The possibility exists that in a different country by virtue of being very light skinned the individual in question would not be considered “Black”. Therefore, even when a phenotypical metric is meant to police boundaries of who can claim Afro-Latinidad, it simultaneously creates an ambiguous boundary when it comes

to people who may or may not be read as Black depending on the geographic context and the person doing the identifying.

*Politics: Being Pro-black and fighting Anti-Blackness*

Another way Afro-Latinxs try to police the boundaries of Afro-Latinidad is by arguing that to claim Afro-Latinidad one need to commit to engage with Blackness. I define engaging with Blackness as making a social and political commitment to center Blackness in one's everyday life and to addressing anti-blackness at personal, familial, and public level.

A way Afro-Latinxs gauge someone's engagement with blackness is by seeing if the person in question chooses to identify as "Black". Identifying as "Black" here means choosing to align oneself with other members of the African Diaspora and in the context of the United States choosing to align with Black Americans. Janel Martinez at the beginning of one of the Remezcla videos says, "If you're using the term and feeling like you cannot interchange it with Black, this is not the term for you." (Remezcla 2018b). Zahira Kelly-Cabrera agrees stating; "The term has morphed into people using it who are 'I have 1/10th black, but I'm not Black, but I'm Afro-Latina' and that very conflicting. If you are going to say you're Afro-Latina that means that you are black" (Remezcla 2018a). Both Martinez and Kelly-Cabrera make the point that it is antithetical to claim that one is Afro-Latinx while also being uncomfortable claiming to be Black. Afro-Latinidad is supposed to represent a political statement that while one, or one's family, was born in Latin America one is also a member of the African Diaspora and faces similar forms of discrimination that other members of the diaspora also face. By Claiming Afro-Latinidad, one is claiming to be Black. To claim Afro-Latinidad and reject identifying as Black works to erase this aspect of Afro-Latinidad and does not shows commitment to engage with Blackness.

Another element of engaging with Blackness is centering Blackness and Black people is one's advocacy work. In the AfroLatinDiaspora post mentioned earlier, the admins also wrote that one of the reasons for why they did not think Gina Rodriguez should represent Afro-Latinidad was because "Gina isn't rocking hard and speaking up and fighting for black Latinos like we are and others are. If you are going to claim this Afro Latinidad then you better be speaking up and fighting for SPECIFICALLY black people<sup>16</sup>" [emphasis in original]. Similarly, writer Maria Rodriguez-Morales in a post related to another incident surrounding Gina Rodriguez, where Rodriguez had held a networking event for Latinas in the entertainment industry where only one Afro-Latina was present, poses the question "How does one claim Afro-Latinidad and then negate the responsibility to center blackness in its entirety" (Rodriguez-Morales 2017). Rodriguez-Morales (2017) follows this statement by providing examples of how one centers Blackness:

Are we practicing inclusivity at our brunches, networking events, panels, and workshops?  
Do we advocate for Black Women? Do we call out anti-blackness in homes, places of  
business, worship, ect.? Do we challenge all the harmful tropes associated with Black  
women or is the term Afro-Latina just a misnomer for accountability<sup>17</sup>?

The admins of the AfroLatinDiaspora and Rodriguez-Morales believe centering the concerns and fighting for Black Latinxs, and Black people more broadly, is essential to claiming Afro-Latinidad and they critique Rodriguez for not doing so in her work. The validity to her claiming of Afro-Latinidad was measured by her lack of centering Black people which, by extension, puts her engagement with Blackness in question.

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<sup>16</sup> The Afro Latin Diaspora's Instagram page accessed March 12, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Be3nYo7Bd7R/>.

<sup>17</sup> An interesting case that exemplifies this is the case of Veronica Vega from the TV show *Love and Hip Hop: Miami*. In the show, Vega, a light-brown skinned Latina, had used the n-word in her music and on the show. In her response to being asked about her use of the word, she states "I am Black" and made reference of her great grandmother being African. In this example, she is using her somewhat distant African ancestry to justify her use of the word.

Those who claim the term but who do not show a commitment to engaging with Blackness are seen as disingenuous and they are seen as the ones who are claiming the term because it has become trendy to do so, or because they can gain some social media benefits for claiming to be form an identity group that has been receiving heightened attention. The admins of the AfroLatinDiaspora write in the same post that “people need to understand that this narrative of following the “trend” has to STOP” [Emphasis in original] and that people should not be claiming Afro-Latinidad because “all of a sudden you see the benefits it’s bringing on social media.<sup>18</sup>” Rodriguez-Morales also writes that “Let us not use Afro-Latinidad as a mere buzzword to center ourselves in Black spaces and narratives. Let’s not merely talk about it but be about it” (Rodriguez-Morales 2017). Both fear that Afro-Latinidad will lose all specificity and lose all political meaning. In response they choose to highlight the importance of “being about it”, or engaging with Blackness, to try to prevent this form happening.

Part of engaging with Blackness includes calling out anti-Blackness at both the intimate and public level. Addressing anti-blackness at the intimate level usually involves calling out Anti-Blackness present in families. Sanpy views the persistence of anti-blackness in Latin American and Latinx families as “generational curses” that have taught parents and grandparents “To hate black people, or they have been taught to hate themselves” (Coronado 2018). He goes on to state that in Latin American Blackness is associated with “being poor, being dirty, and being a slave” and if that is the only history one is taught about African descendants then it is no wonder being Black is not seen as desirable (Coronado 2018).

One can see how this learned anti-blackness affects Afro-Latinx children in Peralta’s description of his childhood:

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<sup>18</sup> The Afro Latin Diaspora’s Instagram page accessed March 12, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Be3nYo7Bd7R/>.

Growing up, being *el morenito*<sup>19</sup> de la familia, wasn't seen as – you're not desirable, you know what I'm saying. Like, that's how I grew up, I grew up with low self-esteem and my low self-esteem come from our language, my mother telling me 'yo no se de donde salistes con el pelo than malo' [I don't know from who you got all of this bad hair] (Hinojosa 2017).

For Peralta, being the darkest one in his family meant consistently dealing with anti-black remarks that made him feel undesirable and develop low self-esteem. Often, this language came from his mother, who saw his hair as “bad hair” and, in a gesture showing how much their family has distanced themselves from seeing themselves as Black or having African ancestry, claims that she does not know how he came out with his hair texture. Peralta's mother's comment shows how engrained anti-blackness is in many families that any sign of African ancestry of descent, in this case Peralta's hair, is meant with complete rejection of the possibility of being a part of the family.

Claiming an Afro-Latinx identity, given this context, then is claiming the Blackness that many families would rather forget. It disrupts that passing down of the rejection of Blackness and instead embraces it, seeing it as something that is desirable and a part of their family history. A lot of Afro-Latinxs also feel duty to trying to educate other Afro-Latinxs, especially those of older generations who hold anti-black views, about the history of Afro-Latinxs and promote self-love<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Morenito would literally translate to “The little brown one”. The use of *moreno* is interesting because, at least from my experience, it is vague enough that it could apply to any brown skinned Latin American or Latinx but more often than not it is used as a politer way to refer to someone as black, in comparison to the word “*negro/a*”. In the context, the fact the Peralta states that he was “*el morenito*” or *the* little brown one seems to imply that the label is only being applied to him and is differentiating him from the rest of the family, which means it is likely making reference to his blackness.

<sup>20</sup> I would like to state that while many Latin American and Latinx families do perpetuate anti-blackness, there are some Afro-Latinx families that have always instilled Black pride in their children. Some of the Afro-Latinxs that I have come across in the project have made it clear that they understood themselves as Black first before coming to understand themselves as Latinxs because they developed a positive Black identity at a young age

Another way to engage with Blackness at the personal level is by learning about one's family history. In the LatinoUSA interview, the host Maria Hinojosa tells the panelists that she married an Afro-Taino<sup>21</sup> from the Dominican Republic, which makes her daughter a Mexican and Afro-Taino descendant. She states that her daughter “does not necessarily present, but she is clearly mixed, but not clearly afro” (LatinoUSA). She goes on to say that her daughter has started to wonder if she could claim the term Afro-Latina because she is beginning to learn about how and with whom she should identify, but she also does not want to take ownership of somlatinething she cannot. Her daughter presents in interesting case, because she has a recent relative, in this case her father, who is Afro-Latino, but she does not necessarily get identified as “Black” by others, or at least as Hinojosa puts it not “clearly afro”. She then poses the question to the panelists; can her daughter identify as Afro-Latina? This question is also implicitly asking can those who are read as ambiguous, but who have a recent Afro-Latinx ancestor, claim the term, or is it only reserved for those who are frequently identified as Black?

Peralta responds to the question saying that “In that situation...with her father being Afro-Taino, like if she wants to claim that she has every right to” (Hinojosa 2017). Estevez then states that “and you know, do the work...know your history” (Hinojosa 2017). When asked to expand on what she means by “do the work”, Estevez states “Know your history, read into it, be prepared to find out things you might not want to know” (Hinojosa 2017). Brown follows up from Estevez's comment by stating that, as a daughter of West Indian immigrants who worked on the Panama Canal, “in order for me to embrace the fullness of who I am, I took the time to understand where they came from and what that history was, and what that meant for them to come to panama” (Hinojosa 2017).

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<sup>21</sup> Tainos are the indigenous peoples of the islands in the Caribbean. An Afro-Taino would be a person who has both African and Taino ancestry

In regard to this scenario, it appears that Afro-Latinxs argue that those who have a more recent relative who is Afro-Latinx have a greater right to claim Afro-Latinidad. However, these individuals also need to “do the work” of learning about their Afro-Latino family history. Both Estevez and Brown argue that those who are read as ambiguous but want to claim Afro-Latinidad need to learn about their family’s history. Brown specifically states that for her to really understand herself, she needed to learn about what it meant for her parents, and other west Indians, to move to Panama and what it was like being in Panama. Estevez also cautions one should be prepared to “find out things you might not want to know”, which appears to be alluding to learning about racism and discrimination faced by Afro-Latinxs, particularly in one’s family, and the lasting effects of that marginalization. While not explicitly stated in Estevez’s and Brown’s comments, I would add that learning one’s history would probably also lead to one learning more about the experiences of Afro-Latinxs more broadly, such as the social and political status of Afro-Latinxs throughout Latin America.

By learning more about one’s family history, the person claiming Afro-Latinidad would have more knowledge on the particular struggles faced by Afro-Latinxs in their family. With this knowledge, the person can better understand the importance of the term and of advocating for Afro-Latinxs. Also, their knowledge on their Afro-Latinx heritage is much stronger and becomes grounded in specifics. Their claim to Afro-Latinidad is more likely to be validated because they did the work to understand where their Afro-Latinx heritage is coming from as oppose to simply claiming the term because they have an ancestor, whom they do not know, who was Afro-Latinx.

Finally, I would like to address an element of engaging with Blackness that many Afro-Latinxs believe is important for those seeking to claim Afro-Latintdad, as well as though who already identify as Afro-Latinx. Specifically, many argue that centering Blackness also entails

being cognizant of the power dynamics that exist within the community in terms of who is most likely to be centered and listened to and working to “pass the mic” to those most marginalized within the Afro-Latinx community. Karmenife X, a comedian, states “I think its very important to be proud of where you come from, but also realize if you look a certain way you are going to be treated a certain way and you need to give that mic over to the people who talk about it but are not listened to” (Remezcla 2018b). In the same interview Kelly-Cabrera, also argues “It’s [Afro-Latinidad] a little bit more than just heritage, its like are you giving space to the darker skinned black people?” (Remezcla 2018b)

Kelly-Cabrera and Karmenife X seem to argue that those who have at least some African ancestry can choose to claim a Black identity, however they need to be aware that they will probably be “treated a certain way” based on how they look if they are light-skinned or passing. They both seem to make the point out that lighter skinned Afro-Latinxs need to give space to darker-skinned Latinxs, who have been the most marginalized within Latinidad and who have been raising awareness of their issues for a long time but “are not being listened to”. Therefore, Afro-Latinxs expect that those who choose to identify as Afro-Latinx will not only center blackness in their politics, but also center dark-skinned Afro-Latinxs in particular since they have been made the most invisible within Latinidad. This is particularly expected from those who are lighter skinned, since their experiences will not be the same as those who are darker skinned and who have been advocating Black Latinxs for years.

#### *Name Change: Moving Away from “Afro-Latinx” and Using Other Terms*

While many Afro-Latinxs have tried to police the boundaries of Afro-Latinidad in order to preserve the meanings they associate with the term, others have argued that the meanings have changed so drastically that they prefer to use other terms as their primary identifier.

Kelly-Cabrera alludes to this changing of meanings in her comment mentioned previously, where she stated the term has “morphed” into people with” who are 1/10<sup>th</sup> Black”, or in other words have a distant relative who was Afro-Latinxs and that while the Claim Afro-Latinidad they do not claim Blackness. Therefore, part of the change that is occurring is that Blackness is being divorced from Afro-Latinidad, which creates the idea that one can be Afro-Latinx without being Black. Janel Martinez (2018), in an article for Remezcla, also brings up seeing this separation occurring in online spaces:

Online, where many Afro-Latinxs have created community, was one of the first places where the change was evident. (As a journalist, social media is a part of my daily diet, so I’m on several platforms throughout the day.) I remember stumbling upon a tweet where a self-identifying Afro-Latina referred to Black women as separate from herself. I was both confused and outraged. My sole purpose in identifying as Afro-Latina is to acknowledge my African descent alongside my Latin American roots. And at the core, for me, it’s saying I’m a Black woman, period. Sadly, that wouldn’t be the last time I’d witness or hear the separation of Black from the word.

As mentioned previously, as well as in Martinez’s quote, many Afro-Latinxs use the term to acknowledge their African ancestors that were involuntarily brought to Latin America and to identify as a Black person. Therefore, the separation being made between Blackness and Afro-Latinidad is seen as missing the point and a co-optation of the term.

Martinez is an Afro-Latina that has responded to this change by adopting new terms as her primary identifier. In the same article, she writes that after discussing with other Afro-Latinxs about the changing meanings of the term. She has come to the following conclusion:

...I now use the term negra<sup>22</sup>. I still use Afro-Latina, mainly for convenience purposes, but I've moved away from it over the past year or so. I've also chosen terms like Black Latina and Afrodescendant, which was recognized by community leaders, social activists and scholars in 2001 at the World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa. The latter, in particular, affirms transnational connections and acknowledges the cultural connection to the continent (Martinez 2018).

She has decided to primary identify as Negra. The choice of Negra is particular interesting considering the historical, and even contemporary, use of the term as a derogatory and harsh way to refer to someone as "black". By choosing to use the term, Martinez and other Afro-Latinxs are choosing to reclaim the term and use it to show that they are "first and foremost Black"<sup>23</sup>, both in the sense that they are identified as black by others and that they center blackness in their politics. The choice of also using Black Latina and afrodescendant are interesting in their own ways, with Black Latina centering Blackness within Latinidad, and Afrodesdandant being a broader term that encompasses all people of African descent and deliberately transnational. All three terms make Blackness an even more explicit part of how she identifies. These terms are also harder for someone who does not identify as Black to claim, preventing those who identify as Afro-Latino but not as Black from using them.

Many other Afro-Latinos have also stated that they prefer other terms as their primary identifiers. Major Nesby, an Afro-Dominican creative that Martinez quotes in her article, says that

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<sup>22</sup> "Negro" is Spanish for black. The use of Negro in Latin America dates back to the colonial period as it was the term the Spanish applied to the enslaved Africans. The term was one among the various terms used by the Spanish in their "Sistema de Casta" or "Caste system" that classified the children of various parings that existed in Spanish America. One can see the term "negro/a" applied in the various Casta paintings from the era, such as Luis de Mena's painting of the virgin of Guadalupe with Castas.

<sup>23</sup> Janel Martinez's Twitter, accessed March 13, 2019,

[https://twitter.com/janelmwrites/status/1027337361989017600?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetemb ed%7Ctwterm%5E1027337361989017600&ref\\_url=http%3A%2F%2Fremezcla.com%2Ffeatures%2Fculture%2Fnegra-vs-afro-latina%2F](https://twitter.com/janelmwrites/status/1027337361989017600?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetemb ed%7Ctwterm%5E1027337361989017600&ref_url=http%3A%2F%2Fremezcla.com%2Ffeatures%2Fculture%2Fnegra-vs-afro-latina%2F).

he also identifies as Black or Negro (Martinez 2018). Robert Chong, an editor at Remezcla, states in the Remezcla interview that he prefers to say, “Black or Black Latino” (Remezcla 2018a) and Rosa Clemente, Scholar and Activist, has also been identifying as “Black Boricua” for years now (Yemaya Pictures 2014).

The move to police the boundaries and make the lines between who is and is not Afro-Latinx more explicit is an attempt to reenter the original meanings and politics of the term by recentering who the term was meant to represent: Black Latinxs, especially dark skinned ones, who embrace and celebrate their African ancestry in the face of a long history of anti-blackness and African erasure in Latin America and who fight this anti-blackness in their communities while bringing attention to issues facing Black people in Latin America, the United States, and the world. The choice to use other terms does not see policing boundaries as the approach that will accomplish this work. For some a history of having their identity policed makes them question whether they should do the same. Instead, they would rather pick labels that centers their Blackness explicitly, so as to make clear to everyone that they identify as Black. In particular, the use of “Negro”, which based on tone and who is saying it can be interpreted as a pejorative, reclaims a word that can used to reinforce anti-blackness and instead chooses to celebrate Blackness and make it desirable.

### Concluding Remarks

The conversations that have emerged in response to the increasing visibility of Afro-Latinidad serves as a reminder of the instability of terms that become highly visible. The work that is currently being done by Afro-Latinx shows that getting one’s concerns addressed and voices centered is an ongoing process and the tactics used to achieve these goals will shift over time. While social media has aided in increasing the visibility of Afro-Latinidad and Afro-Latinx people, it has also been the arena where the dilution of Afro-Latinidad first occurred. At the same time.

Afro-Latinxs have used social media and other online spaces to make their concerns and critiques public. Therefore, social media and other online spaces play a complicated role when it comes to discussions about Afro-Latinidad in the United States. This raises questions about the way social media can be used to both support and work against marginalized communities and how this can occur simultaneously.

Areas of further study would be exploring the way Black Americans have responded to the increased visibility of Afro-Latinidad. Some Black Americans have been suspicious of Afro-Latinx claims to Blackness, believing that Afro-Latinxs choose to opt-in and opt-out of Blackness at their convenience. Further research could examine the history that undergirds Black Americans' suspicion toward Afro-Latinxs. Another line of research could further explore how Afro-Latinxs grapple with people who have African ancestry but “look ambiguous “or people who have are dark skinned and are often identified as Black but do not hold a pro black politic. How are their claims to Afro-Latinidad accepted and/or questioned? Finally, it might also be interesting to explore generational and regional differences between U.S. Afro-Latinxs. Most of the voices I highlight in my paper are those of younger Afro-Latinxs, those who are in their 20s and 30s, and many are from New York. It is worth seeing if Afro-Latinxs who live in different regions of the country, such as the southwest or Midwest, conceptualize the meanings they associated with Afro-Latinidad differently. It would also be interesting to see if such difference exists between generations as well.

I came to the project looking to see if I could call myself an Afro-Latino. When I started I expected to find a book, or video, or author, or article that would make the answer clear to me. Over time, what did become clear was that I had to decide for myself whether I claim it or not. After considering all that Afro-Latinxs have been saying about Afro-Latinidad, I have decided that for now I will identify as a Black Latino and Afro-Latino. I use Black Latino for similar reasons

to Martinez's choice to identify as "Negra". By using Black Latino, I am making clear that Latinxs who are identified and racialized by others as Black exist and that I commit myself to engage with Blackness. While I claim Afro-Latinidad, I know that there is always the chance that other Afro-Latinxs could contest my claims to Afro-Latinidad. Regardless, I choose to stand with Black Latinxs in both the United States and Latin America and that will remain a constant no matter how I choose to identify.

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