"It's a tug of war" : reflections and stories of Afrolatinx collegians and sense of belonging at a diverse public university

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“IT’S A TUG OF WAR”: REFLECTIONS AND STORIES OF AFROLATINX COLLEGIANS AND SENSE OF BELONGING AT A DIVERSE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

By

Alfredo Medina, Jr.

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigated the racialized experiences of AfroLatinx collegians at a diverse public university. Sixteen (16) self-identified AfroLatinx students participated in semi-structured interviews and a focus group to share their stories in negotiating their ethnoracial identity as it relates to sense of belonging. Drawing on Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit), the study examined the experiences of AfroLatinx students growing up in traditional Latinx homes and how their neighborhoods and social networks influenced their racialized identity formation. Rendón’s (1994) Theory of Validation and Tucker’s (1999) modified version of Tinto’s (1993) Theory of Student Integration shed light on AfroLatinx collegian experiences among their collegiate peers. Utilizing narrative research, a method of qualitative interviewing that emphasized participant's’ perspective, and counter storytelling, a story re-telling method that challenges deficit-thinking usually linked to minoritized students, participants shared their experiences as being Black and Latinx, simultaneously. Qualitative analysis revealed that AfroLatinx collegians had varied experiences growing up. Many reported being exposed to anti-Black and anti-AfroLatinidad messaging that contributed to identity confusion. A strong sense of belonging was attributed to student life diversity, yet findings suggest that collegians involved in programs and services that embraced and acknowledged their racialized identity were more likely to report being satisfied and motivated. Based on these stories, academic and student affairs practitioners can use this knowledge to address institutional challenges and pitfalls relative to transition, adjustment, and persistence affecting Latinx students.
Where do I begin? Let me preface by saying, this was one of the most challenging sections to write due to the overwhelming support I’ve received from all friends—including my social media friends—family, and work colleagues, who have been a part of my doctoral journey over the past five years. If I forgot to mention you personally, please accept my apology.

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

“On the other hand, my Latino friends see my race as a liability. ‘You’re not black, like the African Americans in the United States,’ one told me recently. It bothers me that to accept me, they want to distance me from being black, which carries negative connotations in the Americas.” (Pryce, 1999).

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2016), Latinxs1 are the largest ethnic group comprising 17 percent, or 53 million people, of the overall U.S. population. Latinxs come from more than 20 countries sharing a common language with the three largest ethnic identity groups being Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban (Davis & Engel, 2011). In 2008, Latinxs constituted 21.2 percent of the U.S. population younger than 18, and 24 percent of those are younger than the age of five. In 2014, 35 percent of Latinxs between the ages of 18 and 24 enrolled in a 2- or 4-year college, up from 22 percent in 1993 – a 13-percentage-point increase amounting to 2.3 million Latinx college students (Krogstad, 2016). Given this population’s exponential growth, enrollment numbers of Latinxs in postsecondary education increased from 1.3 million in 1999 to 3.6 million in 2016 (Gramlich, 2017). They are also expected to be catalysts for significant changes to the U.S. workforce over the next three decades (Society for Human Resource Management, 2016). Today, Latinxs are the largest population of students of color across higher education institutions (Fry, 2011). Despite improvements in the rates of college enrollment over the past few decades,

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1 Due to the high degree of heterogeneity associated with Latina/o and/or Hispanics, the term Latinx (Latinxs for plural) will be used throughout the dissertation to minimize confusion and be more gender-inclusive. The terms Latino, Latina and Hispanic will only be used when included as part of a citation.
college persistence, retention, and graduation rates continue to be problematic for underrepresented students, including students of color and students from low-income and/or first-generation families (Pyne & Means, 2013). Latinxs comprise the largest segment of foreign-born residents in the U.S. at 18.6 million, or 35 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016) who earn considerably less in wages, suffer higher rates of unemployment, fall below the poverty line, and have poorer educational attainment than the rest of the U.S. population (Suarez-Orozco & Paez, 2002). The college education gap between Latinxs and Whites is worsening with 11 percent of Latinxs possessing a bachelor's degree compared to 24 percent of Whites (Smith, 2018). Furthermore, studies suggest that students of color encounter less favorable college experiences as a result of environments that have narrow perceptions of racial and ethnic identities which contributes to lower levels of persistence compared to White students (Rodriguez, 2010).

To compound the problem associated with race and identity, Latinx college students are frequently treated as a ‘single separate group’ (Logan, 2003) by the U.S. Census Bureau, thus neglecting the richness of their unique cultural traditions and potential contributions to the university environment. Haywood (2017) asserts that despite their fast-growing presence in the U.S., and in higher education specifically, there is a tendency to treat Latinxs as a monolithic group, which masks the complexities of within-group differences.

Latinxs, specifically AfroLatinxs—Latinxs of African ancestry—do not fit easily into the prevailing system of racial categories in the United States, so understanding Latinx racialized identity presents special challenges and challenges the dominant racial order itself (Ferdman & Gallegos, 2001). The term racialized refers to “a view that divides people into mutually exclusive categories that are primarily based on phenotypes and the meaning ascribed to those features” (Ferdman & Gallegos, 2001, p. 60) which are then used to construct social groups and structure
their social relations (Torres et al., 1999). According to García-Louis & Cortes (2020), the “AfroLatinx nomenclature is organically comprised of individuals who uphold an ethnoracial identity of being both black and Latinx identities” (p. 4). Many AfroLatinxs embrace their African ancestry while practicing Latinx culture, norms, and values. Depending on phenotypes, some AfroLatinxs may be perceived as lesser than compared to White Latinxs. Phenotype is best described as observable physical features such as skin pigmentation and hair texture.

Historically, African ancestry is perceived as the lowest by many Latinxs in Latin America as in the United States (Cruz-Janzen, 2002). The value of light skin color has been well-documented, even among Latinxs themselves (Uhlmann et al., 2002). For example, lighter skin Latinxs are afforded better opportunities—academically, economically, and socially—and privileges that closely align with being White. Latinxs with darker skin and more African and indigenous features are more likely to live in segregated communities, earn less money, attain less education, have lower occupational prestige, and marry lower status partners (Espino & Franz, 2002; Gómez, 2000). As Jacobson (1998) asserted, “race is not just a conception; it is also a perception. The problem is not merely how races are comprehended, but how they’re seen” (p. 9). To ensure that Latinx and Black identity is viewed as mutually inclusive, the AfroLatinx label was joined with no hyphenation “to ensure it is understood and accepted as a holistic term, not a hyphenated identity” (García-Louis & Cortes, 2020, p. 3).

There is a variety of literature related to AfroLatinxs in the United States, including research on colorism (Adames, Chavez-Dueñas, & Organista, 2016; Burton, Bonilla-Silva, Ray, Buckelew, & Freeman, 2010; Haywood, 2017; Hunter, 2016; Quiros & Dawson, 2013), racial stratification (Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Taylor, Lopez, Martinez, & Velasco, 2012); racial and ethnic identity (Denton & Massey, 1989; Sanchez, 2013; Torres-Saillant, 2003); and skin color and
phenotype (Adames, Chavez-Dueñas, & Organista, 2016; Fergus, 2009; Gómez, 2000; López, 2008; Montalvo & Codina, 2001; Telzer & Vazquez Garcia, 2009). However, there is limited literature about this Latinx subgroup in higher education literature. It was critical to examine the racialized experiences of AfroLatinx collegians and how those experiences impact their intentions to persist given increased college enrollment and low graduation rates.

To date, there have only been three studies that focused on Latinx’s skin color and education. Haywood (2017) examined the racialized experiences of six AfroLatinx undergraduates at historically White Institutions relative to intragroup marginalization due to colorism. Haywood posits that “as a result of an internalized devaluation of Blackness and a belief that upholding Whiteness will lead to upward social mobility, participants were exposed to a barrage of messages that upheld the master narrative of White beauty norms and standards” (p. 774). Fergus (2009) examined the social identification, racial constructs, and social interaction of seventeen Mexican and Puerto-Rican students at a predominantly African American high school. Fergus’s findings suggest that skin color was critical in establishing racial/ethnic boundaries (i.e., who is in and who is out) and skin color had different meanings. (i.e., White-looking, Hispanic/Mexican looking). Fergus (2009) posits that “the nuances that emerged in the negotiation of self-identity and external identification as it was experienced in the school context suggest that skin color, as a race/ethnicity marker, moderates how these students experience the schooling process” (p 345). A recent qualitative study conducted by García-Louis & Cortes (2020) focused on the relationship of Blackness in the context of Latinidad involving AfroLatinx collegians at a small, urban public college. The findings reported varying degrees of rejection, alienation, and microaggressions that AfroLatinx students experienced due to their Blackness by family relatives and college peers. Scholars also suggest that there are limited Black identity development models that recognize the

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This dissertation examined the experiences of AfroLatinx college students growing up in traditional Latinx homes and how they negotiated their racialized identity to persist at a diverse public university in the Northeast. Using semi-structured interviews and a focus group, AfroLatinx undergraduate students spoke candidly about their academic and social experiences and peer relationships—specifically peers of Black, Latinx, and Caribbean heritage—in negotiating their ethnoracial identity to find their sense of belonging. Moreover, this study examined how intragroup marginalization and validation impacted students’ intentions to persist.

The literature has noted that AfroLatinxs share similar oppressive and racist experiences as their Black American counterparts in the United States. According to Araújo and Borrell (2006), “many Latina/os may not see themselves as victims of racial discrimination because they do not classify themselves as Black” (p. 251) despite being phenotypically Black (Adames et al., 2016). Persons with even a small fraction of Black ancestry have traditionally been regarded as Black (Gordon, 1949). This is the result of the Rule of Hypodescent, or the “one-drop” rule, in which a person who had at least a drop of African blood was defined as Black in the United States. The Rule of Hypodescent dates to a 1662 Virginia law regarding the treatment of mixed-race individuals that was upheld until 1985. This institutional practice was designed to assign mixed-race people to the status of the subordinate group (Hickman, 1997). According to James Sidanius, professor of psychology of African and African American Studies at Harvard University, hypodescent against Blacks remains a relatively powerful force within American society in which
the highest status in America’s racial hierarchy is assigned to Whites, followed by Asians, with Latinxs and Blacks at the bottom (Bradt, 2000).

Due to their dual identities as both Black and Latinx, AfroLatinxs are further alienated by White and non-White peers, especially by Latinxs, for not conforming to traditional ethnic norms and cultural expectations. Scholars suggest that when Latinxs “display behaviors or attitudes that differ from the group’s norms, they may be perceived as a threat to the cultural group’s distinctiveness” (Llamas & Ramos-Sanchez, 2013, p. 159). Similarly, AfroLatinxs were treated differently based on their skin color (colorism), phenotype, and not being “Latinx enough” which contributed to intragroup marginalization. Colorism is defined as the allocation of privilege and disadvantage according to the lightness or darkness of one’s skin (Burke, 2008). Intragroup marginalization is defined as “the perceived rejection of students by persons of their heritage culture group in response to the students’ acculturation efforts in regard to the college culture” (Castillo, 2009, p. 247).

Although there have been some prior studies on the topic of intragroup marginalization among Latinx college students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), there is a dearth of literature that focuses specifically on the experiences of AfroLatinx college students in general. Also, there is a paucity of literature regarding the collegiate experiences of AfroLatinxs relative to their sense of belonging, retention, and persistence in higher education. Haywood (2017) asserts that AfroLatinxs are largely understudied in higher education research and discourse, especially as it relates to intragroup relations. Furthermore, intragroup marginalization experienced by AfroLatinxs may not be completely linked to skin color and phenotype. Recent studies also suggest that AfroLatinxs have experienced microaggressions by other Latinx peers for not being able to speak Spanish or for not engaging in Latinx traditions and norms (García-Louis & Cortes,
According to Castillo (2009), some low acculturated Latinx parents may impose a social sanction of intragroup marginalization on their child such as calling him or her “brown on the outside” (referring to race or skin color) and “White on the inside” (referring to adopting White American values and behaviors).

To date, there have been limited studies published on understanding persistence among Latinx college students. From 2000 to 2014, only two studies were published specifically on the persistence of Latinx college students and Latinx culture (Gonzalez & Morrison, 2016). The first study by Torres (2006) found that Latinx culture influenced students’ intentions to persist. Torres suggested that “making other Latinos feel at home at the college, and Latino cultural activities that make Latinos feel at home at the college” (p. 312) had the greatest impact on students’ intent to persist. In a second study by Torres and Hernandez (2009), the authors found that Latinx students experienced increased persistence due to “family responsibility, encouragement from family, friends, faculty, and advisors and cultural affinity or the awareness of Latino faculty help, student help, or support of Latino cultural activities (p. 149). Gonzalez and Morrison (2016) suggest that “use of specific Latino cultural variables such as Family Responsibility, Encouragement, and Cultural Affinity demonstrate the importance of incorporating known Latino cultural variables when it comes to persistence research” (p. 99). However, these empirical studies focused exclusively on the persistence of Mexican American and Chicana/o college students. As it relates to Latinx and persistence, ethnicity is a key identifier used in most published studies since many Latinxs tend not to identify by the racial categories (i.e., Black, White, Asian) used by the U.S. Census Bureau. In a recent study on Latinx identity and values, 51% of Latinxs identified as “some other race” or volunteered “Hispanic/Latino” (Taylor et al., 2012). To reduce the number of Latinxs that selected “some other race,” the 2010 U.S. Census added the following text
immediately before the questions regarding Latinx origin and race: “For this census, Hispanic origins are not races” (Humes et al., 2011, p. 5).

As a social construct, race is often understudied within the context of Latinx heritage and higher education. A key problem is that race in America is often viewed as Black and White. The U.S. has operated along biracial (White, Non-White) lines for centuries (Bonilla-Silva, 2002). These "either/or" notions, typically Black/White or White/not White, have not easily incorporated or allowed for the multicolored reality of Latinxs (Ferdman & Gallegos, 2001). Due to this racial dichotomy, some Latinxs self-identify as White when asked to select a race. According to Taylor and colleagues (2012), many Latinxs don’t see themselves fitting into the standard racial categories used by the U.S. Census Bureau, but when asked to choose, 36 percent identified their race as White, and only 3 percent indicated their race as Black. This discrepancy may be associated with longstanding racist ideology in which White is viewed favorably and Black is viewed negatively. For many AfroLatinx with Caribbean heritage, particularly Dominican and Puerto Ricans, Malinda (2011) asserts that both Latinx groups share similar histories and ideology that shaped their racial perspectives about skin color and European and Afrocentric features in that “there exists in the Dominican Republic an elaborate anti-Haitian ideology that designates only Haitians as black and of African descent. This antihaitianismo, as it is known, contrasts the identity of black, African Haitians with the presumed white, Hispanic identity of Dominicans” (p. 28).

As it relates to social stratification, Logan (2003) reported that White Hispanics tend to have higher incomes and lower rates of unemployment and poverty compared to Black Hispanics who have lower median incomes ($34,300), higher unemployment rates (11%), and higher rates of poverty (29.7%). In an earlier census count, Dominicans and Puerto Ricans were most likely to identify as Black at 8.2 percent and 5.8 percent, respectively. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).
Therefore, this study was conducted at a public university in the Northeast due to the high concentration of AfroLatinx collegians in that region. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2008), Dominicans and Puerto Ricans comprised the majority of Latinx collegians in the Northeast with 16 percent of Dominicans and 11 percent of Puerto Ricans obtaining at least a bachelor’s degree. As it pertains to foreign-born Latinx, existing literature also suggests a history of White acceptance supported by anti-Blackness sentiments, which may contribute to heightened levels of colorism and intragroup marginalization experienced by AfroLatinxs (Haywood, 2017).

Finally, this study illuminated the Latinidad and AfroLatinidad of AfroLatinx collegians when examining both racial and ethnic experiences. The term Latinidad, or in its plural form Latinidades, was used to better understand the shared experiences of subordination, resistance, and agency of the various national groups of Latin American descent that comprise the U.S. Latinx sector (Aparicio, 2009). Latinidad is place-specific and closely linked to a Latinx’s ethnic identity. The concept of Latinidades allowed me to “tease out the power differentials and the historical, social, and cultural dilemmas” as it relates to the “interactions between and among peoples of various Latin American national identities” (Aparicio, 2009, p. 625). Because Latinxs are a heterogeneous population comprised of individuals from more than twenty Latin American and Caribbean countries, many take pride in their town and cities that they were born and raised. For example, my Latinidad is rooted in Dominicanidad. My identity as an AfroLatinx is shaped by my Dominican immigrant parents while growing up in Washington Heights, a New York City community comprised primarily of first- and second-generation Dominicans. My Dominicanidad encompasses how I speak (dialect and slang), what I eat (mangu, sancocho), and listen to (merengue, bachata). All of these cultural elements shape my Dominican identity. A Puerto Rican from New York City may share a similar cultural experience as a Dominican, but their way of life
is rooted in their *Puerto-Ricanidad* which focuses on the communities that influence and shape their cultural understanding of being a Nuyorican.

Conceptually, AfroLatinidades is a combination of Latinidad and Blackness. For this study, Laó-Montes (2005) definition—tailored by García-Louis & Cortes (2020)—was used in describing AfroLatinidad as a “domain of difference” that encompasses “a world-historical field of identification, culture, and politics” which recognizes the “subalternized histories of Afrodiasporic subjects within and beyond the border[s] of [Latinidad]” and other geographical and ideological borders that attempt to delimit rigid singular notions of AfroLatinidad (Laó-Montes, 2005, pp. 118–119). AfroLatinxs take pride in celebrating cultural affiliation which features a transnational and intersectional appreciation of their country of origin, U.S. home, and African ancestry. Furthermore, it is important not to perceive racial and ethnic complexity as “one or the other.” Race and ethnicity are not mutually exclusive identifying constructs for AfroLatinxs.

**THEORETICAL BASIS FOR THE STUDY**

To better understand the experiences of AfroLatinx college students, this study was guided by frameworks that focus on the race and culture of historically oppressed groups.

*Critical Race Theory and Latino Critical Theory*

Based on past studies, Latinx studies scholars utilized Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Haywood, 2017; Solórzano, 1997; Yosso, Smith, Ceja & Solórzano, 2009) and/or Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit) (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Geertz Gonzalez and Morrison, 2016; Pyne and Means, 2013; Solórzano and Yosso, 2001) to guide their research. CRT is a framework that aims to identify, analyze, and alter oppressive facets of education that sustain the status quo in all educational contexts (Matsuda et al., 1993) and facilitate the discourse on race, racism, and power (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). LatCrit, rooted in CRT, seeks to bring the voices...
of Latinos to the forefront (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). As a theoretical framework, LatCrit focuses on debunking standard definitions of race/ethnicity and emphasizing the importance of cultural knowledge (Geertz and Gonzalez, 2016) while disrupting normative discussions about race that only perceive it in terms of the Black-White binary (Espinoza & Harris, 2002).

Both frameworks analyzed patterns of racial exclusion and other forms of discrimination against college students (Villalpando, 2014) and support the complexities that AfroLatinxs use to navigate and negotiate their lived experiences in two worlds: race and ethnicity. From a race perspective, assumptions are made based on skin color and phenotype. This may create a misconception that AfroLatinxs’ experiences are analogous to Black Americans in the United States, thus negating their ethnic identity. From an ethnic perspective, assumptions are made based on language and cultural traditions. As a result, this assumption may support that AfroLatinxs’ experiences do not associate and/or identify with a race, thus negating their Black identity. CRT and LatCrit provide the necessary lenses to address nuances relative to race and ethnic identity that is often overlooked by theoretical frameworks used primarily on traditional White college students.

**Intersectionality.** AfroLatinxs contend with more than just their racialized identity to navigate their surroundings. As it relates to this study, many collegians were challenged by several axes of social division (i.e., socioeconomic class, religion, gender, and sexuality, and dis/ability) that contributed to shaping their overall identity. Intersectionality is a theory of identity that values the richness of multiple identities that makes each individual unique (Collins & Bilge, 2016) and a way for “understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences…that self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor, be it race or gender or class, but by many axis that work together and influence each other” (p. 2).
As a theoretical framework, intersectionality has evolved within educational research since it was first coined and introduced by Crenshaw (1989) in her paper entitled, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” in which she centered Black women “to contrast the multidimensionality of Black women's experience with the single-axis analysis that distorts these experiences” and “reveal how Black women are theoretically erased” (p. 139). Intersectionality is a central tenet of both CRT and LatCrit.

For my study, I utilized intersectionality as an analytical tool to examine and illuminate the challenges and limitations associated with Latinidades. Scholars suggest that Latinidades as a focal lens relative to Latinx identity can involuntarily—in many cases, voluntarily—distort, negate and erase AfroLatindades. As an analytical lens—integrated within the CRT and LatCrit frames—intersectionality was instrumental in helping me better understand the interactions of race, ethnicity, gender, and class of AfroLatinx collegians as a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

**Tucker’s (1999) Modified Version of Tinto’s Student Integration Model**

To examine student persistence among AfroLatinx college students, two frameworks were used to guide my study. First, Tinto’s (1993) Student Integration Model guided my research question on persistence. Tinto’s (1993) theory suggests that persistence increases when students are fully integrated into the college social and academic environments. Tinto’s model has consistently predicted academic persistence (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997). However, it has been highly criticized by scholars (Guiffrida, 2006; Tanaka, 2002; Tierney, 1992;) because it “assumes that minority students must modify or abandon their cultural backgrounds to ‘fully’ integrate into academic culture and eventually persists to graduation which denotes that minority
students cannot retain their cultural identities, knowledge, and function within a new academic identity” (Rendón et al., 2000, p. 129). While there are some limitations in Tinto’s model of student persistence, it is still one of the dominant conceptual models that guide the design of retention programs in higher education (Hu and Ma, 2010). Therefore, a modified version of Tinto’s traditional framework was used to better understand AfroLatinx collegian experiences relative to transitioning and adjusting to college life.

Sense of belonging, or group attachment, is especially important for traditionally marginalized groups because it serves to unify and rally members in the face of various threats and provides a shared sense of community (López, 2008). Hausmann and colleagues (2007) posit that there is a conceptual justification for examining a sense of belonging in studies of student persistence. Hurtado and Carter (1997) suggest that studying a sense of belonging allows researchers to assess which forms of social interaction (academic and social) further enhance students’ affiliation and identity with their colleges. In a quantitative study on the sense of belonging and college students’ intentions to persist, Hausmann et al. (2007) found that students who reported a greater sense of belonging at any point also reported stronger intentions to persist at the beginning of each academic year. Since sense of belonging is associated with persistence, this study will be guided by Tucker’s (1999) modified version of Tinto’s (1993) Student Integration Theory, with a focus on Sense of Community. Students who possess a greater sense of belonging have an easier time making the transition into their new college environment (Tucker, 1999). Furthermore, Tinto suggests that students who perceive themselves as belonging to a specific group are more likely to persist because it leads not only to enhanced motivation but also to a willingness to become involved with others in ways that further promote persistence. Since
AfroLatinx students juggle multiple identities, a sense of belonging plays an integral role in their intent to persist.

**Rendón’s (1994) Validation Theory**

In the United States, colleges and universities were created as institutions of higher learning for individuals from well to do families with the financial means to afford a world-class educational experience that translated into upward mobility. Historically, these institutions have been predominantly White with a Euro-centered focus on teaching and learning that excluded the contributions of non-White and minoritized groups (Rendón, 1994). Scholars suggest that students who “fit” or are welcomed and affirmed by the institution’s culture are more likely to be satisfied and persist (Astin, 1993; Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Kuh, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tierney, 1992; Tinto, 1993).

Rendón (1994) introduced the Theory of Validation as a theoretical framework to capture and uphold the cultural experiences of nontraditional students and their contributions to the university environment. According to Rendón Linares and Muñoz (2011), “validation refers to the intentional, proactive affirmation of students by in- and out-of-class agents (i.e., faculty, student, and academic affairs staff, family members, peers)” (p. 12). As a theoretical lens, it has been used widely by scholars to guide their research in understanding the experiences of low-income, first-generation college students, specifically Latinx collegians (Barnett, 2011; Gupton, Castelo Rodriguez, Martinez, & Quintanar, 2007; Holmes, Ebbers, Robinson, & Mugenda, 2007; Lundberg, Schreiner; Pérez & Ceja, 2010; Rendón, 2002). Based on the existing literature regarding Latinx college students and intragroup marginalization and sense of belonging, this theoretical lens was critical in illuminating the in/validating experiences reported by AfroLatinx
participants in finding communities, spaces, and counter spaces that acknowledged valued and celebrated and their racialized identity as both Black and Latinx.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Socialization is key in establishing relationships with faculty, staff, and students. Moreover, research has demonstrated social support to be an important determinant of academic adjustment and success for Latinx college students (Lopez & García-Vázques, 2002). Marginalization and in/validation hindered AfroLatinx from establishing healthy support systems, including relationships with Black, the Caribbean, and other Latinx collegians. In a recent study on the role of peer support on intragroup marginalization, Latinx students who experienced marginalization by Latinx peers experienced more acculturative stress and were less able to adjust to college compared with those who did not experience marginalization (Llamas & Ramos-Sánchez, 2013). In the absence of a positive socialization experience, both in and outside the classroom, AfroLatinx found it difficult to perform interact with others, engage in activities, and take leadership roles on campus. Colorism contributed to intragroup marginalization which negatively affected AfroLatinx collegians’ self-esteem for not conforming to Latinx norms and traditions. Some participants experienced alienation and stress relative to their level of Latinidad as validated by other Latinx peers. In a study on ethnicity-related stressors among Latinx collegians, Ojeda et al. (2012) posit that students’ perception of pressure from their group to conform to the norms of Latinx culture decreased their life satisfaction and “as students’ fear of alienation from their group for not being ‘Latino enough’ increased, their level of well-being may have diminished” (p. 22). Also, Hernandez (2003) asserts that AfroLatinx identity is a contested terrain in which they are visually viewed as not ‘authentic’ Latinxs.
The goal of this study was to better understand how AfroLatinx collegians established and managed relationships due to their racialized identities and how intragroup marginalization, microaggressions, and validation experiences impacted their intent to persist. The information gathered from their stories will help university leaders, faculty, and practitioners in addressing Latinx monolithic policies, practices, and programs that contribute to the ongoing alienation and erasure of AfroLatinx collegians on their campuses. My study also attended to the various gaps and omissions on the scant literature in the area of student retention and persistence relative to intragroup marginalization and colorism experienced by AfroLatinx collegians. Two research questions guided my study:

1. How do AfroLatinx collegians describe their academic and social experiences at a diverse public university in the Northeast?
2. How do AfroLatinx collegians negotiate their racial and ethnic identities at a diverse public university in the Northeast?
   a. How does intragroup marginalization affect peer relations, especially among Black, Caribbean, and other Latinx peers?
   b. What effects, if any, does intragroup marginalization have on AfroLatinx collegians’ intentions to persist?

This dissertation consists of five chapters. Chapter One provides the significance problem, purpose of the study, a brief overview of the main theoretical frameworks and conceptual definitions, and the research questions that guided my study.

Chapter Two provides a historical background of Latinxs, in particular AfroLatinxs, in the United States relative to their history and ideology associated with intragroup marginalization and colorism and its impact on self-identification. This chapter includes a literature review on Latinx
racialized and ethnic identity; the role of familial influence on identity development; and college access and persistence of Latinxs and AfroLatinxs. It also provides an overview of the three theoretical lenses and a conceptual definition that guided the study: CRT and LatCrit Theory; Tucker’s (1999) modified version of Tinto’s (1993) Student Integration Model; conceptual definition of Intragroup Marginalization; and Rendón’s (1994) Theory of Validation.

Chapter Three provides background information on the methodology for this study. This chapter includes information on the research paradigm and strategy of inquiry selected, participants, educational setting for the study, research design, procedures, data collection and analysis, researcher positionality, trustworthiness, and limitations.

Chapter Four includes my findings using narrative inquiry and counter-storytelling as methodological approaches for honoring and retelling the stories of AfroLatinx participants. The findings identified three main themes: (1) Family, Education, and Community on AfroLatinx Identity Formation; (2) “It’s a Tug of War”: Validation of Latinx and AfroLatinx Identity; and (3) Social Integration Experiences of AfroLatinx Collegians.

Chapter Five provides a discussion of the findings including implications associated with each of the three themes. The final section consists of recommendations for future research direction and my concluding thoughts.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter is divided into three major sections. The first section provides background information on Latinxs in the United States with an emphasis on race, ethnicity, and culture and the role of family influence in shaping Latinx identity. Literature from empirical studies was used to illustrate the acculturation process of Latinx identity development.

The second section provided an overview of Latinxs in higher education with a focus on the racialized identities of AfroLatinxs relative to intragroup marginalization and mestizaje ideology. This section also provided context on Latinx perspectives regarding skin color and phenotype.

The third part of this chapter reviewed the theoretical frameworks that guided this study. This includes the combination of CRT and LatCrit Theory; Rendón’s (1994) Validation Theory; conceptual definition of Intragroup Marginalization; and Tucker’s (1999) modified version of Tinto’s Student (1993) Integration Model.

PART I
LATINXS IN THE UNITED STATES

The United States is more racially and ethnically diverse today than at any other time in its history, and the near future promises a continuation of this trend (Swail, Cabrera, & Lee, 2004). Latinxs in the United States has experienced the largest population growth over ten years than any other ethnic group. The nation's Latinx population, which was 35.3 million in 2000, grew 43 percent over the decade and accounted for most of the nation's growth—56 percent—from 2000 to 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). According to a U.S. Census report (2011), the largest subgroup of Latinxs in the U.S. is of Mexican heritage (63%) followed by individuals from Puerto
Rico (9.2%), Cuba (3.5%), and the Dominican Republic (2.8%). Although immigration has played a significant role in the population growth over the past 50 years, demographic experts believe that future increases in the Latinx population will be driven primarily by high rates of second- and third-generation citizens (Pew Hispanic Center, 2005). As of 2015, the Latinx population is at 57 million despite a drop-off in immigration from Latin America due to current U.S. government policies and a declining birth rate among Hispanic women (Krogstad, 2016). Nonetheless, Latinxs are projected to reach over 100 million by 2050 and comprise 24 percent of the population by 2065 (Cohn, 2015). However, these estimates need context due to the heterogeneity of Latinxs. Since 2000, the Census Bureau treats race and Hispanic origin as distinct concepts, although often users of census data and the Bureau itself combine them to compare information about non-Hispanic blacks and Hispanics (Logan, 2003).

To understand how race and ethnicity apply to Latinxs, particularly AfroLatinxs, it is important to describe the terms race and ethnicity as to how they are understood and operationalized in the United States. The use and application of “race” do not apply to Latinx born and raised outside of the United States. Skin color, phenotype, and social status in many Latin American countries, particularly in the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, plays an integral role in shaping Latinx identity. Phenotype and social status rather than biological descent define a person’s racial identity, especially in Spanish-speaking countries (Duany, 1998).

**Race and Ethnicity**

While many definitions of race exist, most scholars agree that race is a socially constructed category (Haney-López, 2006; Omi & Winant, 1994; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). Bonilla-Silva and Ray (2009) assert that race involves the assumption that individuals can be divided into groups based on phenotype or genotype and that those groups have meaningful differences. The social
structure of American society has been racialized, meaning that the United States is a society “in which economic, political, social, and ideological levels are partially structured by the placement of actors in racial categories or races” (Bonilla-Silva, 1997, p. 469). However, many Latinxs in the United States are referred to by a pan-ethnic label (e.g. Latino/a, Hispanic) or ancestral country of heritage. Panethnic refers to a person’s willingness to cross ethnic boundaries and stay within racial boundaries (Kao & Joyner, 2006). Treitler (2013) stated that most persons from places that touch the Caribbean Sea who speak Spanish are named according to the nation of geography—such as Dominican, Puerto Rican, or Cuban. Given the heterogeneity of Latinxs, it has been a challenge for the U.S. government to accurately measure this population’s growth, and more importantly, understand how their identity is tied to race and ethnicity. Treitler (2013) also argues that ethnicity and race are social constructs that “are not wholly distinct, but neither are they interchangeable” (p. 12). As it relates to this study, we must understand the role of race and ethnicity among Latinxs and how the U.S. Census Bureau defines these concepts to count, and as a result, misconstrues Latinx identity.

**Who are Latinxs/Hispanics?**

The racial thinking in the United States—which involves rigid categories and views Latinxs as distinct from Whites—has led to an inability to distinguish between Latinxs of varying national origins (Ferdman & Gallegos, 2001). Many Latinxs contend that the current census was structured with full understanding that most Latinx will not willingly self-classify along racial lines (Cruz-Janzen, 2002). Since 1970, the U.S. Census has asked all Americans to identify their race and, separately, whether they are Hispanic (Logan, 2003). However, the United States uses a different definition of race for census counting purposes. The U.S. Census Bureau (2017) defines race as a person’s self-identification with one or more social groups. An individual may select
from the following racial categories: White, Black or African American, Asian, American Indian and Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, or “some other race.” Although the U.S. Census Bureau defines race within the context of social groups, Cruz-Janzen (1997) states that racial categories “in fact are based on physiognomy, carrying immense repercussions for the persons receiving the label, especially in light of the broad ignorance that exists regarding each label and/or category” (p. 49).

Daniel (2002) defines ethnicity as a subset of people whose members share common national, ancestral, cultural, immigration, or religious characteristics that distinguish them from other groups. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2017), ethnicity determines whether a person is of Hispanic origin or not and further elaborate that “for this reason, ethnicity is broken out in two categories: (1) Hispanic or Latino and (2) Not Hispanic or Latino. Hispanics may report as any race” (p. 2). Ethnicity, in this case, is used interchangeably as a pan-ethnic term to single out individuals from Spanish-speaking countries of origin. Davis (1998) asserts that race, ethnicity, and national origin remain uniquely powerful in the United States—so powerful that these terms have become interchangeable. By U.S. Census Bureau standards, ethnicity does not apply to any other racial category mentioned above which lends further confusion to understanding the identity of Latinxs. In the United States, the “idea of ethnicity has perhaps always been tainted with notions of hierarchy” (Treitler, 2013, p. 20). Therefore, an individual living in the United States of Spanish origin is either Latinx/Hispanic or not.

As a result of Cuban newcomers following the 1959 Cuban Revolution and the historical designation of Mexican Americans as “White” for census purposes (Rumbaut, 2009), the term ‘Hispanic’ was introduced by the U.S. government as a catchall identifier for persons from Spanish-speaking countries. As a hybrid category, “the classification ‘Hispanic’ remains as pliable
as the very texture of race has proven to be” in that it “problematizes certain prevailing assumptions about racial definition and formation, serving not so much as a third race, a category of mixed race—black and white melding into brown—as an evidencing that race is politically fabricated and contested, that the very conception is elastic and transformable” (Goldberg, 1997, pp. 66–66).

In 1976, at the urging of the U.S. Census Bureau, Congress passed Public Law 94-311. This legislative bill was not only intended to reflect a more accurate count of Latinxs in the United States but to include language that recognizes Latinxs contributions as citizens and provisions for equal rights (Rumbaut, 2009).

Even with the passage of Public Law 94-311, U.S. census data collection and reporting of Latinxs continues to be problematic in the United States. According to Cruz-Janzen (2002), Latinxs in the U.S. are commonly viewed as “an ethnic group of persons stemming from Latin America or Spain and its former dominions, ignoring the vast cultural, economic, language, national, political, and racial diversity that exists between Latinxs” (p. 50). In terms of U.S. racial stratification, Latinxs are not viewed as a distinct race. Public Law 94-311 is “the only law in the country’s history that mandates the collection, analysis, and publication of data for a specific ethnic group” (Rumbaut, 2009, P. 8). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2003), instructions to respondents clearly states that “Hispanics may be of any race.”

Historically, Latinxs have self-identified by ethnicity and/or country of origin more so than by race as required by the U.S. Census Bureau. Taylor et al. (2012) reported that in a national bilingual survey conducted by the Pew Hispanic Center, most respondents preferred their family’s country of origin (e.g., Mexican, Cuban, or Dominican) over panethnic terms such as Hispanic and Latinx. Self-identification preference by ethnicity (e.g., Cuban, Puerto Rican, Mexican, Dominican) is closely linked to strong cultural heritage and pride.
Culture

Cultural values are characterized as being centered on family values (Castillo & Cano, 2007). Scholars have noted the importance of examining the role of culture on the educational experiences and well-being of Latinx college students (Gloria, Castellanos, & Orozco, 2005). Culture is defined as the patterns of learned and shared behavior and beliefs of a particular social, ethnic, or age group (Lumen Learning, 2018). According to Rosaldo (1993), culture refers broadly to the forms through which people make sense of their lives. However, Latinxs ability to practice cultural values within an educational context is questionable, particularly given the consistent and demoralizing process of “switching” or “juggling” values based on context (Sanchez, 2006). Existing educational literature on Latinxs in higher education is inundated with stories of failure and stereotypes, somehow suggesting that either their cultural values are responsible for their lagging behind their counterparts across the educational pipeline (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007). Niemann et al. (2000) also found that Latinx college students who strongly identified with Latinx culture, as demonstrated by ethnic loyalty, reported feeling threatened by possible alienation or being perceived as elitists in their ethnic communities for attaining a college education.

PART II

LATINXS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The substantial growth of Latinxs in the United States has positioned them as a significant constituent of the educational system (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007). Latinx enrollment in two- or four-year institutions hit an all-time high from 2009 to 2010 (Fry, 2011). Over the past two decades, Latinxs have made significant strides in postsecondary enrollment. Yet, a careful review of the data reveals a mere 7% increase over the past 20 years with most students attending community colleges (Castellanos et al., 2006). Latinxs continue to be the least educated ethnic
group in terms of bachelor’s degree completion with only 16 percent of Latinxs aged 25–29 attained a bachelor’s or higher degree compared with 20 percent of African Americans and 40 percent of White students (NCES, 2014). Also, Latinx college students face unique challenges, feel alienated and discriminated against, have limited role models, and are subjected to low educational expectations—all of which lend a sense of normlessness and high academic attrition (Gloria & Castellanos, 2003). While traditional White university culture and norms may contribute to dismal academic attainment and persistence of Latinx college students, the problem may be compounded by Latinx student within-in group differences, particularly for AfroLatinx collegians that identify by both as Black and Latinx.

**AfroLatinxs**

According to Jiménez Román and Flores (2010), AfroLatinx is the “distinctive and unique phenomenological experience lived at a personal level by people who are raised both Black and Latin@ in all aspects of their social life” (p. 14). AfroLatinxs provide a unique opportunity to study the effects of intragroup marginalization and colorism due to their racialized identities within a university setting. According to the Pew Research Center (2016), one-quarter of all U.S. Latinx adults self-identify as AfroLatinx, Afro-Caribbean, or of African descent roots. The majority of AfroLatinxs come from Central America and Caribbean Island countries which include the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Honduras, Colombia, and Guatemala. In the Census 2000, Logan (2003) reported that there were “nearly a million black Hispanics living in the United States” (p. 1). However, about 50 percent of all Latinxs who answered the 2000 U.S. Census chose to refer to themselves as ‘White,’ thus declining to classify themselves in a manner that would distinguish them from the dominant majority (Suarez-Orozco and Paez, 2002).
In a 2011 National Survey of Latinxs, findings show that 10 percent of Latinxs indicated their race as Black (Taylor et al., 2012). Many Latinxs, particularly second- and third-generation persons from Caribbean countries with darker skin pigmentation and Afrocentric phenotypes, may identify by both ethnicity and race. Based on phenotype variations, some lighter-skinned individuals can maintain an ambiguous racial identity, straddle the racial divide, and can pass for White while others are assigned a Black or AfroLatinx racial identity based on phenotypic features and, typically, skin color (Vaquera & Kao, 2006; Quiros, 2009). According to Cruz-Janzen (2002), most Latin American countries developed categorical boundaries to identify and segregate persons of various racial backgrounds, particularly the darker the Latinx, and the more apparent the African bloodlines, the more likely they will be at the bottom socially, economically and politically.

To date, there are only three studies that explicitly focus on Latinx’s skin color and academic experiences. Fergus (2009) examined high school Latinx students, primarily of Mexican and Puerto Rican heritage, about their racial/ethnic identity and how they perceived that others defined them. The findings suggested that “identity politics found among these Latino students and their African American peers involved a struggle over physical and cultural markers of what defines a Puerto Rican and Mexican identification” (p. 369). In other words, how participants perceived themselves by ethnicity (e.g., Mexican, Puerto Rican, Chicano) was viewed differently at times by African American peers (e.g., looking White, Black, Hispanic, or Mexican). Fergus (2009) posits that “the manner in which race and ethnicity was constructed for these students is presumably influenced by their African American peers’ constructs and experiences surrounding what is race and ethnicity, as well as the constructs of race and ethnicity within their Latino, Mexican, and Puerto Rican community” (p. 370).
Haywood (2017) examined the experiences of AfroLatinx collegians relative to intragroup marginalization due to colorism at historically White institutions. There are no other studies—empirically or qualitatively—on AfroLatinx collegiate experiences involving intragroup marginalization and colorism. Haywood’s study “illuminates how Black inferiority manifests within the Latino community in a collegiate setting” (p. 774). Most recently, García-Louis & Cortes (2020) found that AfroLatinx collegians at a small public college encountered differing levels of rejection and acceptance which impacted their lives but in turn, they “actively challenged deficit-based notions of blackness rooted in historical and cultural legacies of African slavery and colorism” (p. 12).

**Racial Identity Development and Formation**

To better understand the racialized experiences of AfroLatinx collegians, it is important to define and apply concepts of Black racial identity with this Latinx subgroup. According to Helms (1990), racial identity is defined as “a sense of group or collective identity based on one’s perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group” (p. 3). Cross (1971) defines Black racial identity as a set of stages that change across a Black individual’s lifetime seeking to transform a preexisting identity into one that is Afrocentric. Afrocentricity is a perspective on the African experience that posits Africans as subjects and agents, and therefore demands grounding in African culture and its worldview (Mazama, 2002). As it relates to AfroLatinxs, the concept of Afrocentricity applies due to shared “physical characteristics, cultural and political alliances, ancestry, and history” (Cross, 1971, p. 5) for individuals of African heritage.

It is important to underscore that existing literature on Black racial identity (Broman et al., 1998; Gurin and Epps, 1975) primarily focuses on the social and psychological experiences of
Blacks in the United States (Cross, 1971; Helms, 1990). The concept of Black racial identity is not easily defined due to varying perspectives and is described as “ambiguous and socially constructed” (Sullivan et al., 2018, p. 3). Davis & Gandy (1999) suggest that the formation of Black racial identity is produced by the daily “interactions and challenges” (p. 367) that individuals encounter. Furthermore, Black racial identity formation is affected by social and demographic factors, childhood socialization, interracial interaction, social class, age, family and friends, and socioeconomic status (Gecas, 1981). Demo and Hughes (1990) conducted a study on socialization and racial identity among Black adults and their findings suggest that adult relations with family, friends, and community are important in fostering a sense of group identity. Also, they assert that “parental messages concerning the meaning of being black, are important in shaping racial identity” (p. 364). This key finding reinforces that family plays a key role in identity formation in AfroLatinxs which in turn helps them connect with other Black peers. Finally, similar to the body of literature on Latinxs and intragroup marginalization, existing research shows that Black intragroup racial identity differences also exist among Black Americans (Sullivan et al., 2018) most likely associated with skin color and classism.

**Colorism**

For this study, it was important to understand how AfroLatinx college students negotiated their racialized identity when confronted with alienation and rejection based on skin color and phenotype. While scholarship on race and educational outcomes is voluminous, there is little attention devoted to the place of colorism in education (Keith & Monroe, 2016). While researchers have highlighted how colorism operates within Black families (Wilder & Cain, 2011), less is known about colorism practices in Latino families and within higher educational settings (Haywood, 2017).
Colorism is defined as the processes and practices of discrimination that privileges people of color with lighter skin over those with darker skin (Hunter, 2005). Quiros and Dawson (2013) state that the influence of skin color privilege and stigma in the United States has been explored in existing literature (Collins, 2000; Hunter, 2002, 2007; McIntosh, 1988; Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992;); however, less attention has been given to the privilege and stigma experienced by Latinxs who can be either white, light- or dark-skinned (Hernández & Rivera-Batiz, 2003). Colorism is a form of racial discrimination grounded in a colonial ideology which “operates as a subsystem of structural racism” (Hunter, 2016, p. 55) where lightness is associated with White Europeans and is therefore preferred and viewed as superior to darkness, typically associated with indigenous and Black African people (Hunter, 2002).

AfroLatinxs in the United States possess distinct phenotypical characteristics that affect their social and educational experience, such as darker skin and non-straight hair (Haywood, 2017). Lighter-skinned Latinxs experience greater access and privilege while darker-skinned Latinxs experience marginalization and discrimination resulting in negative psychological and socioeconomic outcomes (Bonilla-Silva, 2004). Also, dark-skinned Latinxs face higher levels of discrimination in the labor and housing market compared to their lighter-skinned counterparts (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Espino & Franz, 2002) with lower-paying wages. In a study investigating the effects of skin color among Latinxs, particularly Puerto Ricans and Dominicans in the Northeast, a person’s phenotype was significant in determining wage earnings. Based on an analysis of the 1994 Boston Social Survey Data of Urban Inequality, Gómez (2000) suggests that dark skin Latinx men earned less in hourly wages compared to lighter skin men. While skin color was not a factor for Latinx women, they still earned significantly less than their male counterparts.
Ricourt (2016) interviewed Jorge Güigni, a prominent cultural activist in the Dominican Republic, on the concept of colorism. Güigni explained that “skin color is intrinsically related to social mobility. People embrace whiteness as a safeguard to distinguish themselves from the rest of the people around them, as the only tool to be above, on the social ladder, the rest of their neighbors. Wealth is in the hands of ‘white’ people, and opportunities are available to those of light skin color” (p. 139). As a result, some AfroLatinxs experience greater levels of rejection and discrimination due to stigmas associated with darker skin complexion and phenotypic features contributing to intragroup marginalization and hindered social mobility.

**Intragroup Marginalization**

Growing up, Latinxs receive messages from family, friends, and others within the Latinx community regarding what it means to be a Latinx (Llamas and Ramos-Sánchez, 2013). Failure to conform to Latinx traditions and norms can have mental and emotional implications. Intragroup marginalization can lead to alienation from the student’s culture of origin when individuals from that culture do not feel that a student lives up to the group’s cultural expectations (Llamas & Consoli, 2012). When a Latinx begins college, he or she inevitably undergoes an acculturation process because the student is dealing with two different cultural groups: being Latinx and the college culture (Castillo et al. 2004).

According to Castillo and colleagues (2008), Latinxs may experience tension due to acculturative stress from within their heritage culture group. Acculturative stressors—stress associated with adapting to a new culture—may cause psychological and physiological distress among Latinxs (Adames et al., 2016). Acculturative stressors may also impact Latinx college students’ psychological adjustment to new peer groups. Lastly, the traditional Latinx acculturation process may not place much emphasis on racial identity formation as it relates to AfroLatinxs. In
a study on minority-status stresses and acculturative stresses among Latinx college students at a public, non-White university, Rodriguez et al. (2000) suggests that Latinx students not only contend with typical college demands (e.g., stresses over academic matters, finances) but also with being Latinx. Of these stresses, family conflicts were the most important predictor of psychological distress. In a recent study on discrimination and influence on group identity, nearly 40 percent of Latinx respondents who participated in the Latino National Survey reported being discriminated against by other racial and/or ethnic groups, with many indicating they were discriminated against by other Latinxs (Sanchez & Espinosa, 2016). The findings suggest internal discrimination suppresses a sense of group identity among Latinxs and could have a distinct impact on health outcomes (e.g., depression). Sanchez & Espinosa (2016) also suggested that there is a plausible link to the U.S.-born versus foreign-born Latinx cultural perceptions and competition for jobs among immigrants.

Existing literature also supports that colorism is associated with intragroup marginalization (Gómez, 2000; Montalvo & Codina, 2001; Quiros & Dawson, 2013; Hunter, 2016). However, there are limited studies that examine the impact of intragroup marginalization among AfroLatinx college students relative to colorism and racialized experiences within an educational environment. The existing literature on intragroup marginalization focuses on within-group differences (Ojeda, Navarro, Rosales Meza, and Arbona, 2012), family influence (Castillo, Cano, Chen, Blucker, and Olds, 2008; Llamas and Morgan Consoli, 2012; Rodríguez, Myers, Morris, and Cardoza, 2000) and Latinx college students adjusting to the university environment at predominately White institutions (Castillo, Cano, Chen, Blucker, and Olds, 2008; Castillo, 2009).

Peer support is a positive contributing factor to intragroup marginalization. Castellanos and Gloria (2008) assert that peers who share similar collegiate experiences can help shape others’
understanding through their educational insights and encouragement. Llamas and Ramos-Sánchez (2013) examined Latinx undergraduate students to determine whether perceived social support of friends mediates the role of intragroup marginalization on acculturative stress and college adjustment. They found that “the role of friends for Latino college students may be a pivotal aspect of their college experience, not only in aiding with the adjustment but also in helping to buffer from potential college stressors” (p. 165).

**Mestizaje Ideology**

Throughout Latin America, conquest and colonization have produced large mixed-raced populations that blended European, indigenous, and African heritages resulting from sexual violence against women of color, as well as consensual formal and informal unions (Keith & Monroe, 2016). The intermixing of these populations is rooted in *mestizaje* ideology. The majority of research among Latinxs’ identity has focused on the concept of mestizaje whereby anyone of Latinx descent is deemed to be of mixed race consisting of indigenous, Black, and White (Chavez-Dueñas, Adames & Organista, 2014). Mestizaje has traditionally been used to describe the racial combination of Latinx people which diminishes the Black identity of AfroLatinxs. As Bonilla-Silva (2004) asserts, skin color serves as an endemic capital. According to Keith and Monroe (2016), mestizaje ideology “became part of Mexican national identity and declarations that racism did not exist because there were no races” (p. 8) despite evidence of stratification that is consistent with ethnoracial and color rankings (Villarreal, 2010). In response to Torres-Saillant’s article “Inventing the Race: Latinxs and the Ethnoracial Pentagon,” Hernandez (2003) posits that too much attention has been focused on mestizaje pride in Latinx studies.

This ideology is problematic for AfroLatinxs who vary in skin pigmentation and choose to embrace and acknowledge their African heritage. Mestizaje does not consider the wide range of
skin complexions by which Latinxs use to racially describe themselves. An AfroLatinx may exhibit a lighter skin tone but still identify as Black. According to Duany (1996), Latinxs participate in a wider racial classification system than in the U.S. that consists of Indio/a (Indian complexion), trigueno/a (olive complexion), and moreno/a (dark complexion). Also, skin gradations can be further distinguished by lightening or darkening a person’s complexion. Duany (1998) illustrated an example of this mixed-race ideology involving a Dominican mulatto—a person of mixed White and Black ancestry—who “recently ‘discovered’ that she was Black only when she first came to the United States; until then she had thought of herself as India clara (literally, a light Indian) in a country whose aboriginal population was practically exterminated in the 16th century” (p. 147).

Furthermore, scholars argue that the term mestizaje was constructed as a way to deny that a racial/color hierarchy had been established in which lighter-skinned and more European-looking phenotypes had higher power and status than individuals with darker skin and more indigenous and/or African phenotypes (Organista, 2007; Soler-Castillo & Pardo Abril, 2009). According to Torres-Saillant (2003), “the elevation of mestizaje as a third space of ethnoracial identity—a presumably more enlightened space that Latino voices often seem to ascribe exclusively to themselves as a special feature of a certain Hispanic condition—often appears as a potential solution to the race question in American society,” however, “the conceptual panacea of mestizaje has insufficiently addressed its own white supremacist assumptions” (p. 138).

Hernandez (2003) asserts one area that is often overlooked in Latinx studies is the treatment of AfroLatinxs within the Latinx community. Furthermore, AfroLatinx college students’ experiences are understudied and analyzed from a racialized lens. The majority of studies involving Latinx collegians involve Mexicans, specifically Chicana/os, the largest U.S. Latina/o
ethnic group (Castellanos and Gloria, 2007) and is “quantitative in nature, overlooking the experiences and voices of other Latino/as such as those from the Caribbean” (Quiros & Dawson, 2013, p. 287).

**Family Influence on Latinx Identity Development**

Family members are the primary conveyors of cultural heritage within any ethnic group (Torres, 2004). Latinxs are a family-oriented group that places a strong emphasis on culture and tradition. The value of family is grounded in the concept of *familialism*. According to Marin (1993), familialism is defined as “that cultural value which includes a strong identification and attachment of individuals with their nuclear and extended families, and strong feelings of loyalty, reciprocity, and solidarity among members of the same family” (p. 184). Also, Latinx cultural values are grounded in *comunidad* or community. Castellanos and Gloria (2008) define comunidad as “the caring for and responsibility to community” (p. 385). When both concepts are integrated within the educational experience, Latino students experience an increased sense of connection, well-being, and persistence (Castellanos and Gloria, 2008) that reinforces “cultural affirmation and specific navigational strategies to negotiate the host culture of academia” (p. 387). However, these underlying concepts align with traditional Latinidad experiences that neglect the AfroLatinidades of AfroLatinx collegians.

The family plays an integral role in the development of Latinx ethnic identity and how individuals view, interact, and make sense of the world. According to Phinney (1990), “others” are described to be part of both forming and maintaining ethnic identity. For this study, the term “others” constitutes family members and Black and Latinx peers. Ethnic identity development involves the exploration of what meaning ethnicity brings to the understanding of oneself and others in “defining and upholding the ethnic boundaries—there is no “us” without a “them.”
(Svensson et al., 2018, p. 187). No different than race, ethnic identity is also viewed as a social construct and all ethnic groups and individuals must affirm and reaffirm the boundaries, or have others define what they are (Kibria, 2000). However, ethnic identity development in Latinxs, particularly in AfroLatinxs, varies depending on the family’s acculturation experience. Based on existing literature (Castillo, Cano, Chen, Blucker, and Olds, 2008; Castillo, 2009; Llamas, Morgan Consoli, 2012; Haywood, 2017; Llamas, Morgan Consoli, Hendericks, and Nguyen, 2018; Llamas and Ramos-Sanchez, 2013; Ojeda, Navarro, Rosales Meza, & Arbona, 2012; Pyne and Means, 2013; Sanchez and Espinosa, 2016) both family and peers have contributed to intragroup marginalization relative to influencing Latinx identity.

Acculturation is defined as an individual’s process of learning about and adoption of White American cultural norms and the degree to which the person maintains his or her heritage culture (Kohatsu, 2005). Acculturation research most frequently uses Berry’s (2003) model which suggests two central issues based on an individual’s preference: (1) retain their identification with their original, heritage culture, and (2) engage with and participate in dimensions of other cultures. Berry’s model also posits that individuals negotiate between the two preferences resulting in one of four possible acculturative strategies of adaptation: assimilation, integration (i.e., biculturalism), marginalization, and separation (Castillo, 2009).

Latinx parents are central to shaping and influencing a child’s view of the world through a strong connection with their perception of what constitutes Latinidad, specifically “Caribbean Latinidad—common experiences, values, and cultural practices—that includes sharing the rich and varied histories of migration” (Reyes-Santos & Lara, 2018, p. 53). Depending on AfroLatinx parents’ lived experience (Rúa, 2001), children may be influenced not to embrace or discuss their African heritage. Haywood (2017) posits “as is the case for many Latinos, participants’ family
members might be unaware of their preferences for lighter skin and straight hair because the dominant Eurocentric esthetic is so deeply entrenched in our society” (p. 774). This colonized perspective is most evident in immigrant parents, particularly those of Dominican and Puerto Rican heritage, who display a stronger connection to their Latinidad and Dominicanidad than their African heritage. Reyes-Santos & Lara (2018) argue that “we must rethink cultural and nationalist methodological paradigms within Latinx Studies that implicitly ignore the specific challenges and experiences of these families (specifically Dominicans and Puerto Ricans), as well as engage what these families offer as intimate sites of knowledge production…” (p. 48).

There is a power dynamic associated with acculturation in the Latinx community. As ethnic identity formation is seen as an interactive process, others have the power to validate or invalidate a person’s ethnic identity (Way & Rogers, 2015). This form of discrimination, referred to as identity denial, is the process when others challenge, doubt, or do not recognize a person’s group membership (Svensson et al., 2018). This form of discrimination may present a challenge to AfroLatinx collegians who are denied their Blackness by others. Unlike ethnic majority members and Whites who have been suggested as having more freedom and flexibility in defining their ethnic identities, ethnic minorities have fewer options and stricter boundaries around their identity and the meaning of them (Waters, 2014). As Goodyer & Oktikpi (2007) assert, identity formation is not always an individual choice, and ethnic identities can be seen as both self-identified and as ascribed external definitions made by others.

The literature on Latinx college student ethnic identity states that Latinx culture is complex and multifaceted depending on several factors including generation, immigration status, country of origin, and socioeconomic status (Torres, 2004; Torres & Hernandez, 2009). Niemann et al. (2000) found that Latinx college students who strongly identified with Latinx culture, as
demonstrated by ethnic loyalty, reported feeling threatened by possible alienation or being perceived as elitists in their Latinx ethnic communities for having a college education. Existing literature suggests that parents of Latinx students play a positive role regarding ethnic identity formation (Torres, 2003). In a study on the ethnic identity development of Latinx college students, Torres (2003) suggests that the environment where a Latinx student is raised, family influences, generation in the United States, and self-perception in society as a whole affect how Latinxs defined their identity. In another study of ethnic identity development of Latinx at PWIs and Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI), Torres (2004) again uncovered differences in how family influence affected Latinx ethnic identity and suggests that “Latino students with less acculturated parents also had conflicts regarding college awareness (p. 464). Lastly, Latinxs, particularly first-generation Latinxs, tend to undergo an acculturation process that contributes to their identity.

PART III

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The three primary theoretical frameworks used to guide my study included: (1) CRT combined with LatCrit; (2) Rendón’s (1994) Theory of Validation and (3) Tucker’s (1999) modified version of Tinto’s (1993) Student Integration Model. In measuring for marginalization due to in/validation experiences, I applied intragroup marginalization as a conceptual definition due to empirical evidence suggesting that colorism contributes to marginalization among Latinx college students. The definition was used to analyze AfroLatinx relationships among Black and Latinx peers relative to their sense of belonging. Finally, intersectionality—a core principle of CRT and LatCrit—was employed as an analytical tool to illuminate the complexities associated with AfroLatinx experiences that extend beyond their ethnoracial identity.
Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Matsuda (1991) defined CRT as “the work of progressive legal scholars of color who are attempting to develop a jurisprudence that accounts for the role of racism in American law and that work toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating all forms of subordination” (p. 1331). CRT increasingly acknowledges the extent to which race is not an independent given on which the laws act, but rather a social construction at least in part fashioned by law (Haney-López, 2006). It evolved out of critical legal studies in the 1980s as a movement seeking to account for the role of race and persistence of racism in American society (Delgado, 1995). As a theoretical lens, CRT explores the ways that so-called race-neutral laws and policies perpetuate racial and/or ethnic and gender subordination (Delgado Bernal, 2002).

CRT provides the proper historical and cultural context to deconstruct racialized content (Crenshaw et al., 1995) while challenging majoritarian ideology (e.g., colorblindness, meritocracy) to demonstrate how these ideas operate to disadvantage people of color and further advantage Whites (Delgado & Stefancic, 1994). More importantly, this theoretical lens provides students of color with a voice. As Delgado Bernal (2002) posits, students of color are key “holders and creators of knowledge.” (p. 106). CRT allowed for the collective voice of students to highlight instances of racism and identify ways to improve their experiences (Hubain et al., 1993).

As it related to my study, CRT provided an appropriate lens to study the racialized experiences of AfroLatinx collegians. To date, CRT has been applied as an educational research frame to examine the collegiate experiences of minoritized students for more than two decades. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) are regarded as pioneers for introducing CRT into education. Savas (2014) views Ladson-Billings and Tate’s research as “a milestone of educational research using a CRT framework” (p. 509) in which they argued that pervasive racism damages the
educational outcomes and pathways of students of color. Delgado Bernal (2002) applied CRT to better understand and interpret the Chicana/o educational experience and how it differed from a Eurocentric perspective. Delgado Bernal (2002) posits that Chicana/o students have vastly different worldviews about what is considered “valid knowledge” such as bilingualism, biculturalism, and commitment to communities—as a critical tool that has helped them navigate through educational obstacles, go onto college, and make a positive difference to others.

In a qualitative study examining the racialized experiences of students of color in a graduate preparation program, Hubain and colleagues (2016) applied CRT to understand the influence of race on students’ experiences. Their findings suggested that race and racism played a major role in the overall student experience. Participants in the study reported numerous experiences of racism—including tokenism and racial battle fatigue—in classes, study groups, the larger campus environments, and the communities in which the programs are located, all contributing to their overall academic experience (Hubain et al., 2016).

Solórzano (1997) identified five tenets shared by CRT scholarship that was developed with a growing number of scholars (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn, Yosso, Solórzano, & Parker, 2002; Parker, 1998; Tate, 1997) to apply this framework to the field of education. For this study, I applied the five tenets to better understand and support the racialized experiences of AfroLatinx collegians.

1. **Intercentricity (intersectionality) of race and racism with other forms of subordination.** Solórzano & Yosso (2001) argue that CRT in education starts from the premise that race and racism are endemic and permanent. As a critical race analysis tool, they support viewing race and racism at their intersections with other forms of subordination relative to gender, class, sexual orientation, and religion. Intersectionality,
the interconnection of oppressive institutions (e.g., racism, sexism, gender identity, religion, classism) that disadvantage minoritized individuals, was integral to this study given perceived differences in experiences among AfroLatinxs relative to gender and place of birth (the U.S. born versus foreign-born). Based on the work of Harris and Patton (2018), there are three underlying assumptions for using intersectionality as a guiding framework. First, the use of intersectionality must include citation practices, methodological approaches, who and what are analyzed in intersectional research, exploring the history of the theory, and the offering of generalist or specialist definitions, amongst other aspects (Harris & Patton, 2018). Second, intersectionality must promote “social justice and social change by linking research and practice to concrete holistic approaches to the eradication of disparities and to changing social and higher education institutions” (Thornton-Dill & Zambrana, 2009, p. 5). Third, any mis/use of intersectionality may stifle radical and transformative social justice (Bilge, 2013). Due to its vague prescription, the use of intersectionality is open for interpretation, resulting in divergent strategies of employing the theory Harris and Patton (2018). Collectively, these three assumptions guided the application of intersectionality in my study.

2. **Challenge the dominant ideology.** According to Solórzano & Yosso (2001), CRT challenges the traditional claims the educational system and its institutions make toward objectivity, meritocracy, color-blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity. Because power and politics are at the center of all teaching and learning, the application of household knowledge to situations outside of the home becomes a creative process that challenges the transmission of “official knowledge” and dominant ideologies (Delgado Bernal, 2001). In this sense, CRT scholars suggest that these traditional discourses of
objectivity and neutrality are made to camouflage white privilege, power, and self-interest (Savas, 2014).

3. **A commitment to social justice.** Within the context of educational research, CRT argues for a commitment to social justice that offers a transformative response to racial, gender, and class oppression (Matsuda, 1991). Solórzano and Yosso (2001) view social justice education—curricular and pedagogical—as two-fold: (1) the elimination of racism, sexism, and poverty; and (2) the empowerment of underrepresented minority groups.

4. **The centrality of experiential knowledge.** CRT recognizes and values the voices of people of color as legitimate, appropriate, and critical to better understand, analyze, and teach about racial subordination (Savas, 2014). CRT scholars view this knowledge as a strength and draw explicitly on the student of color’s lived experience by including such methods as storytelling, family histories, biographies, scenarios, parables, cuentos (stories), chronicles, and narratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). As Aguirre (2000) posits, the most distinguishing feature of CRT writings is the use of stories or first-person accounts which include critical social events and experiences that places and amplifies minoritized voices at the center, rather than the periphery.

5. **A transdisciplinary perspective.** CRT challenges ahistoricism and the unidisciplinary focus of most analyses and insists on analyzing race and racism in education by placing them in both a historical and contemporary context (Delgado, 1992).

**Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit)**

As an extension of CRT, LatCrit “calls attention to the way in which conventional, and even critical, approaches to race and civil rights ignore the problems and special situations of Latino people—including bilingualism, immigration reform, the binary black/white structure of
existing race remedies law, and much more” (Stefancic, 1997, p. 1510). LatCrit seeks to bring the voices of Latinxs to the forefront (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) by highlighting the importance of cultural contexts and knowledge in analysis, particularly within learning spaces (Gonzalez & Morrison, 2016). As an educational framework, LatCrit Theory—when combined with CRT—can be used to theorize and examine how race and racism explicitly and implicitly impacted educational structures, processes, and discourses that affected people of color (LatCrit Primer, 1999), specifically AfroLatinxs whose ethnoracial identity is wholly one and not “one or the other.”

LatCrit has been applied to educational research to better understand the lived experiences of Latinx college students. Drawing on both CRT and LatCrit, Pyne and Means (2013) explored the academic and social interactions of first-generation, low-income Latinx college students relative to race and ethnic identity at a highly selective private college. The researchers encountered a myriad of themes that impacted participants’ educational experience, particularly the experience of the main character of the study, Ana Ramos. The themes focused on “the role of family, the consequences of inadequate academic preparation, the centrality of peers in establishing a sense of belonging, and the variety of financial barriers” (Pyne and Means, 2013, p. 188) which contributed to better understanding the Latinx collegiate experience.

In another study, Solórzano & Yosso (2001) applied LatCrit to examine different forms of racial and gender discrimination experienced by Chicana/o graduate students at a PWI. Using counter-storytelling as a methodological approach, researchers analyzed the educational experiences of two Latina characters, a professor and a graduate student. As the stories were retold, the findings suggested that both participants felt invisible and marginalized. Similar to a study conducted by Pérez Huber (2010) on the intersectionality of undocumented Chicana college
students, the LatCrit framework investigated the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, and immigration status (foreign-born Latinxs) that Latinx college students negotiated in establishing peer relationships.

**Conceptual Definition of Intragroup Marginalization**

Given the complexity and heterogeneity of the Latinx experience, it is important to frame theoretical statements about individual identity in the context of group experiences and patterns (Ferdman & Gallegos, 2001). The concept of intragroup marginalization is based on Social Identity Theory, which suggests that group members marginalize in-group members who do not conform to group norms to maintain the uniqueness and stability of the group (Abrams, Marques, Bown, & Henson, 2000). As a definition, intragroup marginalization provided necessary context to understand how AfroLatinx collegians handled microaggressions and validation experiences in negotiating their racialized identities within-group interactions among other Latinxs and non-Latinxs (Black and Caribbean) peers.

As a definition, intragroup marginalization was used to examine social norms associated with racial and cultural expectations in a collegiate setting. Studies have shown that intragroup marginalization can lead to alienation from the student’s culture of origin if people from that culture do not feel that the student lives up to dominant expectations (Llamas and Consoli, 2012). For Latinxs, group membership is of particular relevance to acculturation (Pizaro & Vera, 2001). To date, the relationship between intragroup marginalization and academic non-persistence of Latinx undergraduate students has been surprisingly understudied, with most research focusing on the benefits of family support (Ratelle et al., 2005).

Additionally, studies suggest that family influence negatively contributed to intragroup marginalization, including colorism, among Latinxs with racialized identities. In a recent clinical
practice study on colorism, skin color, and phenotype, Adames and colleagues (2016) reported intragroup marginalization experienced by Latinxs. Using case studies, the researchers illustrated how intragroup marginalization negatively affected Beatriz, a Latinx female of Dominican heritage, seeking mental health services due to college-related stress. During her first therapy session, Beatriz shared the following:

Beatriz reported feeling worried about “failing out of college” and expressed that “becoming an engineer would make her family very proud.” She stated, “They will finally accept me.” When asked to say more regarding “acceptance,” Beatriz proceeded to describe a sense of “not belonging, even within my own family.” She also discussed rarely feeling attractive but was “thankful” for her parents who would often say that she was their bella negrita (beautiful little Black girl), which used to make her feel special” (Adames et al., 2016, p. 48).

In Beatriz’s case, intragroup marginalization due to colorism manifested into internalized racism creating a sense of shame which intensified in college leading Beatriz to “question whether she would be “accepted” by her student peers and professors” (Adames et al., p. 49). Internalized racism is when a member of a marginalized ethnic community holds biased beliefs that depict his or her ethnicity as inferior (Padilla, 2001).

**Rendón’s (1994) Theory of Validation**

Validation theory provides a framework that allows researchers to better understand the experiences of minoritized collegians, specifically AfroLatinx students. Rendón’s (1994) Validation Theory was introduced more than two decades ago for scholars and practitioners interested in a theoretical framework “that could speak to the issues and backgrounds of low-income, first-generation students as well as adult students returning to college after being away for some time” (Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011, p. 12). The theory evolved from a U.S. Department of Education grant that examined the influences of students’ out-of-class experiences on learning
and retention. Approximately, 132 first-year college students were interviewed from a variety of
diverse 2- and 4-year colleges and universities across different regions of the United States. For
many students, this was the first time someone had expressed care and concern and made them
feel that their prior life experiences and knowledge were deemed valuable (Rendón, 1994).

According to Rendón Linares & Muñoz (2011), as researchers reflected on what was
reported as being most meaningful by students who transition to college, the term “validation”
made the most sense since it helped collegians “acquire a confident, motivating, ‘I can do it’
attitude, believe in their inherent capacity to learn, become excited about learning, feel a part of
the learning community, and feel cared about as a person, not just a student” (p. 15). Furthermore,
while some students were perfectly able to overcome potentially devastating and invalidating
experiences through self-efficacy and sheer grit to succeed, it is likely that many marginalized
students, particularly AfroLatinx collegians, may not persist.

The theory of validation has six elements. The first element centers on initiating contact
with minoritized students by institutional agents (i.e., faculty, advisers, counselors). The second
element focuses on feeling capable of learning and instilling a sense of self-worth. The third
element requires that students receive consistent validation to increase their overall confidence and
get engaged with campus life. The fourth element—a key indicator for in/validating AfroLatinx
identity—focuses on validating agents (faculty, staff, and peers) who actively affirm and support
students consistently. The fifth element underscores the importance of validation as a
developmental process over time. Finally, the sixth element of validation focuses on retention and
persistence and is viewed as most critical during the early stages of beginning college, especially
during the first few weeks of a semester.
There are two types of validation: academic and interpersonal. Academic validation occurs when in- and out-of-class agents take action to assist students to “trust their innate capacity to learn and to acquire confidence in being a college student” (Rendón, 1994, p. 40). Interpersonal validation occurs when in- and out-of-class agents take action to foster students’ personal development and social adjustment (Rendón, 1994). While the focus of validation theory has focused on faculty and student interactions in which faculty create learning environments to validate and affirm students’ contributions, the theory has applicability on peer to peer interactions in validating cultural identities. As Rendón Linares & Muñoz (2011) assert, “validation of one’s cultural identity and prior knowledge can address the existing inequities with educational attainment among student-of-color populations” (p. 22).

From an ontological perspective, Rendón’s (1994) validation theory (1) works with students as whole human beings with a focus on students’ emotional and social development (i.e., caring, support, relationship-building, nurturance); recognizes students’ voices and experiences and (3) serves as an asset-based model in that minoritized students, irrespective of background, are contributors of knowledge and experiences to the campus community. Since the focus of this study involved how AfroLatinx collegians negotiated their racialized identity in establishing and maintaining peer relationships, the application of validation theory was student-centered to better understand peer to peer interaction and experiences.

**Tucker’s (1999) modified version of Tinto’s Modified Student Integration Model**

The most widely known and studied model of student persistence is Tinto’s Student Integration Model (1987, 1993). Tinto (1993) theorized that students’ integration into their social and academic college environment predicts whether they are likely to remain enrolled in college. According to Hausmann and colleagues (2007), Tinto’s persistence model incorporates students’
pre-college characteristics (e.g., socioeconomic status, high school achievement, etc.) which shapes their initial level of commitment to finishing college (goal commitment) and to completing a degree at the college in which they are enrolled (institutional commitment). Most persistence studies include measures of social and/or academic integration, but the psychological sense that one is an accepted member of one’s community is distinct from one’s level of involvement with the community (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Tinto’s (1993) asserts that the process of becoming integrated into the academic and social systems of a college occurs when students navigate the following three stages: separation, transition, and incorporation. Milem & Berger (1997) defined the stages as follows: (1) separation involves students’ ability to disassociate themselves to some degree from the norms of past communities, including families, high school friends, and other local ties; (2) transition occurs after the successful negotiation of separation; and (3) incorporation happens when students adapt to and adopt the prevailing norms and behavior patterns of their college or university community. Milem & Berger (1997) suggest that successful integration does not necessarily guarantee persistence.

**Sense of belonging.** Given the increasing presence of Latinxs in the general population and higher education, the recruitment, retention, and academic performance of Latinx college students is a critical issue for research (Mayo, Murguia, & Padilla, 1995). Although Latinx aspirations and college enrollment have exponentially increased over the past two decades, graduation and persistence rates remain low nationwide. This may be attributed to not feeling welcomed, or a sense of belonging within the university community. A sense of belonging reflects the social support that students perceive on campus; it is a feeling of connectedness, that one is important to others, that one matter (Jacoby & Garland, 2004; Strayhorn, 2012).
According to Tinto (2017), a sense of belonging can refer to smaller communities within the institution as, for instance, with students with whom one shares a common interest (e.g. students in the same discipline or program) or background (e.g. students of similar socio-cultural backgrounds). Also, “strong familial obligations may prevent Hispanic students from establishing a sense of belonging on campus” (Strayhorn, 2008, p. 302). Researchers suggest that Latinx students may struggle to remain closer to their families, especially parents and siblings, or members of their culture of origin (Dayton, Gonzalez-Vasquez, Martinez, & Plum, 2004; Ortiz, 2004). In a study conducted on sense of belonging, Strayhorn (2008) suggests that Latinxs were greater influenced and affected by interacting with others from diverse backgrounds in comparison to their White collegiate peers. According to Hurtado and Carter (1997), a sense of belonging has been under-studied in student persistence research.

**Theoretical limitation.** Tinto (1993) posits that individuals are required to “reject the norms of past communities” and “to dissociate themselves, in varying degrees, from membership in the communities of the past, most typically those associated with family, local high school, and local areas of residence…” (p. 95). Based on this theoretical perspective, students who become successfully incorporated into the college environment have “moved away from the norms and behavioral patterns of past associations” (Tinto, 1993, p. 98). As a result of Tinto’s stages, his integration model has been highly criticized by scholars (Guiffrida, 2006; Tanaka, 2002; Tierney, 1992) because it “assumes that minority students must modify or abandon their cultural backgrounds to “fully” integrate into academic culture and eventually persists to graduation and it denotes that they cannot retain their cultural identities, knowledge, and function within a new academic identity” (Rendón et al., 2000, p. 129).
To ensure AfroLatinxs’ cultural norms and traditions are equally valued and honored, Tucker’s (1999) modified version of Tinto’s Student Integration Theory was applied relative to his tenet of *Sense of Community*. Tucker’s theory is based on the results of an ethnographic study using Tinto’s Model of Student Integration as the main framework. According to Tucker (1999), Sense of Community includes any transitional or adjustment phenomena that make students feel a sense of belonging; Sense of community is best described as positive peer group relationships and feelings generated by the institution’s surroundings. AfroLatinx collegians encountered adjusting to college life difficult with having to “pick sides” to fit in and/or be accepted by peers. While empirical evidence tied to Tucker’s theory focused exclusively on transitioning and adjusting to college using a small, homogenous participant sample, other researchers have expressed similar support for fostering a sense of belonging among Latinx students who are made to feel marginalized, alienated, isolated, unsupported, and unwelcomed by their peers (Bennett & Okinaka, 1990; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993; Strayhorn, 2012). Therefore, this modified theoretical framework was applied to the study to better understand persistence relative to a sense of belonging for AfroLatinx collegians at a diverse, public university.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This study was structured and guided by two research questions:

1. How do AfroLatinx collegians describe their academic and social experiences at a diverse public university in the Northeast?

2. How do AfroLatinx collegians negotiate their ethnoracial identities at a diverse public university in the Northeast?
   a. How does intragroup marginalization affect peer relations, especially among Black, Caribbean, and other Latinx peers?
   b. What effects, if any, does intragroup marginalization have on AfroLatinx collegians’ intentions to persist?

These questions required an examination of the racialized experiences of AfroLatinx college students in negotiating their identities to establish and manage peer relationships relative to intragroup marginalization and colorism and its impact AfroLatinx collegians’ intentions to persist.

While there has been a myriad of studies conducted on Latinxs, primarily Mexicans/Chicana/os, there is a dearth of literature on AfroLatinxs relative to intragroup marginalization and colorism. Patton (2002) calls for a qualitative inquiry that allows the researcher to explore the complexity of color and identity within social contexts. By utilizing a qualitative research approach, I will gain a richer and deeper understanding of AfroLatinx collegians’ racialized experiences that is limited by utilizing quantitative scales. Qualitative research is more suitable in dealing with multiple realities because this approach provides greater insight into the many mutually formed influences that a researcher may encounter (Lincoln &
A strategy of inquiry used for this study was narrative research. Chase (2005) described “narrative” as a term assigned to any text or discourse, with a specific focus on the stories told by individuals (Polkinghorne, 1995). Because narrative research has many forms and uses a variety of analytic practices (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004), counter-story telling will allow participants to share personal events so that their story is retold from a lived and minoritized experience.

This section of the study elaborated on the study’s paradigm, a strategy of inquiry, research site, participant sample, data management and analysis, researcher positionality, trustworthiness, triangulation, and potential limitations.

PARADIGMS

To comprehend the experiences of AfroLatinx collegians, stories must be told in their own words. From a social constructivist perspective, the goal of the research is to better understand and make sense of the social worlds that people create. Learning is critically dependent on the qualities of a collaborative process within an educational community, which is situation-specific and context-bound (Schunk, 2012). Semi-structured interviews and focus groups are appropriate qualitative methods for narrative research projects because they allow and encourage two-way conversations. The narrative interview is conceived as a collaboration or partnership—one that supports the co-creation of knowledge and does not objectify the participant (Fine, 1994). Open-ended, candid conversations will lead to a better understanding of how individuals navigate, and more importantly, construct their social realities (Gergen, 1994). Social reality is defined as the “part of the world to which experience gives us access that constitutes the realm of human coexistence” (Schatzki, 1988, p. 243). In other words, humans construct sociality realities based
on daily interactions with other humans. Schatzki (1988) refers to social reality as the interrelatedness of ongoing lives.

This study was situated using an interpretivist and social constructivist paradigms. Ladson-Billings (2005) asserts that an interpretive position provides a pervasive lens for qualitative research as it relates to participants from underrepresented or marginalized groups. My study’s problem statement and research questions align with the selected theoretical frameworks to understand specific issues or topics—conditions that serve to disadvantage and exclude individuals or cultures, such as racism, sexism, unequal power relations, and identity (Creswell, 2013). The study also supported the “principle of hermeneutics, or meaning making, which details the idea that the whole must be understood in relation to the parts, which derive their meanings from our understanding of the whole, recognizing that they are mutually constitutive” (Josselson, 2013, p. 6). To paraphrase Paterson and Higgs (2005), hermeneutics refers to the shared understandings that we already have with each other, and meaning emerges through a dialogue between the text and the inquirer (Koch, 1999). Traditionally, Latinxs are viewed and treated as a monolith. By not recognizing the racialized identity of AfroLatinxs, it is difficult to fully understand their lived experience as both Black and Latinx within a collegiate environment. It is equally important that race and ethnicity be viewed as mutually constitutive among AfroLatinx collegians as opposed to mutually exclusive. Applying the principle of hermeneutics as a research strategy was key to interpreting how Latinx and African heritage shape each other in dynamic ways, thus forming AfroLatinxs’ identity.
METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS

To capture the voices of participants and challenge narratives based on the experiences of traditional White collegians, this study utilized narrative inquiry and counter-storytelling to provide rich, personal, and contextualized information.

Narrative Inquiry

To understand and appreciate the experiences of AfroLatinx collegians, narrative inquiry was used to collect and share their stories. Narrative inquiry is an appropriate methodological strategy to gather information on participants’ experiences. According to Paterson and Higgs (2005), narrative inquiry is defined as the discourse that makes sense of experiences without necessarily ordering it chronologically. The focus of narrative inquiry is to collect personal testimonios (life stories)—in oral, written, or document form—to make meaning of experiences, both in the past and present. Also, narrative inquiry advances social action. According to Chase (2018), social action is “doing or accomplishing something (e.g., defending, persuading, or entertaining), and simultaneously constructing versions of self, others, and the social world” (p. 547).

Narrative inquiry afforded AfroLatinx collegians the opportunity to not only provide an oral account of their experiences but encouraged the sharing of a personal artifact that was meaningful and expanded the boundaries of narrative. Artifacts hold promise as a research tool to access information that might not be possible through document analysis or interviews (Rowsell, 2011). Artifacts can be images, personal photographs, art, or a physical object that possesses sentimental value with a unique story behind it. Telling the story behind an artifact provides ways into narratives that are not always accessible in other ways (Hurdley, 2006).
Counter-storytelling

Counter-storytelling was the second strategy of inquiry employed in this study. This qualitative approach, grounded in CRT, argues that the voices and experiential knowledge of people of color must be recognized (Hubain et al., 2016). Counter story-telling serves two key purposes: (1) tells the story of those experiences that are not often told, particularly those on the margins of society, and (2) serves as a tool for analyzing and challenging the stories of those in power and whose story is a natural part of the dominant discourse—the majoritarian story (Delgado, 1993). Since many stories advance White privilege through majoritarian master narratives, counter-stories by people of color help shatter the complacency that may accompany such privilege and challenge the dominant discourses that serve to suppress people on the margins of society (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). This strategy has been used in numerous studies with the application of CRT and LatCrit combined (Aguirre, 2000; Gaytan-Morales, 2016; Haywood, 2017; Hubain, Allen, Harris, and Linder, 2016; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001) to examine the experiences of Latinx collegians.

Counter-storytelling is an important methodological strategy because it provided a voice for a Latinx subgroup that is often invisible in existing literature “since they physically appear black but are not African American and descriptively not Latinx (Cruz-Janzen, 2002; Flores & Jiménez Román, 2009; Jiménez Román & Flores, 2010; Romo, 2011). It allowed participants to speak candidly and freely about what means to be Black and Latinx and have their accounts retold in ways that value their worldview and experiences. These stories challenged the deficit-thinking approach that AfroLatinx collegians “need help,” a perspective that is often implied of minoritized individuals living on the margins of society. On the contrary, counter-storytelling augmented AfroLatinx collegians’ experiences as shifting the current perspective of Latinx student persistence
from deficit to an outlook of gain (Yosso, 2005) while highlighting those experiences as validated holders and creators of knowledge (Delgado, 2002). While existing literature supports counter-storytelling as an effective strategy for telling the stories of Latinx collegians, the voices and stories of AfroLatinx collegians are sparse in scholarship and academic discourse.

According to Delgado (1989), counter-story telling serves four theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical functions:

1. Build community among those at the margins of society by providing a human and familiar face to educational theory and practice;
2. Challenge the majoritarian narrative and provide context to understand and transform established belief systems;
3. Open new windows into the reality of those at the margins of society; and
4. Construct a narrative that combines the story with the current reality that is richer than either the story or the reality alone.

Storytelling is integral to Latinx culture because it “extends one’s personal experience to include collective experience and community memory, and points to the importance of participants’ engaging in the analysis of data” (Delgado Bernal, 1998, pp. 563-564).

According to Merriweather Hunn, Guy, & Manglitz (2006), there are “three genres of counter-stories documented by CRT scholars: personal stories, other people’s stories or narratives, and composite stories. Personal stories comprise direct reports of experiences of persons of color and how they experience racial discrimination, insult, injury, or disadvantage. Other people’s stories hold the power to move and when they are retold, they take on a ‘larger than life’ quality. Composite stories or narratives represent an accumulation, a gathering together, and a synthesis of
numerous individual stories” (p. 245). For this study, the main themes were discussed using composite narratives to retell the collective thoughts of AfroLatinx collegians.

**Compositing**

Compositing was chosen to create collective narratives because it allowed for thematic grouping of participants’ experiences that emerged from the analysis of the data (Patton & Catching, 2009). Similar to a qualitative study on racialized experiences of graduate students, Hubain et al. (2016) posit that “compositing participants’ experiences allows for a creative and in-depth approach to presenting data, potentially reaching readers in a way that they would not have otherwise been reached” (p. 951). Pyne and Means (2013) assert that “such stories are compelling, but they also simplify and homogenize the day-to-day experiences of underrepresented students, erasing contradiction and struggle, ignoring the larger historical systems of privilege and power…” (p. 190).

**RESEARCH SITE**

Many studies on Latinx experiences have been conducted at a PWI or HSI, primarily in the Southern or Western parts of the United States. According to the Pew Research Center (2016), approximately 65 percent of AfroLatinx are concentrated in the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast. Therefore, East Coast University (ECU: pseudonym) was the primary research site for the study. ECU is a public, four-year research university located in an urban environment with a total student enrollment of around 17,500 undergraduate and graduate students (Carnegie Classification, 2018). In terms of diversity—racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically—about 45% of the student body is comprised of individuals from historically underrepresented populations (Black, Latinx, Asian, Native American, more than one race) and more than 40 percent receive some form of Federal Pell aid support. According to the Federal Student Aid (2019), Pell Grants are typically awarded to
undergraduate students who display exceptional financial need (a family household income of
$50,000 or less) and have not earned a bachelor's, graduate, or professional degree.

Approximately, 17 percent of the ECU student body self-identifies as Latinx with a 68
percent graduation rate (IPEDS, 2017). Interestingly, the majority of Latinx undergraduates were
first-generation Dominican and Puerto Rican collegians. First-generation collegians are defined
as students whose parent(s)/guardian(s) did not to attend college. A large percentage of existing
literature on Latinx college students and intragroup marginalization has focused primarily on the
Mexican and/or Chicana/o collegiate experience, so ECU presented a different perspective in terms
of students that embrace their Latinx and African heritage.

RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

It is important to acknowledge my own lived experience growing up as a second-generation
Dominican-American from Washington Heights, a heavily populated Dominican community on
the upper west side of New York City. As a child of immigrant Dominican parents, I had limited
knowledge and understanding of academic opportunities after high school. Neither of my parents
persisted beyond grade school. They were raised under a dictatorship before migrating to the
United States in the 1960s. As a child, I was frequently reminded that it was not my place to ask
questions about their history and past. Instead, I was instructed to direct my curiosity towards
education so that I would be the first in the family to attend and graduate college. As a result, I
am the first in my family to attend and graduate college with a bachelor’s and two master’s degrees.

During my undergraduate years, I encountered numerous identity conflicts that led to
strained peer relations for embracing both my Latinx and Black identities. As a result, I was
alienated in some Latinx circles for “wanting to be Black” and perceived as a “sellout.” I was also
accused by some Black peers of cultural appropriation for dressing, speaking, and partaking in
norms and practices rooted in Black authenticity. As a result, I feared self-identifying as Latinx and Black to avoid being treated differently by family and friends. Many of my Latinx and Black college peers argued that ethnicity determined a person’s true and only identity. Therefore, I would regularly switch identities to conform to the dominant group’s expectations to minimize intragroup conflicts, microaggressions, and misunderstandings.

The juggling of a racialized identity had a profound effect on my sense of belonging. I would constantly negotiate my ethnoracial identity based on the most welcoming spaces. If a social function consisted of a predominately Latinx crowd listening to merengue and speaking Spanish among peers, I would embrace my Dominican heritage to fit in. While I would have preferred to exercise both identities, the dominant Latinx space would not allow it. If I were in an academic setting, I would negotiate my identity to make faculty and White peers feel comfortable. This meant behaving like a “White student.” This altered behavior consisted of concealing my city accent and vernacular, downplaying my Latinidad, using terminology that was not part of my vocabulary to sound “smart,” and avoided interactions that required speaking on matters of my lived experience out of fear it would bring embarrassment to my family. This facade allowed me to blend in better with White faculty and peers. I did not partake in these behaviors to feel connected but to experience a temporary sense of belonging as a means of survival.

My parents played a huge role in influencing and shaping my Latinx identity. They believed that Latinx parents were responsible for imparting a strong sense of cultural pride in their child and formal schooling was primarily responsible for developing a child’s intellectual capacity. I underwent a high enculturation process that involved only Spanish-speaking at home and in the presence of other Spanish-speaking relatives. I was expected to participate in traditions and practices that were gender-specific in shaping my identity as a Dominican man.
As it relates to colorism, my parents were ingrained with racist rhetoric regarding darker-skinned individuals. They were raised under the former General Rafael Trujillo regime. Trujillo was the president of the Dominican Republic from 1931 until his assassination in 1961. Trujillo was often compared to Adolf Hitler for his efforts to “whiten” the Dominican Republic to create a Eurocentric influenced society that values lighter skin. Trujillo even took drastic genocidal measures to rid of anyone that identified as Haitian. In 1937, Trujillo ordered his army to slaughter thousands of Haitians and “give the appearance that the murders had been committed by Dominican farmers who were supposedly distressed over an alleged influx of Haitian workers in the country” (Hicks, 1946, p. 112). As Torres-Saillant (1998) asserts, the Dominican Republic sought to insert itself into an economic order dominated by Western powers, among whom the organizing principle of White supremacy served as its foundation. Colorism is still prevalent today among many Dominicans and Latinxs in general, contributing to identity conflicts that promote racial and ethnic divide.

Unfortunately, racist ideology has been adopted and passed on by immigrant Dominicans and Puerto Ricans, many of who comprise a large segment of AfroLatinxs from the Caribbean Islands. As my parents would often remind me, “mi’jo tu no eres moreno, es indio” which translates to “my child you are not Black, you are Indian.” This anti-Black ideology had a profound impact on me as an adolescent. From what I can recall, my parent’s views of Dominicans with darker skin pigmentation was attributed to statements such as “Es que los Dominicanos oscuro pasan muchisimo tiempo en el sol” (Translation: It’s that darker skin Dominicans spend a lot of time in the sun) to justify their melanin-rich skin complexion. Some family members believed that “Los Haitianos son los culpables” (Translation: Haitians are to blame) for our Afrocentric features. Growing up, I was exposed to anti-Black messages about Haitians illegally
crossing the border to procreate and destroy the Dominican “race.” As an adolescent, I was raised to believe that African Americans “son malo” (are bad) and perceived as “thugs” and drug dealers. If a Dominican person was involved in any criminal behavior, the rationale was that African Americans were to blame… “asi es como que ello vivien” (Loosely translated: that’s their way of life).

Until the age of 16, I denied having any association with my African heritage. This Latinidad allegiance shifted during my sophomore year of high school. In 1986, Mr. Davis was my History teacher at Cardinal Hayes High School, a Catholic all-boys’ high school located in the South Bronx, N.Y. He was an outspoken, gruff African American Vietnam War veteran and a proud graduate of Columbia University. In addition to New York State history course requirements, Mr. Davis required his students to read “Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America” by Lerone Bennett, Jr. This book was life-changing. My views of Blacks in America and, more importantly, my identity was altered. I learned about the transatlantic slave trade, the mass deportation of enslaved Africans to the New World. I learned about the role of the Spanish empire and its involvement in the kidnapping and enslaving Africans, involuntarily shipping them like cattle in the hulls of ships and sold into slavery in America. What I had not known is that most enslaved Africans were shipped to Latin America and the Caribbean Islands. According to Gates, Jr. (2011), who was also unfamiliar with the number of enslaved Africans who survived the Middle Passage, he asserted that “out of 11.2 million Africans, only 450,000 arrived in the United States. All the rest arrived in places south of our border. About 4.8 million Africans went to Brazil alone” (p. 2). The education of slavery in Latin America helped me better understand the full extent of my Dominican heritage. Today, I am fully aware of my African heritage and identity as a Black/Afro-Dominican. I proudly embrace my AfroLatinx identity. In turn, younger
AfroLatinxs, specifically undergraduate collegians, look to me for guidance in navigating their racialized identity and sharing their stories.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

To enhance validity and ensure trustworthiness, this study employed two specific qualitative methods to gather rich, contextualized data. The two main methods approaches were semi-structured interviews and a focus group.

Participants

Participants for this study were AfroLatinx college students who attend ECU. The participant sample consisted of sixteen (16) self-identified AfroLatinx undergraduate students between the ages of 18-25. Participants ranged from sophomores to first-year graduate students. First-year students who had only completed one academic semester were excluded from the study due to their limited persistence experience.

Graph 1. Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Self-Identification/Ethnicity</th>
<th>First Gen</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Transfer</th>
<th>Birthplace</th>
<th>Home</th>
<th>Spanish Fluency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Adelia</td>
<td>Dominican and Mexican</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Brooklyn, NY</td>
<td>Yes, Fluent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Amara</td>
<td>AfroLatina, Honduran and Garifuna</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Bronx, NY</td>
<td>Yes, Fluent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Angel</td>
<td>Black, Puerto Rican and Dominican</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Bronx, NY</td>
<td>No Fluency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Cardi</td>
<td>AfroLatina, Dominican, West Indian</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Bronx, NY</td>
<td>No Fluency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Chatoye</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Brooklyn, NY</td>
<td>Yes, Fluent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Felix</td>
<td>Dominican, Black</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Bronx, NY</td>
<td>Limited Fluency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Gabriel</td>
<td>Dominican, AfroLatino</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Dominican Republic</td>
<td>Bronx, NY</td>
<td>Yes, Fluent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Josefa</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Brooklyn, NY</td>
<td>Yes, Fluent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Juan</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Bronx, NY</td>
<td>Yes, Fluent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Juana</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Washington Heights, NY</td>
<td>Yes, Fluent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>Latina, Dominican</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Bronx, NY</td>
<td>Yes, Fluent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Manny</td>
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<td>M</td>
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<td>Bronx, NY</td>
<td>Yes, Intermediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>F</td>
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<td>Uniondale, NY</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Washington Heights, NY</td>
<td>Yes, Fluent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Nativa</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Dominican Republic</td>
<td>Bronx, NY</td>
<td>Yes, Fluent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>AfroLatina, Dominican and Jamaican</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Bronx, NY</td>
<td>Yes, Fluent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sampling. AfroLatinx participants were recruited using purposive sampling to identify a broad representation of collegians (i.e., gender, commuter). Purposive sampling uses the judgment
of an expert to select cases with a specific purpose in mind of a difficult-to-reach population (Neuman, 2006). Specific units of the university that have regular interaction with the student body, specifically Latinx students (e.g., college access services and programs, advising office, Latinx sponsored clubs and organizations) were asked to assist with recruitment. These units were comprised of student leaders and university administrators with access to student accounts who were able to assist with screening and identifying potential participants.

**Recruitment.** The recruitment of self-identifying AfroLatinx participants involved consultation and coordination with Latinx-based student organizations on campus. I worked closely with the largest and oldest Latinx-student sponsored organization at ECU. Through email correspondence, the student organization president and executive board members distributed an email recruitment letter and flier that described the purpose of the study along with my contact information. By enlisting the aid of student leaders, I secured student buy-in and endorsement increasing the likelihood of AfroLatinx collegians participating in my study. Latinx student leaders circulated my flier at general membership meetings. Latinx student leaders also circulated my flier and email to other student-related distribution lists that the organization had access to. A meeting was held with a few student leaders to assist with recruiting participants.

Also, staff directors who interacted regularly with Latinx students were included in recruiting eligible participants. These were the steps implemented to recruit participants:

1. Met with Latinx student organization leaders to discuss recruitment strategies.
2. Met with select ECU staff to assist with recruiting participants.
3. After participants were identified, I contacted eligible participants with an IRB-approved recruitment email describing the nature of the study and inquire about a student’s willingness to participate.
4. Once a qualifying collegian expressed interest to participate in the study, I followed up by scheduling a date/time and confidential location for an interview.

5. Once a date, time, and location were mutually agreed on, the recruitment process repeated until a minimum of 15 participants were interviewed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted while the remaining participants were screened, recruited, and interviewed.

6. Participant inquiries were handled on a first-come, first-serve basis. The recruitment process ensured the representation of participants by gender and varying AfroLatinx identities (e.g., country of origin, sexual orientation, U.S. and foreign-born).

Procedures

Participant interviews. Life experiences are stored in the form of stories and when asked to describe their experiences in an open-ended way, people will respond with narratives (Josselson, 2013). AfroLatinx undergraduate students participated in confidential, semi-structured interviews in Fall 2019. Each interview was conducted in a private, quiet room that was only accessible to me and the participants. Interviews ranged from 45 to 60 minutes. To ensure credibility, interviews were audio-recorded with permission from participants in the beginning. Each interview commenced with less intrusive questions to learn about an AfroLatinx student’s background. After some trust and rapport were established, we moved onto personal questions to learn about their family and environmental influences that formed their identity, including peer relations relative to validation and intragroup marginalization.

Artifacts. Participants were encouraged to bring an artifact to the interview session. Participants were welcome to bring an image, picture, poem, drawing, and/or physical object to share its meaning relative to their identity. Images and physical objects were treated as socially situated narrative texts (Salmon & Riessman, 2013). The use of artifacts helped participants make
connections to past events that would not have been possible by interview alone. Researchers (Hurdley, 2006; Miller, 2008; Pink, 2009) have argued that artifacts are integral to our lives and they should not be considered separate from people and their social lives. Roswell (2011) posits that this data collection approach “not only contextualizes research in space, time, and through identities but also regards material worlds as reflections of people’s real lives and real-world settings” (p. 334). The sharing of an artifact was optional and participants were not excluded and/or penalized for not bringing or sharing it during the interview.

**Focus Group Interview.** The goal of the focus group was to better understand the experiences of AfroLatinx collegians collectively and to share their feelings and thoughts openly among other AfroLatinx participants. According to Krueger and Casey (2009), focus groups “work particularly well to explore perceptions and feelings” (p. 7) when questions are phrased and sequenced, so they are easy to understand and logical to the participants. Focus groups generate a wealth of understanding about participants’ experiences and beliefs through guided discussions, during which the group dynamic provides insights into the world of the participants (Morgan, 1998). A focus group was held in late Fall 2019 for AfroLatinx collegians who participated in the interview phase. The focus group promoted a sense of belonging by “connect[ing] participants with each other and offer a healing and empowering space to assert their Afro-Latinidad” (Haywood, 2017, p. 768). The focus group lasted 90 minutes and six participants attended. The findings allowed for data triangulation by comparing information and emergent themes from both the semi-structured interviews and the focus group.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

To paraphrase Blee & Taylor (2002), semi-structured interviewing methods allow the data analysis process to begin simultaneously because it requires the researcher to begin analyzing data
as it is being collected. After each interview, audio-recorded responses were transcribed verbatim by me or through a certified third-party company specializing in transcriptions. Once the transcription process was completed, each transcript was “cleaned” to ensure greater response accuracy. Any identifying information that could be linked to a specific respondent was removed to ensure confidentiality.

Similar to qualitative studies that employed narratives and counter-storytelling on the racialized experiences of students (Hubain, Allen, Harris, and Linder, 2016; Haywood, 2017), I utilized a three-cycle coding process using analytic coding (Saldaña, 2009).

The first cycle of coding used initial coding. Initial coding involved breaking down qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examining them, and comparing them for similarities and differences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This coding process involved a line-by-line analysis to identify key terms and make logical sense of AfroLatinx responses that appeared throughout different parts of the interview. I searched for keywords and phrases that aligned with the tenets of each respective framework used in this study. Additionally, I used color Post-Its to record and visualize emerging themes before using computerized software to further analyze the information gathered from participants. I did not assume that participants would provide explicit and discernible responses to their racialized experiences. As Pierce (1974) asserts, “one must not look for the gross and obvious. The subtle, cumulative miniassault is the substance of today’s racism” (p. 516). While colorism and racism are different concepts, the interplay between both was self-evident. Skin color served as the most obvious criterion in determining how a person was evaluated and judged because of the deeply entrenched racism in the U.S. in which dark skin is demonized and light skin is celebrated (Tharps, 2016). Also, structural coding was used for analyzing the information gathered from the focus group. Structural coding applies a content-
based or conceptual phrase representing a topic of inquiry to a segment of data to both code and categorizes the data corpus that relates to a specific research question used to frame the interview (MacQueen et al., 2008). According to Saldaña (2009), this elemental coding method is appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies, but particularly for research employing multiple participants, semi-structured data-gathering protocols and suggests that it is “more suitable for interview transcripts than any other data” (p. 67).

In the second cycle of coding, I revisited the transcripts to search for patterns. Pattern codes are explanatory or inferential codes, ones that identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation and pull together a lot of information into a more meaningful and parsimonious unit of analysis (Saldaña, 2009). Pattern coding is an integral process of thematic analysis. Portions or chunks of data that did not fit a pattern was set aside under a “Miscellaneous” category and revisited after the coding process was complete to search for possible connections to the three main themes. This allowed for the creation of subthemes not directly related to a specific interview question but provided an informative context for understanding AfroLatinxs’ racialized experiences. As it relates to intentions to persist, I looked for patterns associated with a sense of belonging (i.e., peer interactions/support, diverse programs, and student/club organizations) to better understand its effects on persistence. Tinto (1993) provides a frame in his model in which a sense of belonging is tied to individual and institutional commitments. Tucker’s (1999) Modified Version of Tinto’s (1993) Student Interaction Theory, specifically Sense of Community, focused on the experiences of collegians’ transition and adjustment to college. As part of the analysis phase, I looked for patterns that aligned with both of these lenses in search of connections relative to the racialized experiences of AfroLatinx collegians.
In the third cycle of coding, categories were created to represent themes that emerged from the previous cycle. These themes contributed to the narrative that retold AfroLatinx collegian’s experience. These themes were examined against the tenets of CRT, LatCrit, and Validation Theory. Each theme was color-coded and categorized under the appropriate theoretical frame. This winnowing process helped me make sense of usable data that illuminated matters on race, racism, racialization, colorism, validation, and intragroup marginalization for responses that were explicitly and/or implicitly shared by participants.

As part of the overall analysis process, I searched for information through the lenses of CRT and LatCrit. This analysis approach was utilized in numerous studies using the CRT/LatCrit (Haywood, 2017; Solórzano, and Yosso, 2001; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, and Solórzano, 2009;) to ensure that the methodological frameworks for my study aligned with the core tenets of critical race scholarship to uncover and disrupt dominant ways of knowing and conducting research that incorporates anti-racist, anti-hierarchical, emancipatory agenda (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001) and “explore the various ways in which racial thinking operates” (Flores, 2000, p. 437). The thematic labels aligned with each theoretical framework identified and the two research questions that guided the study.

NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, was used to manage and analyze the coded data to identify emergent themes. All qualitative components related to my study—interview transcriptions, audio-recordings, research memos, and thematic categorization—were organized and stored in NVivo until the study was completed. Access to data is only accessible to me and all information stored on my laptop, including external hard drive and cloud-based storage, is password protected.
Privacy and Confidentiality

Participants in both the individual interviews and the focus group were read an Informed Consent Form. The Informed Consent Form clearly stated and outlined the description of the study, any potential benefits and/or risks, a statement regarding voluntary participation, confidentiality statement regarding steps to protect a participant’s identity, their right to withdraw from the study at any time without reason, and my contact information for any question and/or concerns after the interview concluded. Participants were given sufficient time to review and ask questions regarding any element of the Informed Consent process. Once a participant stated that s/he fully understood the purpose of my study, had no further questions, and signed the Informed Consent Form, the interview and/or focus group commenced. Participants were also informed that they were allowed to refrain from answering any question, may discontinue, and/or withdraw their participation at any time without penalty. Once the interviews and the focus group were completed, participants were told that a de-identified, confidential copy of the interview transcript will be sent to the email address provided. This allowed participants to review their responses for clarity and accuracy. I also made myself available to participants who were interested in meeting to go over the transcript and provide clarification in person. Upon completion of the study, audio-recordings and any notes associated with the focus group were codified and permanently destroyed.

All participants received a pseudonym to protect their identity. I gave participants the option of selecting a pseudonym that represented their identity. The university is referred to as East Coast University or ECU throughout the dissertation and not by its actual name. This is common practice in qualitative studies to protect the identity of the institution. The same process was used in providing pseudonyms for student clubs and organizations. During interviews,
participants were asked not to use any names or identifiers. If participants use names during the interview, the names were struck from the transcription.

**TRUSTWORTHINESS AND QUALITY OF RESEARCH**

To enhance validity and ensure trustworthiness, data triangulation was applied. Triangulation is a key component of qualitative research. In triangulation, researchers make use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To protect the quality of the results, the following strategies were employed in the study’s protocol.

**Role of the Researcher.** As an AfroLatinx who is proud of his Dominican heritage, establishing a rapport with the participants was paramount. The concept of *confianza* was used in interacting with the participants. Confianza is the Spanish term for “trust.” It is an advantageous concept for researchers of Latinx heritage. According to literature, confianza suggests that individuals of Latinx heritage are more likely to communicate openly and honestly with other members of and familiar with Latinx heritage based largely on personal relationships and rapport…the idea that a person “knows us” or “is one of us” far outweighs that person’s credentials or professional accomplishments (Common Ground International, 2010). Latinxs instill a greater sense of trust that is tied to an individual’s cultural heritage rather than the institution. Familiarity with a person’s cultural affiliation and lived experience established a comfortable level of trust with the AfroLatinx collegians. To encourage a candid conversation, some of my cultural background information was shared to make a connection and help participants feel relaxed during the interview sessions.

The key to fostering a sense of confianza involved helping participants feel connected from the outset. An obvious strategy involved sharing parts of my own background experience,
especially my Dominicanidad and Washington Heights roots, particularly for AfroLatinxs of Dominican heritage. As a self-identifying AfroLatinx and college graduate, this information proved helpful in establishing a connection since we shared a similar lived experience. Also, participants were encouraged to converse between English and Spanish, assuming they possessed a certain degree of bilingual proficiency. Conversing between English and Spanish allowed AfroLatinxs to feel “at home” during the interview session. Similarly, I conversed in English and Spanish and incorporated popular slang to connect better with participants. Collegians who took part in the interview were invited to participate in a focus group. Yosso et al. (2009) stated that this as an opportunity to build trust and as a member check by asking “participants during and at the completion of the focus groups to provide whatever clarifications they felt necessary and express any additional thoughts about issues that arose during the discussion” (p. 666). Also, having the participants together in a room and the focus group facilitated by an AfroLatinx encouraged greater conversation that augmented individual narratives. The focus group allowed participants to revisit and retell their experiences collectively with a greater sense of trust.

These compelling stories were not influenced by me and/or by any other individuals. My researcher positionality was used to establish rapport to gain some level of trust as an AfroLatinx. Although time was limited in establishing long-term trust, our shared AfroLatinidad identity allowed for candid and free-flowing conversations. To ensure that researcher bias was minimized during both phases of the study, I followed the interview protocol carefully as approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

As part of qualitative research, I reflected on how my role in the study and personal background, culture, and experiences shaped interpretations, such as the themes I advanced and the meaning ascribed to the information collected (Creswell, 2013).
**Researcher Bias.** While my own racialized identity was well-intentioned, research bias was unavoidable. Confianza helped establish a connection, but also created the perception that certain responses or assumptions linked to shared experiences were already known. The purpose of using confianza was to connect with participants, not to influence their responses. Being cognizant of my positionality as an AfroLatinx, the goal was to encourage participants to share their thoughts without feeling led on with questioning and/or feeling judged based on their responses. A strategy to minimize this concern was to develop and use a clear, semi-structured interview protocol that allowed for adaptability during the conversation. Another strategy involved minimizing non-verbal cues (e.g., head nodding) to avoid swaying responses in a certain direction. It is important to note that not all AfroLatinx lived experiences were analogous. There was a generational gap between me and participants and cultural experiences varied between the U.S. born and immigrant AfroLatinx collegians. Another concern involved participants assuming that I “knew the answer” to an interview question, thus limiting their responses. A strategy to minimize this concern involved informing and reminding participants before and during the interview, or as needed, that the study was to learn about their lived, racialized experiences and not to make assumptions based on shared experiences. For example, if participants responded with “well, you know how it is” responses, I promptly reminded and redirected them to respond based on their personal experiences.

**Respondent Validation.** Also referred to as member checks, this strategy was used to ensure that the information was shared with the participants and assessed for accuracy before making concluding thoughts. According to Maxwell (2013), this strategy is the “single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and their perspective on what is going on, as well as being an important way of identifying your
biases and misunderstanding of what you observed” (p.127). After each audio-recorded interview was cleaned and transcribed, an electronic copy of the transcript was emailed to participants to check for the accuracy of responses. This common qualitative research practice encouraged participants to reflect on their responses and provide clarity and additional context, whereas needed. Also, member checks allowed participants to examine their responses for any possible misunderstanding on my part. For AfroLatinx collegians who participated in the focus group and provided an email address on the sign-in sheet, a report of the major findings and themes was shared for their review and feedback.

**Memo Writing.** Memos are a specialized type of written records—those that contain the products of our analyses and serve as “reflections of analytic thoughts” (Corbin and Strauss, 2014, p. 120). Strauss (1987) captures the essence of memo writing as analysis tied to thinking, “. . . Even when a researcher is working alone on a project, he or she is engaged in continual internal dialogue—for that is, after all, what thinking is” (p. 110). While memos take on different forms (code notes, theoretical notes, and operational notes), I was fluid in my memo writing approach and record analytic thoughts after each interview session. Memo writing aided in how responses were interpreted by me and compared against responses received from the participants as part of the member check process. I utilized both hand-written memos and Microsoft One Note to keep a record of my analytic thoughts.

**2019 Interview Protocol Testing.** In Spring 2019, the participant interview protocol for this study was tested and refined using information gathered from AfroLatinxs who graduated from college within the past 15 years. As part of ETAP 778, I used purposeful sampling to recruit four (4) family and friends who self-identified as first-generation AfroLatinxs college graduates. Each individual underwent an informed consent process and participated in a 60-minute interview
session. The responses were transcribed verbatim and the audio-recordings were destroyed. Based
on the feedback received after each interview and member check process, modifications were
made to the interview protocol and methodology. Also, the feedback received from participants
was used to design a focus group protocol.

**STUDY LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS**

As with any qualitative study, limitations and challenges were inevitable. The first
limitation involved not being able to recruit a large enough AfroLatinx to share their experiences.
A challenge of many higher education institutions, including ECU, is that students self-identified
by race or ethnicity. The demographic information collected uses a racial/ethnic categorization
process like the U.S. Census Bureau that encourages Latinxs to classify as “Hispanic/Latina/o” or
a specific ethnic group (e.g., Puerto Rican, Dominican), but not race. Therefore, recruitment was
problematic as many participants identified as “Latina/o/x” but not necessarily “African American
or Black” since Latinx ethnicity was their primary self-identifier. Furthermore, ECU does not
encourage collegians to select dual or multiple identifying racial/ethnic categories in their student
data systems. To overcome this limitation, I worked directly with Latinx-based organization
student leaders to assist in identifying and recruiting AfroLatinx participants for my study.

A second limitation involved self-identification by AfroLatinx collegians. Some
collegians proudly embraced their African ancestry but did not feel comfortable using the prefix
“Afro” before the label “Latinx,” “Caribbean,” or their family’s country of origin. Many
participants did self-identify by ethnicities, such as Dominican or Honduran, without prominently
acknowledging their African heritage as an identity label. Furthermore, the term AfroLatinx is not
widely used or understood. This limitation was addressed by including the following statement in
the recruitment documents: “Undergraduate students who self-identify as an Afro-Latina/o/x,
Black Latina/o/x or as a Latina/o/x with African ancestry between the ages of 18-25 are eligible to participate in the study.” Snowball sampling was also used to help recruit other eligible AfroLatinx collegians for the study.

A third limitation involved the length of interviews. The length of each interview varied which led to costly and time-consuming transcriptions, or worse, the loss of participants’ interest during the interview. To address this limitation, the interview protocol was comprised of five interview questions, and the focus group comprised of three questions to facilitate a conversation. The interview protocol was piloted with family, friends, and colleagues to make necessary modifications. The average time of completion for all interviews was 45 minutes.

A fourth limitation involved the facilitation of the focus group. The focus group was open to any eligible AfroLatinx collegian who completed the interview process. Focus groups require greater coordination with managing individual participation. However, some participants were shy to speak up about their experiences in a group setting. To minimize anxiety, participants were instructed that they did not need to speak and/or be present for the entire duration. A larger concern involved managing multiple individuals speaking simultaneously without having responses going in different directions. There was also the possibility of certain participants dominating a conversation. A strategy for addressing these concerns involved employing focus group rules in the very beginning to establish order. I passed around my audio-recording device and participants were instructed that only one person could speak at a time. In my professional capacity, I have facilitated numerous focus groups with underrepresented populations and this process has worked effectively. Lastly, transcribing and/or recording feedback from a focus group was transcribed by me to reduce transcription expenses. In doing so, I was able to better analyze and codify responses having spent considerable time transcribing the audio recordings.
CONCLUSION

This study illuminated the untold and unheard experiences of AfroLatinx collegians at ECU. The AfroLatinx voice and their place in society are becoming more visible as many in the Latinx community challenge the racial stratification system employed in the United States, Latin America, and the Caribbean Islands. As Latinx enrollment continues to increase across the country, the Northeast will be home to a significant number of AfroLatinx collegians of Caribbean heritage. A large percentage of AfroLatinx reside in the Northeast in cities such as New York, Providence, and Boston. This study was situated in a geographic region for recruiting AfroLatinx students, particularly at ECU, which is comprised of many first-generation collegians with Dominican and Puerto Rican heritage.

The results of this dissertation are described in Chapter 4 to share the experiences of AfroLatinx participants based on their stories. Chapter 5 discusses what was learned, implications based on the experiences of AfroLatinx collegians, and the frameworks used to guide this study including future direction and recommendations for understanding the AfroLatinx collegian experience and expanding scholarship in this area of study.
CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Introduction

This qualitative study examined the academic and social experiences of AfroLatinx students and their intentions to persist at ECU. Using narrative inquiry and counter-story telling, AfroLatinx participants and I engaged in open and candid conversations using semi-structured interviews and a focus group to learn about their experiences growing up and how they negotiated their racialized identity to establish peer relations and find their sense of belonging. This study was structured by two research questions:

1. How do AfroLatinx collegians describe their academic and social experiences at a diverse public university in the Northeast?

2. How do AfroLatinx collegians negotiate their ethnoracial identity at a diverse public university in the Northeast?

   c. How does intragroup marginalization affect peer relations, especially among Black, Caribbean, and other Latinx peers?

   d. What effects, if any, does intragroup marginalization have on AfroLatinx collegians’ intentions to persist?

These findings are the result of qualitative interviews with sixteen self-identified AfroLatinx collegians. The two phases of the study—individual interviews and focus group—captured their personal stories growing up in traditional Latinx homes and how their racialized identity impacted their sense of belonging, particularly among other Latinx, Black, and Caribbean peers at ECU. The collective stories presented are based on participants’ experiential knowledge and lived experiences that are comprised of life events and personal reflection.
Composite narratives, the process of developing composite characters to construct a critical race counterstory (Patton & Catching, 2009), was used to tell the stories of AfroLatinx participants relative to how their racialized identity affected their sense of belonging. Since some of the participants are highly engaged students on campus, compositing allowed me to protect their identity while collectively presenting similar themes from across different stories to provide a rich, holistic perspective of their experiences.

The findings aligned with CRT and LatCrit frameworks, thus helping us better understand the ethnoracial experiences of AfroLatinx collegians. Drawing on these two frameworks, the findings showed linkages to family and environmental influences relative to AfroLatinx identity formation. The frames allowed for a careful examination of complexities and nuances associated with AfroLatinx identities. Tucker’s (1999) modified version of Tinto’s (1993) Theory of Social Integration was closely linked to the experiences of AfroLatinx participants who were in search of social communities and spaces that mirrored their lived realities and the peer-support needed to feel accepted. Also, Rendón’s (1994) Validation Theory served as an integral prism to better understand how AfroLatinx collegians were received by peers and how these in/validating experiences affected their sense of self-worth and belonging.

I constructed and presented my findings as a collection of interwoven narratives using major themes to illuminate the experiences and amplify the voices of AfroLatinx collegians. There were three salient themes identified:

I. Family, Education, and Community on AfroLatinx Identity Formation
II. “It’s a Tug of War”: Validation of AfroLatinx Identity
III. Social Integration Experiences of AfroLatinx Collegians

The stories told throughout the various three primary themes and sub-themes illustrate experiential similarities and differences among participants.
I. Family, Education and Community Influences on AfroLatinx Identity Formation

A salient theme across the interviews involved family, education, and community influences on the development of AfroLatinxs’ identity. My findings suggest that AfroLatinx collegians raised in traditional Latinx homes had a strong connection to their Latinx identity, but did not learn about their AfroLatinx identity until leaving home. During the first phase of this study, I asked participants to share their personal stories and events regarding their upbringing before going away to college. Participants were given the option to share an artifact associated with their racialized identity. Each collegian was instructed and encouraged to reflect on the artifact and tell a story behind it. In telling their stories, many participants reported that Blackness, as a part of their ethnoracial identity, was not discussed in the household by either parent and/or extending family members during their formative years. Some AfroLatinx participants explained that not learning about their African heritage during these critical formative years was not a deliberate attempt by parents to diminish their Blackness. Rather, they expressed that their family placed greater emphasis and importance on cultural and ethnic pride. Parents and relatives felt a sense of cultural obligation to teach and embrace Latinidad to promote and instill Latinx identity. In doing so, Blackness was viewed as less important under the banner of Latinidad.

Patria, a U.S.-born AfroLatinx of Dominican and Jamaican ancestry, shared her multicultural, racialized experience growing up with strong ties to Latinidad. She doesn’t consider herself a first-generation college student since her mother is currently working on a second master’s degree and her father is completing a baccalaureate degree. She chose the pseudonym Patria in reference to the Spanish term "Patria" which translates to fatherland or homeland. The term is included in the Dominican Republic’s coat of arms and adorned on the country’s flag to represent “love for the country.” Although Patria was born in the United States, she doesn’t
consider it “home.” As a racialized person raised in the U.S., Patria associates home as “a place where someone should feel safe and comfortable.”

Patria admitted that she “mostly connects with her Dominican side” even though she was raised by both parents under the same roof. Growing up in a predominantly Black and Latinx community in the Bronx, NY, Patria reported that she mostly listened to Dominican music (i.e., merengue, bachata) and watched telenovelas (soap operas) which played a big role in shaping her Latinx identity. Patria credits her Jamaican side of the family for influencing her Black identity. As an adult, Patria has been spending more time with her mother and abuelita (term of endearment for grandmother) discussing her Dominican identity relative to AfroLatinidad:

What really influenced my Latinx identity was my mother, abuela y abuelo (grandmother and grandfather) on my mom’s side, my neighborhood and even church community. Even though I was really sheltered and wasn’t outside like that, even at school I was mostly around Latinos. It could be what we ate every day, Dominican food like mangu (mashed plantains) every morning. It didn’t matter if you weren’t Caribbean Latino, your everyday breakfast was mangu! On my dad's side of the family, we don’t eat curry. We barely eat Jamaican food. Maybe once a month. Since it’s my mother who cooks, we mostly eat moro (rice and beans) or other Dominican food...even my friend groups in high school were mostly Latinas. I even had my own quinceanera (a traditional Latinx 15th birthday celebration for young girls).

Additionally, Patria didn’t know much about her AfroLatinx identity until she enrolled in a course on Dominican identity offered at ECU. The course provided historical context relative to Dominican identity formation and its connection to the Black Atlantic world. She didn’t learn about the full extent of her Dominican identity in K-12 schools, home, or community. Although the course increased Patria’s knowledge and understanding of her racialized identity, she still struggled with negotiating her identity among family members on both sides:
I don’t think I’ve lost Latino culture. I feel like it has been accentuated more since I’ve been in college...I took a Dominican identity class. After taking the class, I reflected on what we were taught growing up about certain things related to Dominican nationalism, about who we are, about us as a people. What we were taught was more about European, Eurocentric based history.

Similarly, other AfroLatinx participants described their cultural experiences as rooted in Latinidad and Dominicanidad. Similar to Latinidad, conceptually Dominicanidad encompasses ethnic, cultural, and sociopolitical identity and agency most associated with Dominican heritage. However, some participants received messages reminding them that both their Dominicanidad and African roots are equally important.

Juan, a U.S.-born AfroLatinx of Dominican heritage, shared how growing up in a traditional Dominican household, his mother still reminded him about his African heritage:

My mom is huge on Spanish culture. Spanish poetry, literature, music, movies. I grew up on that the whole time. But she always said, we are part African. Don’t forget that. That’s one thing I praise her for because a lot of families growing up in Dominican households would never say that.

Amara, a U.S.-born AfroLatinx collegian of Honduran and Garifuna heritage, reported that she had always known she was also Black as far back as she can remember because her father shared his personal life experiences to illustrate the racism and discrimination he encountered daily as an AfroLatinx in the United States:

My dad always made sure to know we are both. We’re both Hispanic and Black because my parents also experienced discrimination when they came here. My dad would always come home with stories every day. We would get together during dinner and that’s when we would tell us about his experiences. For example, he experienced discrimination from a Dominican. The Dominican guy called him a bad word. I can’t remember what he said, Black something. But my dad would remind me that they forget that there are also dark-skin Dominicans in their country...but once he opened his mouth it’s like, he’s one of us.
Participant responses varied depending on how Blackness was perceived by their parents and relatives. Except for participants who self-identified as Honduran and Garifuna, many participants shared that they were not knowledgeable about the full extent of colonialism in Latin American and Caribbean Islands and the history of African enslavement relative to their Latinx heritage. Also, many collegians reported that it wasn’t until they left their household and enrolled in college that they became aware of their African roots despite possessing phenotypic resemblance to their Black American, Afro Caribbean, and African peers.

Josefa, a U.S.-born first-generation AfroLatinx, agreed that Dominican pride is paramount to the family’s identity, she shared that their anti-Black sentiments are rooted in anti-Haitianismo, also referred to as anti-Haitianism. Growing up, Josefa shared that she would hear stories of her family’s struggles living in a community with Haitians in the Dominican Republic. These stories reinforce negative stereotypes of Haitians taking over the Dominican Republic, a long withstanding cross-racial, violent relationship resulting in the deportation and killing of thousands of native Haitians and Dominicans of Haitians descent. In challenging ahistorical narratives associated with Blackness, Chetty and Rodríguez (2015) asserted that “even when investigators find a recognizable embrace of African origins and black identity there is nevertheless a strange inability to let go of narratives emphasizing Dominican self-hatred, negrophobia, and anti-Haitianism” (p. 2).

Juan’s parents emigrated from the Dominican Republic and settled in the South Bronx, NY. He has self-identified as AfroLatinx since his sophomore year of high school after learning about his African heritage and the history of the Dominican Republic. Juan learned that his father’s ancestry traced their lineage back to Ghana and reported on the importance and privilege of enrolling in a 3-credit course on Africa to gain a better understanding of his African roots. Hordge-
Freeman and Veras (2019) suggest that AfroLatinx collegians who enrolled in courses to learn about race and ethnicity in the United States felt validated and proud. When asked about his experience, Juan shared:

I can say “Africa in the Modern World” taught me more about where my family is from. It taught me about culture and how it was and how it is today. Looking back now, I can understand why some people go back [to Africa]. Also, I learned the size of Africa is completely different than what I was taught my whole life. I was looking at the map like, “you’ve got to be kidding me”? I didn’t learn that until I was in college. I also learned that Africa is a continent, not a country.

Conversely, AfroLatinx collegians of Honduran and Garifuna heritage reported that Blackness was recognized and embraced in their homes. The Garifuna “are simultaneously black, indigenous, and Latino; and they can be Honduran, Belizean, Guatemalan, Nicaraguan, and American; they are part of Central America and the Caribbean” (Lopez Oro, 2016, p. 63). While Latinidad was central to their identity development relative to culture, customs, and traditions, participants’ parents and relatives simultaneously embraced AfroLatinidad which was practiced through storytelling and partaking in Garifuna traditions such as drumming, eating hudut and machuca (traditional Garifuna meals), and listening to punta, a Garifuna style of music that is often accompanied by dancing and performed on special occasions.

Chatuye, a U.S.-born first-generation AfroLatinx, shared her multifaceted experience as both Honduran and Garifuna. Both of Chatuye’s parents emigrated from Honduras to Brooklyn, NY. Although she is a Latinx woman, Chatuye chose her pseudonym in honor of Joseph Chatuye, the Garifuna chief who fought against the British colonial government of Saint Vincent. Joseph Chatuye is well-regarded as a hero of the Garifuna people. Chatuye took it upon herself to educate others about her Honduran and Garifuna identity since she doesn’t consider both a monolith. Chatuye shared, “I distinguish the two identities by tying them back to each other and how they’re
“intertwined.” Both Chatuye and Amara were very knowledgeable about their Garifuna history. When I asked each of them to share what they knew about Garifuna culture, both spoke passionately and intelligently about Garifuna history. Chatuye provided important context regarding her Garifuna identity to help educate me about its historical significance throughout various parts of Central America. As she stated about the Garifunas cultural preservation:

Because they were shipwrecked off the island of St. Vincent and never enslaved, they were able to keep a lot of their African heritage. It wasn’t until the 1700s when the British arrived in Saint Vincent, they had a long war with the Garifuna people. Once they killed the chief, the Garifunas were eventually exiled to Latin America by the British. The first settlement was in Punta Gorda which is on the island of Roatan in Honduras. From there, the Garifunas dispersed throughout different parts of Latin America.

Unlike Chatuye and Amara, the majority of AfroLatinx collegians had limited historical perspective about their family’s country and the role that English and/or Spanish colonialism played in shaping their parent’s Latinx identity which in turn shaped their enthoracial identity.

Finally, Felix, a U.S.-born, first-generation AfroLatinx of Dominican heritage from the Bronx, NY, reported that he connects more with his Blackness due to his limited Spanish-speaking abilities and not partaking in Latinx traditions. Although his mother played bachata and merengue growing up and he enjoys Dominican cuisine, Felix had limited exposure to other parts of his Dominicanidad. This lack of Latinx cultural connection rooted in Latinidad continued in college:

I just feel more connected with my Black peers than my Hispanic peers because they’re the kind of Hispanics that speak Spanish all the time, use Spanish slang, and I don’t understand any of that. I don’t understand Spanish slang, Spanish jokes, umm I don’t understand any of it. I feel like I can be in that setting, but I won’t flourish how I would in the Black community. In the Black community, I can be myself. I can understand the references that people are making. Not so much with the Latinx community.
The Power of Speaking Spanish While Growing Up Latinx

The ability to speak Spanish is thought to be related to the ethnic identity development of Latinxs (Torres, 2003). A salient finding in my study involved participants' ability to speak Spanish and how language fluency was used to in/validate their Latinx identity. Hipolito-Delgado (2016) posits that “Spanish language fluency affects the ethnic identity development of Latina/o undergraduates” and “influences access to Latina/o culture, ease of identity development, and salience of ethnicity” (p. 100). Three-quarters of the AfroLatinx participants (12 out of 16) reported that they were either fluent or intermediate in spoken Spanish. The remaining one quarter reported limited understanding of spoken Spanish or no fluency at all. Except for one collegian, the majority of participants shared that they didn’t know the words and/or could not recite their parent’s home country national anthem. This probing question was asked to determine the level of Latinidad associated with their upbringing, especially for foreign-born AfroLatinx students. Surprisingly, foreign-born AfroLatinxs raised in homes that promoted Latinidad could not recite parent’s home country anthem, yet they all knew the American national anthem which suggests parents’ strong desire for their children to assimilate to American culture.

For example, Patria embarrassingly reported that she lost some of her Spanish-speaking abilities being away from home. She shared that since being at ECU, she doesn’t use her Spanish as much since many of her friends are multicultural and speak English only. However, Patria does speak Spanish when she’s among her Dominican peers. Growing up in a mixed-race family in which Patria’s mother spoke Spanish but her father only spoke English, it was difficult to communicate primarily in one language:

I can understand Spanish, I can read Spanish, I can speak it but when it comes to conjugating verbs or searching for words to use it is the hardest thing. My mom would always talk to me in Spanish, but I would respond in English. My mother was never really
like, “you need to speak Spanish.” My abuelo is mostly the one like, “pero aprendre hablar Espanol” (learn to speak Spanish) and all this other stuff. But like, abuelo, “I do know how to speak Spanish, but you have to talk to me?"

Chatuye and Amara are both fluent in Spanish. However, they expressed not having much fluency with the Garifuna language since Spanish is their native tongue and Latinidad is paramount in their households. Also, Chatuye shared how assimilating to American culture contributed to a lesser connection to Garifuna culture which is rooted in Blackness:

I actually don't speak Garifuna well. Both of my parents speak it. A lot of the younger generation did not adopt the language. It's because my parents immigrated to America and they wanted us to be assimilated into American culture. They didn't feel the need to put more pressure on us to learn Garifuna, but a lot of the pressure on knowing and understanding Spanish.

During a conversation with María, a U.S.-born first-generation collegian of Haitian and Ecuadorian heritage, she spoke candidly about her mixed heritage and how she was treated as “second class” for not speaking Spanish. Moreover, María reported how growing up in Long Island, NY created social identity issues, especially among the Latinx community. During our conversation, I asked María to elaborate on which groups specifically made her feel marginalized:

María: The Latinos didn’t talk to me because I didn’t speak Spanish.
Researcher: Did they speak English?
María: Yeah, but they probably didn’t believe I was Latina until they saw my mom. I mean we were friends, but it wasn’t like we were close friends. All the close friends spoke Spanish together. I would respond back in English but then they would be like, “how do you understand”? I would tell them I can understand Spanish, but don’t speak it. I can’t roll my “r” so there’s no point in trying to speak Spanish.
Researcher: Describe how you felt.
Maria: It was annoying. I remember this lady one time telling me, “it’s so bad that you don’t speak Spanish.” She was like, “shame on you and your mom.” My mom didn’t speak Spanish.

Cardi, a U.S.-born AfroLatinx of Dominican and West Indian (St. Thomas) heritage, shared how her West Indian influence on her racialized identity is perceived as “not Latina enough.” Cardi was born and raised in the Bronx, NY in a predominately Latinx neighborhood comprised of Puerto Rican and Dominicans. Cardi was primarily raised by her West Indian mother. Although she is proud of her Dominican heritage, Cardi feels more connected to her Black identity having spent considerable time growing up around the mother’s side of the family. Cardi described that being an AfroLatinx collegian at ECU is “challenging.” She attributes this challenge to not being able to speak Spanish and not participating in norms and traditions grounded in Latinidad. Cardi’s lack of Spanish fluency has negatively impacted her connection with Latinx peers since transferring to ECU:

I don’t speak Spanish. I feel like not knowing Spanish is a disadvantage to me. When I meet people, they’re like, “Oh, you don’t speak Spanish?” When I say no, they’re like, “Well, you’re not really Latina. You don’t even speak Spanish.” So, they Americanize me. Based on Cardi’s perspective, it appears that some Latinxs correlate being Black as an American experience, thus negating Cardi’s Latinx and Dominican identity. When asked to elaborate, Cardi shared that she once believed that her Latinx peers “were right. I’m not Latina because I don’t know how to speak Spanish.” Cardi elaborated on this sentiment in the focus group:

It makes me feel bad. I went to a party and they were playing Spanish music. I was like, I don’t even know how to dance this! I’m not used to that. I never opened myself up to being Latinx because I grew up primarily with my mom who is West Indian. So, I never had that kind of experience with my Dominican side of the family...I feel like people identify me as being of African descent than they do with my Dominican side. Personally, I feel like the
Latinxs on campus speak Spanish all the time and they hang out with each other. I haven’t been able to get into that space.

Nativa encountered intragroup marginalization growing up as a foreign-born AfroLatinx. Nativa reported how she grew up speaking Spanish and didn’t get comfortable with her English proficiency until reaching high school. It was at this pivotal juncture in her life when she began being bullied and marginalized for not phenotypically “looking” Dominican by Latinx peers and for having an accent. Although she doesn’t feel alienated by the Latinx community at ECU, Nativa described that validating her Latinidad, particularly her Dominicanidad, is a “draining” experience. During the focus group, Nativa shared how Spanish fluency has is used to validate her Latinidad due to her dark skin pigmentation:

Spanish is my native tongue. The first language I learned, but now I feel more comfortable speaking English. Like all my closest friends speak English, primarily. But I noticed over the past few years, I no longer feel as comfortable speaking Spanish to people who are not my family. I feel that’s because every time I’m surrounded by other Latinos who I know speak Spanish, I keep myself from speaking Spanish because they’re always questioning me, or people in general questioning me about my Dominicanidad and stuff. So, now it gets to the point where sometimes I feel uncomfortable speaking Spanish around people.

When asked to elaborate on why she stopped speaking Spanish altogether around her Latinx peers, Nativa stated:

It’s never-ending for me. Every time people find out I’m Dominican, at least one person is usually asking, “Really...I don’t see it.” And then they want me to speak Spanish for them. It has become a really draining experience for me...I try to keep to myself because I’m tired of the questioning. It makes me feel like a spectacle which I don’t like. I feel like I have to prove myself and I don’t want to do that anymore. It’s really draining.

The cultural pressure to speak and understand Spanish is due in part to mestizaje racial ideology (MRI). Moreover, skin color contributed to how Latinxs were perceived within a racial
society. Scholars suggest that MRI, also linked to Latinidad, has implications for self-identification because it “…places individuals from the entire color spectrum, from the darkest indigenous/African type to the lightest European type, into one racial category that de-emphasizes the impact of skin color and phenotype on the lives of Latino/as” (Adames, Chavez-Dueñas, & Organista, 2016, p. 47-48), thus undermining Black identity. Based on my findings, MRI was used to in/validate a person’s Latinx identity based on how well Spanish was spoken.

Rite of Passage: Visiting Family’s Home Country to Strengthen Latinx Identity

Another significant finding of my study suggests that visiting a parent’s native country, especially as an adult, may strengthen connections to their AfroLatinx identity. For many Latinx families, taking a trip to the homeland is a rite of passage. More than half of the participants reported having traveled with their family to the Dominican Republic and Honduras at a young age. The majority of foreign-born AfroLatinx participants immigrated to the United States before the age of ten, and one participant immigrated as a teenager. Also, many participants did not learn much about their AfroLatinidad during their visits.

Growing up, Chatuye’s parents were unable to afford the entire family to travel to Honduras. Therefore, she visited Honduras in Summer 2019 to learn more about the Garifuna in hopes of gaining a stronger connection to her AfroLatinidad. Chatuye mentioned that her travel experience was “eye-opening” as she walked along the countryside, visited villages, and watched drummers perform Garifuna traditions. During the interview, Chatuye happily shared a video as her artifact. It was a video clip of her visit to Roatan, Honduras. The video clip showed Chatuye dancing to traditional Garifuna music while drummers performed. Chatuye’s visit to her parent’s home country fulfilled a longtime desire to connect with the Garifuna people, and more
importantly, her AfroLatinidad identity. The visit to Honduras served as a pilgrimage to reaffirm her Black identity:

There are a lot of Garifuna events in the Bronx, but to see it in person it was like, wow! A lot of these rituals are still practiced today and the Garifunas have a lot of pride. Although a lot of these people have come to the Americas, you still see their pride whether in Honduras or here in the U.S. Just being in Honduras was more refreshing to see why it was so important and the beauty in it.

Unlike Chatuye, who traveled to connect with her AfroLatinidad, some participants had not visited their parent’s home country as young adults. For AfroLatinx participants who did visit their parent’s hometowns, they were accompanied by their parents to strengthen familial bonds and their Latinidad connections. For participants of Dominican heritage, their journey to learn about their AfroLatinidad is often depicted as an ahistorical portrayal of events and narratives that negates Blackness. Except for encountering darker-skinned Dominicans along their travels, learning about African heritage was not viewed as important as strengthening their Dominicanidad.

**AfroLatinx: A Nouveau Label with Identity Implications**

My findings suggest that some participants grapple with the origin and usage of the AfroLatinx label. The usage of the label is a novel concept for some collegians. As the main identifier, the term AfroLatinx “confronts historical accounts that extolled the *blanqueamiento*, or white-washing, of the population” (García-Louis & Cortes, 2020, p. 3). Some participants expressed that many of their peers view the world through a U.S. racial lens that reinforces a particular phenotypical requirement associated with Blackness. As a result, participants believe that Latinxs who meet a certain “Black” phenotypic requirement may claim the label. For many, the term AfroLatinx was not discussed in their homes, yet collegians used it as a self-identifier in the study. While the label is widely used on campus, participants expressed reluctance using the
label in recognizing their Blackness to avoid confrontation and marginalization among Black and Latinx peers.

Nativa, a Dominican-born dark-skinned AfroLatinx collegian, reported that the first time she expressed using the AfroLatinx label, the conversation with her parents did not go over well. She chose this pseudonym in honor of her great aunt because of their physical resemblance which recognizes her Blackness. She shared how her mother and stepfather viewed her application and usage of the Afro prefix as diminishing her Dominicanness, rather than celebrating it jointly with her Black identity:

The first time I said that to my mom and the father of my siblings that “I’m AfroLatina,” they looked at me like, “what?” They were almost offended that I even used that term. They said, “why would you even call yourself that? You don’t need to differentiate yourself.” This was during my freshman year at ECU. I started becoming more knowledgeable about it, so that’s the term I wanted to use to express my identity. But to them, it made no sense. They saw it as I was trying to separate myself. So growing up, my mom would tell me stories about herself and her brother who grew up in the DR. And sometimes, they were the darkest people, the darkest kids in the entire neighborhood. Because their father had certain jobs and wherever they moved, it was usually people with money and people with money were usually light skin. So she told me about all the racism and colorism they experienced, but even then and even now, my mom wouldn’t call herself an Afro Dominican. I think it’s a generational difference. The father of my siblings has a very different experience, of course, being a pale Dominican. He doesn’t understand. He sometimes would say to me, “I am being racist against Dominicans for uplifting Black people.” One time I said, “you know what, I think I’m going to marry a Black man” and he thought I was being racist. It’s interesting to see how my mom, who is a Black Dominican, she still won’t use the Afro part to refer to herself. And then you have someone else who doesn’t even share the identity and thinks it is wrong for me to use it because I’, separating my Dominicanness.”
Moreover, the utilization of the AfroLatinx label was problematic for lighter-skin collegians who did not phenotypically look Black. Telles (2014) posits that to better understand the experiences of AfroLatinxs in higher education, we must move away from relying on body-based theories and pigmentocracies that sustain finite rules which dictate racial/ethnic group membership. Furthermore, Young (2010) asserted that by focusing on a “Black body” to determine a person’s Blackness, it contributes to a fallacious projection that relies on visible and phenotypic markers and imposes a particular meaning upon the very bodies they seek to describe. As Cardi stated in our interview, “The Latino community is very criticizing. Even when it comes to hair, body type, what people don’t understand is that Latinos have a very specific image in their head about what a Latinx should be.”

When asked about the term AfroLatinx, Julia, a first-generation collegian from the Bronx, NY, described herself as “Dominican, Hispanic, Latina and female,” the main self-identifiers which encompassed various intersections of her identity. She admitted not being familiar with the AfroLatinx label until coming to ECU. Although Julia recognizes and embraces her Blackness, she sheepishly stated, “I know that I have an afro and I am Latina, but I know that it is deeper than that.” Now that she is away from home, Julia is educating herself more about the label and history of enslaved Africans in the Dominican Republic because she’s “proud of being Black.”

On the other hand, Julia struggled with negotiating her racialized identity due to the fairness of her lighter skin complexion. Rather than use the label AfroLatinx, Julia prefers to say she’s Dominican to minimize confrontation with her peers, “I am proud of my Black roots but sometimes being light skin you can’t say that you’re Black. But I am Black, you know what I’m saying? So, I just say I’m Dominican.” Similar to Julia, other lighter skin AfroLatinx collegians felt conflicted
about embracing and celebrating their Blackness among Black American and Afro Caribbean peers due to heightened mestiza and less Afrocentric features.

To compound Julia’s ability to use the AfroLatinx label to express her Blackness among peers, she also encountered challenges from immediate family members who conflate Blackness with the African American experience and/or align Blackness with darker skin individuals. When asked to elaborate on her in/validation experience relative to skin color, Julia shared that her older brother, who she described as “much darker skin,” warned Julia to be careful about how she communicated and interacted with Black peers due to her light skin complexion. Due to his dark skin pigmentation, Julia’s brother informed her to be careful claiming “to be Black”:

If a person who is Black should ask me what am I? I probably wouldn’t say that I’m Black. I just don’t know how they’ll feel about it. I’ve slacked in educating myself because I just don’t own it like, “oh yeah I’m Black.” I feel it’s because I’m not educated enough to explain why I’m Black and where I come from and how Dominicans are literally Black. It’s like I don’t know...my brother is super educated about it, but when I speak about it, it’s because of what he has told me. He’s the one who basically told me that I’m too light and look too white to claim I’m Black. For example, he’s darker than me. I have a best friend I grew up with who is Dominican and Honduran. She has black silky hair and very fair skin. She doesn’t even look Spanish.

Also, Julia’s brother viewed her usage of the n-word as racially insensitive since its origins are rooted in Black authenticity. This is not to be confused with the first variant of the n-word, nigger. Rahman (2012) asserts that “rather than taking word final -er, the African American form ends in a schwa, without /r/, as in nigga” (p. 138). This distinct phonological variant is commonly used as a term of endearment among African Americans, generally restricted to African American males, who typically use the term to address and refer exclusively to other males (Smitherman, 2000). The term has become more prevalent within the Latinx community, especially among
Latinx women, which has angered some African Americans for its usage without understanding the term’s historical origin. According to New York University Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis, Juan Flores, who regularly teaches courses on AfroLatinx identity, in an interview, he stated that use of the n-word “draws the racial differentiations into the Latino community, which I agree with. It’s just an opportunity to check the power that Black Latinos reflect off each other and the Latino population” (Cepeda, 2008). Julia’s brother explained that due to his darker complexion, he encounters racism regularly and she doesn't understand or have the right to use the n-word.

Juana, a first-generation, U.S.-born AfroLatinx of Dominican heritage, shared that the AfroLatinx term is viewed negatively by her Dominican-born parents. Juana has embraced Blackness since the age of 16, yet finds it challenging to discuss her social identity and why she chose to self-identify as an AfroLatinx. She also reported that her parents espouse anti-Black views which she experienced growing up in her traditional Dominican home. Additionally, Juana’s parents were not open to discussing their African connections. Juana reported:

The main conversation is in regards to AfroLatinidad. I always speak about it with my parents, but they don’t see eye to eye when it comes to my opinion. They do know that we have some type of African ancestry, but instead of using terms like Afro-Latina/o, or negra (black) in certain cases, they just use “India” (Indian), or they just say they’re Latina. So, it’s not a conversation we can fluently have because sometimes they shut down.

In learning about the full extent of their AfroLatinx identity, Black awareness and acceptance was fairly a new concept for many participants. To learn about their African heritage and what does it mean to be AfroLatinx, some participants either enrolled in courses that focused on Black identity within Latinx culture. Moreover, some collegians spoke at length about the ECU AfroLatinx student forum held in Spring 2018. The forum was funded in part by the university’s diversity office and co-sponsored by a myriad of multicultural student clubs and organizations.
The knowledge gained in both areas, academic and social learning, contributed to a better understanding of ethnoracial identity. Chatuye spoke enthusiastically about her involvement in spearheading the AfroLatinx student forum. She shared that this was the first and only time that such a forum was held and devoted to AfroLatinidad. The event was highly attended by Black and Latinx collegians from across different clubs and organizations. Chatuye worked with a myriad of ECU multicultural student organizations to retell the narrative of Blackness in Latin American and the Caribbean Islands as it relates to AfroLatinx identity:

I had the honor of being part of a board. It talked about immigration and how issues affect first-generation students. I was chosen to speak on a panel. This was part of a university diversity initiative that partnered with the Student Association...I actually had a program called “Why Can’t I Be Both: The AfroLatinx Experience.” It was in collaboration with Black- and Latinx-based organizations. I was the representative for the Black student-based organization. I had the African-based student organization educate on the slave trade and how that affected us. I wanted that historical background included. Also, someone from the Latinx-based organization could tie all of the pieces together. So, we were all working together simultaneously to have this one big piece. It was funny to me because I didn’t expect to have such a huge turnout. We had about 70 people come out for a first-time program. People were so happy that I had this discussion because they had never been to a program that focused on AfroLatinxs.

**Community and Environmental Influences on AfroLatinx Identity**

My findings suggest that neighborhoods and communities with a strong presence of Black Americans, Afro Caribbean, and Africans positively influenced AfroLatinxs’ understanding and acceptance of their Blackness. Many participants reported that acceptance and embracing of Blackness are connected to Black American culture (i.e, music, hip hop movement, social justice issues), thus creating an identity conundrum. Although many participants experienced having
received anti-Black messages (to be discussed further in the next section) from parents and family members, they were able to develop and maintain positive relationships with their Black peers.

Manny, a 19-year-old, AfroLatinx collegian born in Santiago, Dominican Republic, shared his experience as a foreign-born collegian. Manny’s mother immigrated to the United States when he was five years old and settled in Miami, FL. Manny shared his experience as a self-identified Black Dominican and how both communities influenced his Black identity:

Once I got to college, I began self-identifying as Black and Dominican because I started learning more about history and what really happened...I self-identified as AfroLatino before I even knew it what it was because my first friends from Queens were Black. Growing up, I’ve always been in the Black community. It’s just natural to me. I never saw a boundary like, “there’s Spanish people or Black people or Dominicans.” I just see them as my people. So, I don’t see a problem with it until others start talking about it...the whole conversation you see online about “I’m Dominican, I’m not Black,” that just got me curious. So, I started researching and thinking, “I don’t know how one can say that.” That’s how I came to self-identify as Black and Dominican...I began to self-identify like this around freshman year because I was in a different environment. I’m not in the Bronx anymore. Coming to college, I was going to learn more about myself a little more, about who I am. This was part of that process.

Juan’s lived experience is rooted in African culture. Growing up, his South Bronx community influenced his Black identity during his developmental years. Juan stated:

Growing up, I was mostly around African Americans. There was a mix, of course. There were a lot of Dominicans in my neighborhood. but it was mostly African Americans. That’s just who I was around. Those were the cards I was dealt with. That’s what I adapted to.

Similarly, Mirabal, an AfroLatinx of Dominican heritage born in Washington Heights, NY, shares how her community was instrumental in shaping her identity. Mirabal chose her pseudonym in honor of the Mirabal sisters—Patria, Minerva, María Teresa—who lost their lives protesting the
dictatorship of the late Dominican president Rafael Leónidas Trujillo. Mirabal credits hip hop culture and being raised in the South Bronx for affirming her Black authenticity. She shared:

"Hip hop is a part of me that I now identify more with my Black and AfroLatínx identity. I really go hard for hip hop because it’s culture. I live right around where hip hop was created on Sedgwick Ave…hip hop is just a different lifestyle. The music, dancing, the culture. I always identify with my Dominican roots, but I also identify with my Black roots as well."

To paraphrase García-Louis and Cortes (2020), “hip hop culture has been an important cultural domain for the playful expression of an AfroLatínx self that exists across borders – be they national, linguistic, racial, or economic” (p. 11). Participant responses aligned with López et al. (2017) “street race” theory in that AfroLatínxs are comprised of multiple identities that are not always recognized by the larger society, but rather how others perceive their race on the streets. This street race theory holds for many AfroLatínx collegians at ECU.

**Anti-Black Messaging in Latinx Homes and Communities**

A common theme among AfroLatínx participants who grew up in a traditional Latinx home centered on anti-Black messages received from parents and/or relatives. Demo and Hughes (1990) posit that “parental messages concerning the meaning of being black, are important in shaping racial identity” (p. 364). Many of the participants shared that they were frequently exposed to racist messages associated with Blackness, particularly as it pertained to African Americans and Haitians. AfroLatínx participants who self-identified as Honduran, Garifuna, and/or mixed ancestry (i.e., Jamaican-Dominican, Trinidadian-Dominican) had a different experience. Despite growing up in traditional Latinx homes, these participants were exposed to both Latinx and Afro Caribbean traditions. As a result, both Black and Latinx identities were equally embraced, practiced, and honored in their households.
As for participants who were raised around family members who possessed anti-Black views, many blame the U.S. media outlets (i.e., commercials, TV shows, literature) for reinforcing negative views of Blackness. Moreover, AfroLatinx collegians of Dominican heritage expressed similar experiences relative to socio-political propaganda perpetuated by the government and media in the Dominican Republic. Torres-Saillant (1998), a prominent scholar on Dominican history and identity, states that “anti-Black feeling has been promoted in the media, school textbooks, and speeches...promoting an image of national identity that stressed the Hispanic European roots of the country’s population and omitted any mention of African heritage” (p. 143). Although sections of these findings portrayed Dominican families as supporting anti-Black ideology, it is important to state that these racist beliefs are intergenerational and likely the result of grandparents raised during the President Trujillo era (1931-1961).

Julia reported that her identity confusion is due to anti-Black messages she learned in her Dominican home. As a child, Julia candidly shared hearing racist views about Black Americans:

Growing up, I had all types of friends. White friends, Black friends, all kinds of friends. But I was definitely more like (long pause)...you know like a little racist because you grow up in a Dominican household. Your Dominican family speak about Black people as if we’re not the same. For example, joking about stuff between family like, “oh, no te busca un negro” (Oh, don’t find yourself a Black guy), that’s going to ruin the family. In terms of skin color, un prieto (Black), so it's as if Black people were lesser than us even though that’s who we share roots with. I never noticed that racism carries in a lot of Dominican families. Shaming Black people and not embracing their Blackness.

As for Juana, she reported gaining a better understanding of her AfroLatinidad after a trip to Peru during her junior year of high school. The class visited a local museum called Museo de Chincha in Chincha Alta. During a museum tour, Juana came across a large display depicting an early Peruvian caste system based on a person’s skin complexion. Juana shared an image of the
caste diagram as her artifact and reflected on the connection between what she learned about her AfroLatinx identity and how skin color was interpreted and used to categorize individuals:

I know that my grandfather calls me *negra* (Black), but then I hear my family be like, ‘*oh no, tu eres india* (oh no, you’re Indian) or *tu eres morena* (brown). I hear those words constantly and I never understood where they come from. So that picture explains to me the family tree or basically how certain words were created. For example, there is a word called “*salta patras.*” So instead of pushing your generation forward, to increase your whiteness, you decrease…salta patras.

In explaining the caste diagram used to categorize Peruvians by skin gradients, Juana shared that she was familiar with many of the terms on the chart having heard them growing up. She also noticed that the “salta patras” phrase was at the bottom of two categories, implying that Peruvians of darker complexion were viewed as less than. The chart further supports Juana’s understanding of AfroLatinidad and darker skin tone. The caption above the caste diagram reads: “*Let’s see some* ‘castes’ *that developed in the country. It should be noted that according to the logistic of the time, the lighter the skin, the more intelligent and civilized the person would be considered.*”

The caste diagram was translated by a native Spanish speaker of Dominican heritage who is a graduate of ECU. Within the context of this chart, the bilingual translator reported that the phrase “salta patras” most likely refers to issues of social mobility or “no racial progress or advancement.” This newly acquired knowledge helped Juana correlate skin color discriminatory practices of Peruvian culture relative to the classism and racism she experienced as part of her Dominican upbringing. This was an interesting perspective since racism in Peru differs from that in the United States. In an interview with an Afro-Peruvian lawyer, Dzidzienyo and Oboler (2005) assert that “although there is ‘hidden’ racism (*racismo solapado*), there is no explicit racial discrimination in Peru” (p. 76).
Josefa shared her anti-Black experiences growing up in a strict Dominican household with clergy parents. Josefa described her mother as darker brown and her father as light-skin, or “White” complexion. Although Josefa is proud of her Dominican heritage, she reported not learning anything about her African roots until she arrived at ECU. In discussing the story behind an elephant drawing that was created from sand by a Dominican artist, Josefa reflected on how the elephant is connected to Africa which reaffirms her Black identity. When asked if she had used the artifact to explain to her parents the connection to Africa, Josefa stated: “The topic of being African being discussed with my family does not go lightly. Even just explaining to my family, ‘oh you’re racist,’ or you have a piece of you from Africa, it is not welcomed in the household.” Josefa was regularly exposed to racist messages despite her dark brown skin tone. Josefa reported:

My family never associated with being Black. So, the term AfroLatina only came about as I was applying to college. I can say that I come from a racist home because they don’t like to associate themselves with Black people. Even saying that I’m Afro-Latina it’s like, oh my God why are you saying that? I didn’t come to realize I was Afro-Latina until I came to college and I experienced the life of being Black and Latina at the same time because any other time it was like, you’re Latina and that’s it.

Josefa reported that she was raised to believe that “being Latina” and “Dominican culture was the only option” is what mattered most to her parents. Josefa is the only sibling to self-identify as both Black and Latina, which created tension with her parents, family, and church community. Additionally, Josefa reported that anti-Black views are shared by the Dominican community to which her family belongs. Josefa reported that there are family members who are as dark or darker than her skin tone, yet they refuse to acknowledge their Blackness. When asked how relatives perceive themselves, Josefa reported that “family members “use the term ‘Indio,’ but would never admit or accept that their Black.” As for her darker-skinned relatives, her parents use the term “Indio oscuro,” which loosely translates to “darker tan/brown” rather than use the term “pierto”
Moya Pons (1995) argued that by referring to themselves as Indians, Dominicans have been able to provisionally resolve the profound drama that filled most of their history: that of being a colored nation ruled by a quasi-white elite that did not want to accept the reality of its color and the history of their race. When I asked Josefa to describe the silencing and/or diminishing of her Blackness, she explained, “I think it is more about a sense of pride. They [parents] want to take pride in their culture. They feel that if they say “Afro,” it will come out as they are taking out a part of themselves.”

My findings also suggest that the denying of Blackness contributed to anti-Black views which resulted in AfroLatinx collegians not fully understanding their racialized identity. Moreover, the labeling of skin tone is akin to “Black denial,” an objection to any reference associated with Blackness, which is common among Dominicans. Sagás (2000) posited that the Black denial discourse around Blackness is “typically pathologizing…preventing Dominicans from recognizing their true racial identity and has perpetuated their racial ‘confusion’ or denial” (p. 125). Also, Sagás stated, “¿Quien quisiera ser negro si ser negro solo significa ser esclavo?” (Who would want to be Black if it only meant being a slave?)” This profound statement compared Blackness with inferiority. According to Lyon (2019), “this approach shifts our understanding of anti-blackness from the individual who ‘doesn’t like blackness’, to the broader arena of racial meaning where ser negro, being black, is only understood vis-à-vis abjection” (p. 12).

**Internalized and Perceived Racism Among Latinx Collegians**

Scholars suggest that internalized racism leads to self-deprecation and the view of the self as intellectually incapable (Harper, 2006; Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2014). My findings suggest that anti-Black messaging contributes to internalized and perceived racism in AfroLatinx collegians. These findings are supported by Cokley (2002) who conducted a study on the inverse relationship
between ethnic identity development and internalized racism in Black undergraduates. Perceived racism had an adverse effect on participants. Perceived racism describes the subjective experience of racial or ethnic prejudice or discrimination (Clark et al., 1999). In individual interviews and focus groups, participants conveyed statements about their experiences that were inherently racist. For example, some participants reported that they straightened their hair to “look prettier,” “not look ugly,” or viewed their hair texture as “bad” or “crazy.” Hipolito-Delgado (2010) found a positive relationship between perceived racism and internalized racism in 500 Latina/o undergraduates; yet, no research exists examining the relationship between perceived racism and ethnic identity in Latinxs.

In a conversation with Felix, he shared how others perceived him, primarily White individuals. Felix’s internalized racism stems from well-known incidences of social injustices committed against African Americans in the U.S.:

I feel like I have to be more aware of how people perceive me. For example, when I walk by the police, I see myself as African American. I don’t want to be perceived as someone the police can target. Like someone that looks like they may have something on them. So, I have to carry myself in a way that is professional, trying to be the best version of myself, not acting a fool. Um, sometimes I think that people might prejudge me because of my heritage. For example, jobs…so if I’m applying for a job and they see my hair, they might think, “Oh no, we don’t want that guy.” Or if I dress professionally, people won’t focus on that, they’ll focus on my hair.

Given his racialized identity, Felix views himself as an African American living in the United States. He equates his Blackness with the Black American experience. Additionally, Felix has adopted White behaviors and norms to lessen negativity associated with being Black in America. In doing so, Felix was ensuring his safety in the presence of law enforcement. However, during our conversation Felix didn’t make the correlation between his Afrocentric hairstyle and
perceived desirability in terms of employment. Given the frequency of racial discrimination cases against African Americans and people of color who are vilified for expressing their true Black identity, Felix still chose to express his Blackness by styling his hair in locks. The heavy burden associated with negative stereotypes regarding Blacks in America did not sway Felix’s decision to conform to majoritarian ideals, even if it meant subjecting himself to racial profiling and discrimination.

Finally, some Latinx families were unaware of the anti-Black messaging passed on to their children when describing racially-mixed phenotypic features as desirable. For example, Chatuye’s skin color was described as “good complexion” by family members due to her medium to high brown complexion. This form of internalized racism was displayed by darker skin family members who viewed Chatuye’s skin pigmentation as “acceptable”:

It’s weird. White people treat me better. A lot of people will tell me, you’re not dark skin. They’ll be like “you’re a good complexion.” And I’m like, “what is a good complexion”? My cousins who are of a darker complexion, they’ll always say “you’re a good complexion.” When I tell people I’m Honduran, they’ll say “Oh, I can see it because of your complexion.” And I’m like, what?

**U.S. Census Categorization Influence of AfroLatinx Identification**

For over two decades, the Census Bureau has treated race and Hispanic origin as distinct and separate social constructs (Logan, 2003). My findings suggest that U.S. Census categorization influenced and impacted how an AfroLatinx collegian self-identified. According to collegians, many shared that it can be confusing self-identifying as an AfroLatinx with limited identification categories on public and private documentation and forms. As far as they can remember, AfroLatinx collegians reported that they have been encouraged by their family to choose “Hispanic/Latino” for self-identification purposes. In the 2010 census, more than 18 million
Latinos checked the “other” box—up from 14.9 million in 2000—an indicator of the sharp disconnect between how Latinxs view themselves and how the government wants to count them (Navarro, 2012).

On college forms, some AfroLatinx participants reported selecting both “African American/Black” as a race and “Hispanic/Latino” as ethnicity to capture both identities. However, collegians who equated Black with African Americans were hesitant to select that option and instead chose “Hispanic.” Some collegians complained that only certain Latinx ethnic groups (e.g., Mexican, Puerto Rican) were listed for self-identification purposes. To illustrate how racialized identity can be problematic, Patria shared a ballpoint pen as her artifact to discuss the burden of honoring and embracing dual identities. She stated, “Whenever I have to mark something off, I think of a pen. I think about the raised box. I think about checking White, Black, Latinx, and Pacific Islander.” Patria reported that she finds that other individuals different from her often determine how she should identify due to their lack of knowledge and understanding of racialized identities:

I was talking with my mother about identity. I was telling her that it’s messed up that the education system doesn’t even teach us about our identities. We have to learn about it as we go through life. We really don’t know what Black means or White means. We’re just assuming from what others tell us that that’s what we are. When I was younger and I had to check the boxes, I would check Black, White, Pacific Islander, Latinx, Native Americans. I didn’t know what it meant, so I would check all of them. Today, I check “Black,” “Hispanic/Latino, and “other.” The forms never have the Caribbean or Jamaican category, so I just assume that goes with my Blackness.

As a result, AfroLatinxs continue to exist and operate in a dichotomous—Black and White—racial hierarchy in which the census category “Hispanic” continues to create problems not only for counting purposes but how society views these collegians as monolithic.
II. “It’s a Tug of War”: Validation of AfroLatinx Identity

Way and Rogers (2015) posit that there is a power dynamic associated with ethnic identity formation in which others have the power to validate or invalidate a person’s identity. A salient theme for AfroLatinx participants is the constant need to justify their Latinidad and AfroLatinidad with Latinx and Black collegians to feel accepted. My findings suggest that darker skin AfroLatinx collegians with strong Afrocentric phenotypes experienced a higher degree of intragroup marginalization, microaggressions (i.e., shaming for not participating in traditions and practices rooted in Latinidad), and invalidation relative to their ethnoracial identity.

To fully grasp the complexities and nuances associated with growing up Latinx, context is provided. Drawing on Rendón’s (1994) Theory of Validation, it is conceptually defined as “an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development” (p. 44). When validation is present students feel capable of learning, have a sense of self-worth, get involved in college life, and “should be authentic, caring, and nonpatronizing” (Rendón & Munoz, 2011, p. 18). As a framework, it has been widely used to center on the experiences of racially/ethnically diverse and/or low-income students in better understanding how to improve student persistence at colleges and universities (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2006; Solorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005; Terenzini, et. al., 1994; Tinto, 1998).

*Latinx Validation Rooted in Colorism*

While scholars have studied how colorism operates within African American families (Wilder & Cain, 2011), less is known about colorism practices in Latinx families (Haywood, 2017). What we do know is that colorism operates as a subsystem of structural racism (Hunter, 2016) and is prevalent among Latinx families and individuals, especially as it relates to intraracial
colorism. According to Herring (2004), intraracial colorism occurs when members of a racial group make distinctions based upon skin color between members of their race. Although the term Latinx is a social construct based on ethnicity, conceptually intraracial colorism applies to this study due to the variance in skin complexion and Afrocentric phenotype.

As a first-generation student, Amara candidly shared her struggles as a U.S.-born Latinx of Honduran and Garifuna heritage. Amara was born and raised in a diverse, low-income neighborhood in the Bronx, NY comprised primarily of Puerto Rican and Dominican residents. Although she has strong Garifuna roots, Amara was raised in a traditional Latinx home. She chose her pseudonym in honor of Diana Danelys De Los Santos, otherwise known by the stage name Amara la Negra (translation: Amara the Black One), a popular Afro-Dominican singer, actress, and entertainer. De Los Santos adopted the stage name Amara La Negra to acknowledge her Latinx and Black identity. Amara recalled watching the VH1 hit show, “Love and Hip Hop,” in which De Los Santos discussed her struggles as an AfroLatinx in the entertainment industry.

Similarly, Amara grapples with negotiating her enthoracial identity among Black and Latinx peers and how she continually struggles to validate her Latinidad due to her strong Afrocentric phenotype (i.e., dark skin, coarse hair, wider nose, fuller lips). Unlike other Latinx peers who exhibit less pronounced Afrocentric phenotypes due to their mixed ancestry, Amara is not afforded the same privilege to own both identities. As a result, Amara is racialized as Black. Therefore, validating her Latinidad is an ongoing challenge. In discussing Amara’s social interactions with her Black and Latinx peers, she shared: “I struggle with which side to pick. Sometimes I find it hard like, where do I fit?” When asked to elaborate on her struggles for choosing her peer circles, she frustratingly responded:

Hispanics sometimes, the light-skin Hispanics, I feel like if I didn’t speak Spanish, they wouldn’t have accepted me. They would just push me to the side. Among my Black friends,
we are all different types of Blacks. They all come from different Caribbean cultures. I felt I was accepted by them because of my Caribbean side, the Garifunas. They accepted me more. We just connected more with our cultures, but again I didn’t like the stereotypes they had about Hispanics because of the discrimination they experienced from them...so when it comes to choosing friends, I didn’t fit more on the Hispanic side because I feel like I wasn’t really accepted. With Blacks, I did feel accepted, but I didn’t like the stereotypes that had against Hispanics...it’s like a tug of war, which side to choose. But I can’t choose because I’m right in the middle. I represent both.

Although Amara embraces Latinx practices and traditions rooted in Latinidad (i.e., television shows, music, food), she reported that colorism played a significant role in how she was perceived and alienated by Latinx peers. During the interview, she shared an image of Amara La Negra to reflect and expand on her struggles and experiences as a dark-skinned AfroLatinx. Amara reported how she shares similarities with Amara La Negra as it relates to validating her Latinidad.

In an interview with *Hola! USA* (2020), Amara la Negra stated:

“Here’s a classic one — people consider me to be physically attractive, and I get the, ‘Oh my god, you’re a pretty Black girl,’ or ‘For being Black, you’re really pretty’…“I went to do an audition for a soap opera, and they told me, ‘You’re probably not going to get the role because they want someone who looks more Latina.’”

In making this connection with colorism, Amara described her encounters among Black and Latinx peers:

So, like when Black people talk about Hispanics, they talk about how they’re racist, how they experience discrimination from them which is what I experience from Hispanics, too. But then when Hispanics talk about Black people, they talk about how they act...the stereotypes [of Black people].

Colorism also occurred back home, particularly among Dominicans in her neighborhood. It’s worth noting that ECU’s diverse student body is comprised of many first-generation Dominican collegians who come from similar Latinx communities. Amara shared an example of
a racial profiling incident she encountered with a Latinx coworker. In sharing her experiences growing up in a Latinx neighborhood, Amara reported:

Amara: I have been followed a lot in Hispanic stores.
Researcher: Okay. When you say Hispanic, please be more specific.
Amara: Dominicans.
Researcher: Describe that experience of being followed.
Amara: Um, stereotypes. They think that Black people automatically steal. It wasn’t until I spoke Spanish with my sister and then they’re like, oh she’s okay. This happened with my first job, too. I went to a little supermarket and I had to be trained by a cashier. When she looked at me, her energy just changed. And I’m thinking, I didn’t do anything to you. Once her boss had her train me, she did it in a way that she didn’t want to train me. And once I told her that I speak Spanish, that’s when her energy automatically changed. She was like, “oh you’re one of us!” I’m like, but regardless of my skin color, you shouldn’t have treated me like that. Then she began speaking trash against this other Black co-worker.

Because she is racialized as a Black American, Amara expressed that her Latinidad was invalidated by her Dominican coworker leaving her feeling further conflicted about her identity due to her dark skin complexion.

Nativa shared similar colorism experiences with Latinxs, particularly among Dominicans. During the interview, Nativa discussed how her dark skin complexion and accompanying phenotype has its advantages and disadvantages. For example, Nativa can sit among other Dominicans and listen in on their conversation since they wouldn’t suspect her being one of them. This allows her to enjoy conversations rooted in Dominicanidad without needing to validate. However, colorism is inescapable among many Latinx who espouse anti-Black and anti-Haitian sentiments. Nativa shared:
I was born in the Dominican Republic and I came here when I was eight. But even as a child I can still remember comments to this day from other dark skin people. For example, “Yo, tu eres Haitiana” (Yo, you’re Haitian) and stuff like that. It has followed me to the U.S., but here it’s even worse because at least for the most part growing up over there almost everyone is Dominican and you just happen to be dark skin. But here, even if it’s not direct, I can feel it. Usually in a room of other Latinos, I’m usually the darkest one. I’m the one that people say she “doesn’t look Dominican,” so I know some colorism plays a role even if people are not explicit about it, I still feel it. I just feel left out.

Nativa shared that when she enters a space comprised mostly of Latinx peers, she often gets awkward stares. This situation occurred during the focus group among the predominantly lighter-skinned AfroLatinx participants in attendance. However, the observations were quizzical. After Nativa openly expressed her frustrations in a safe and confidential environment, Gabriel, who was also born and raised in the Dominican Republic, turned to Nativa to share his feelings relative to colorism:

I get what you’re saying because it is actually true. When I see you for example, I don’t want to lie, I was thinking the same thing. When I look at you, I don’t think about you being Dominican. When I heard your accent and that you actually speak Spanish, I would be like okay she must be…I mean I wouldn’t think you are Dominican from the moment I see you right away. That happens a lot in DR. A lot of people don’t look Dominican. A lot of people are Haitian or have Haitian descent, but they’re full Dominican because they were born there. But people still treat them a little differently because of their color. That is just the colorism in the DR.

Based on Gabriel’s perspective, dark-skinned Dominicans are perceived as Haitian or of Haitian descent because they do not fit a mestizo profile of what it means to “look Dominican.” Patria reported that she’s heard negative messages associated with Dominican identity and Black denial at ECU:
Whenever I hear anything about Dominicans, it’s mostly something negative especially on this campus. When we have conversations, especially about race, it’s like Dominicans this, Dominicans that. And I’m like where do ya’ll hear this from? They’ll say that Dominicans don’t think that they’re Black, Dominicans deny their Blackness, the way Dominicans treat Haitians, and stuff like that. Sometimes I really don’t agree with but then I do my research on it. When I hear that stuff I think...but my mom married a Black man.

For Patria, it was difficult to learn about these instances expressed by her peers since her Dominican mother “married a Jamaican man.” However, marrying someone who is racially Black does not mean that the partner can’t be racist or espouse racist ideology. Patria realized that racist ideology does exist within the Latinx community because she has taken ethnic studies courses on Latinx and Caribbean identity. Also, she has witnessed Black denial from her relatives:

I just asked my mom the other day, do you identify as Black? And she said, yeah. Then I asked my aunt--her sister with the same brown complexion--but she doesn’t identify as Black. My mom only now identifies as Black after having these conversations. I never asked her when I was younger.

Juan shared an enlightening perspective relative to skin color after learning about his African heritage which traces to Ghana. His father’s side of the family has darker skin and African phenotype. Although Juan has indigenous features mixed with African phenotype, he self-identifies as Black which has been questioned by his Latinx peers:

To be honest, the first thing people think about is the color of the skin, obviously. When I say “I’m Black,” people look at me confused like, “you’re Black?” Yea, I’m Black. Do I not look, Black? That’s what people don’t understand. Black is not just color. It is something that you are. For example, being African is not a color. It is something that I am.
Based on some of his peer’s reactions, it suggests that skin color and lived experience are mutually exclusive. In other words, Juan has to have dark skin and lived a “Black” experience to be considered Black by his Latinx peers.

Unsurprising to Chatuye, many of her peers are unfamiliar with Honduras and where it is located. Also, she self-identifies as Garifuna. Given the intersections of her identity, Chatuye finds the negotiation process frustrating and exhausting since many Hondurans have strong Africanized phenotypes. This has caused some of her Latinx and Black American peers to question her Latinidad based on skin color. With a heavy sigh, Chatuye shared:

When I was younger, especially in middle school, a lot of people didn't know about Honduras. So, I would tell them that my parents were from Honduras. Then a lot of them would be like, “What's that?” I would further explain and then they would respond, “But you don't look Spanish?” I guess I really didn't know...like do I act like I'm Latin American? First of all, I'm not Spanish. It was just hard to know how to identify. Also, at the time I had a lot of Dominican friends. So, my Dominican friends would make fun of my Black friends and my Black friends made fun of my Dominican friends. I was just always in the middle, but I understood both sides.

Finally, Josefa shared how some peers reacted when matters of race and ethnicity were discussed relative to her racialized identity. She reported, “So, most of the friendships I have made on campus, we don’t really speak on our race...it’s like, you’re crazy. You’re Dominican. That’s it, there’s nothing else. But when they say it, most of the time it’s respectful.” Some of Josefa’s Dominican friends think she’s “confused” or “doesn’t know what she’s talking about.” Josefa felt that her friends’ views were somewhat disrespectful at times, but believed that their views are due to being uneducated as it relates to their own Dominican identity.
Validating AfroLatinidad through Hair Styles

For AfroLatinxs, discovering one’s sense of belonging among Latinx and Black peers can be challenging, especially for collegians who are lighter-skinned mixed with African, White, and indigenous features. Another form of validation relative to Blackness centered on hair texture and hairstyle. Many participants expressed how they chose to wear their hair served as a major identifier for validating AfroLatinidad, particularly among Dominican collegians. Candelario (2007), who devoted an entire chapter on the role and transformation of Dominican women’s hair into racially acceptable signs, posits that “for Dominicans, hair is the principle bodily signifier of race, followed by facial features, skin color and last, ancestry” (p. 223). Many female participants reported wearing their hair naturally to express and embrace their Blackness. Similarly, male participants expressed their Blackness by how they groomed and displayed their curls, waves, and locks.

Manny shared his love for durags. During the interview, Manny shared a durag as his artifact to illustrate how Blackness is expressed through hairstyle. A durag is a silk scarf or rag headwear that originated in the 1970s to accentuate and keep Afrocentric hairstyles in place. Durags are most popular among Black boys and men to flatten curls and create curly patterns, otherwise known as “waves.” The grooming process requires continuously brushing hair forward using a bristle brush. Pomade and/or hair products used specifically to soften hair texture may be applied during the brushing process. The durag is then wrapped around the head to compress the hair. Also, durags come in a variety of colors and patterns and are worn as a fashion item in the Black community. As Manny explained, “Our hair is pretty coarse. Like they say, pelo malo (bad hair), right? It’s really curly. So, I brush it down, shampoo it, and take good care of it. My hair is going to curl in a way that looks like waves.”
Manny conveyed an ingrained racist view that his hair is “bad,” but is still proud of its texture. He wears a durag regularly to maintain the waves and to express his Blackness across campus. Manny explained how durags heighten awareness of his racialized identity among peers on campus. However, his mother and grandmother were not receptive to Manny’s choice to wear a durag in public because it was perceived as a “Black thing” equated with gangs and crime, a stereotype perpetuated by the media rooted in racism and discrimination. Understandably, she was more concerned about Manny’s safety than how he chose to express his Blackness. Yet, his mother was understanding of Manny’s desire to express his Blackness by wearing a durag. Manny has educated his family on the significance of the durag and waves. This educational process helped them become aware of their internalized racism and anti-Black messaging:

At first, when I got waves my mom didn’t understand it. She was like, “what are waves”? She’s clearly seen it but waves and that hairstyle is prominent with the Black community. So, she always described it as, “eso algo que lo negro hacen” (That is something that Black people do). I feel like my mom, unlike a lot of Dominicans, is self-aware because there are a lot of Dominicans who do have self-hatred for people with darker skin color. I’m happy my mom didn’t instill any of that in me. She was like, oh this is something that is associated with the Black community. She rarely saw Dominicans doing it. But when I went outside with my durag, she didn’t know what it meant. You see someone with a durag on the news because they saw someone get robbed, sadly. It’s the Bronx and he got on a durag, they relate it to crime. So she’s like, why are you going out with a durag? My grandmother was the same way, no me salga con ese pañuelo en tu cabeza (Don’t go out with that scarf on your head)...I started explaining it to my mother and then my family. If you see a durag it is nothing associated with being bad, or gang-related.

Juan also wears a durag, referred to as silky, regularly to express his Blackness and maintain his waves. However, some peers—particularly Black Americans—were confused as to why a Latinx individual would want to wear a durag in public. Some Black peers did not understand
and/or questioned Juan’s choice to wear a durag in public to express his Blackness. This is a common perception among peers unfamiliar with Black Latinxs who are typically viewed by their ethnicity only. Blackness and Latinidad are viewed as mutually exclusive. During the interview, Juan shared his views on wearing a durag around campus and how he is perceived by his Black peers:

Sometimes I see them look at me like, “why are you wearing that outside in public”? And then sometimes I see others like, “oh I see you embracing the silky.” That’s what it is. I’m embracing the silky! I’m embracing my heritage. I’m embracing the type of hair that I have. I’m showing appreciation for my hair which is a big part of my character and identity. It symbolizes who I am. Some people don’t see that. Also, the silky symbolizes something bigger and some people don’t see that. The silky is about taking care of your hair that others frown upon...if I let my hair grow out it’s gonna look kinda rough. I have coarse hair.

AfroLatinx female collegians shared similar experiences relative to hairstyle and Blackness. While AfroLatinx male participants used specific grooming kits to maintain their waves, conversely, some AfroLatinx female participants embraced a more natural look using minimal hair products, and in some cases, no products at all. The natural hair movement is a movement that began during the Civil Rights era and resurged in the 2000s to encourage women with African ancestry to celebrate their natural hair texture. AfroLatinx collegians referred to embracing their natural hair as a way to promote and celebrate Blackness while redefining beauty standards rooted in whiteness (i.e., straightened hair, relaxers, weaves).

Julia, an AfroLatinx collegian of Dominican heritage, shared her challenges relative to validating Blackness among Latinx and Black peers due to her light skin pigmentation. Lyon (2019) asserted that afro-textured hair has been and still serves as a “primary vehicle for racialization in the Dominican Republic” (p. 3) and “where skin pigmentation is determined to be
of indigenous—not African-origin, hair surpasses skin color as the most salient racial determinant” (p. 6). Furthermore, because hair is more readily manipulated than other racialized features such as noses, lips, or figure, it is also a source of race and gender identity expression (Badillo, 2001).

To express her African heritage, Julia wears her hair regularly in an afro, oftentimes with very tight curls. The curls are voluminous that it sometimes engulfs parts of Julia’s face. By wearing her hair out naturally, Julia was making a political statement by challenging established societal standards and norms associated with White beauty. She felt “stronger and more empowered” wearing her afro around campus:

  In a lot of Dominican families, females are always getting their hair straightened weekly in the salon. That was me my whole life until my senior year of high school. That’s when I stopped straightening my hair. My mom would be like, “Oh no, don’t wash your hair yourself. Go to the salon because all your hair is going to fall out and you’re going to mess up your hair.” They were like, “straighten your hair or you’ll look ugly.” If I had my hair out and went a whole week without going to the salon, the whole family would be like, “Y ese pajon?” (And what’s up with that afro?). You look crazy! So, during my senior year going through my process to get my curls, I was being hated on by some family members. But then my mom was the first to jump on the natural wave, too. Now she’s natural as well. So is my aunt.

  Llamas and Ramos-Sánchez (2013) posit that the role of friends for Latinx collegians is a pivotal aspect of their college experience. When asked how she was perceived by her Latinx and Black community and college peers, Julia shared that she received mostly positive feedback, yet struggled in the beginning to embrace her AfroLatinx identity.

  Sometimes, I was embarrassed to show my hair. If it wasn’t straight, I didn’t feel pretty in a way because I was so used to my family saying I looked crazy with my natural hair. My peers saw that I made the change, but didn’t really confront me about it. My friends were supportive like, “yessss, natural!” Even when I got to ECU, that’s when my afro really
grew and started looking like an afro...at first, I was very hesitant to come out with an afro because I wasn’t sure if that’s what I wanted to do if that’s the look that I wanted to embody. Because having an afro defines me. If anyone were to describe me, the first thing they’re gonna say is, “the girl with the afro.” Sometimes I don’t like that. Sometimes I want to show my face more because I hide a little bit behind my afro, too. I feel like in a way the afro has given me power. I feel like that comes from my Blackness.

Chatuye was raised to believe that she had “bad hair” and required frequent hair treatment to look “prettier.” Chatuye candidly shared her experience embracing the natural hair movement during her junior and senior years at ECU. She gradually moved away from wearing weaves and wigs to challenge the majoritarian narrative that Blackness is an inferior beauty standard. Also, years of chemical products damaged her natural hair. Chatuye wanted to gain ownership of her AfroLatinx identity:

Growing up, there’s this notion of being Black with pelo bueno, pelo malo (good hair, bad hair). So, I was in the category of having bad hair...I guess I just had bad hair (shrugs)...Lots of times my mother couldn’t manage my hair, so she’ll put in relaxers and chemicals to tame it. Little did I know that by her doing that it was damaging my hair in the process. She did that to make my hair softer and prettier. I got so used to it after a while that I just wanted to always perm my hair. I always wanted my hair to be straight because I felt like that would make me more beautiful...I was just so frustrated because I didn’t understand why my hair...(long pause) was associated with my beauty and why I felt so strongly about it. Now my hair was no longer what it was before when I thought it was beautiful with all these chemicals in it when I realized it was all these chemicals that damaged my hair. I just got so angry because I learned growing up that this is what will make me look pretty. Once I cut it all off, I had to learn what was good for my hair, naturally. That’s when I grew more patient for myself figuring out what works and what doesn’t work.

Maria reported how her mixed heritage created confusion among Latinx relative to how her mother braided her hair as a child. María discussed how she and her sisters viewed negatively by Latinx for wearing hairstyles associated with Black Americans:
Growing up, we were known as the Spanish girls with the Black hairstyles because we always had our hair braided. So, people would always say, “well, why do you have your hair braided if you’re not Black?” When I first moved to Long Island, people would ask me if my hair was real. Yeah, like why wouldn’t it be? I was no longer wearing braids. I would wear my hair in a bun, ponytail, or leave it out. So, people would be like, “Is your hair fake?” Or, “can I touch your hair?”

**Validating Blackness Among Black Collegians**

My findings suggest that many AfroLatinx collegians connected stronger with Black peers in comparison to their relationships with Latinx peers. Although participants maintained healthy peer relationships with both Black and Latinx peers, many reported having an “easier time making friends” with African American and Afro Caribbean collegians. Rendón’s (1994) theory of validation aligned with the personal experiences shared by AfroLatinx participants as it relates to feeling accepted and a sense of belonging. Some AfroLatinx participants expressed that their Blackness was accepted by Black peers without having to undergo an in/validation experience that they encountered with Latinx peers. Also, Black peers were much more accepting of AfroLatinx who owned and celebrated their Blackness regularly and spent considerable time in Black spaces and communities. However, some AfroLatinx participants expressed that depending on who they interacted with on campus, that’s how they were perceived by peers, which at times, created segregated communities among Black and Latinx collegians.

While some AfroLatinx participants described their acceptance by and into the Black community as a positive experience, a few participants encountered negative experiences associated with less acceptance due to lighter skin pigmentation, mixed ancestry, and in some cases, heightened Eurocentric features (i.e., colored eyes, finer nose, hair texture). AfroLatinx
participants who were phenotypically perceived as either racially ambiguous and/or more closely aligned with whiteness felt a greater need to validate their Blackness.

Mirabal, who is slightly darker than Julia but light-skin with Eurocentric phenotypic features (i.e., hazel eyes), shared her experiences negotiating her Blackness among Black peers. When asked to discuss her AfroLatinx identity, Mirabal described being “confused” as much as her peers when claiming Blackness. Growing up, Mirabal believed that classism may have played a role in how her Black American peers perceived her. Mirabal suggested that she may have been treated differently by her African American peers because she attended a private school and her mother was actively involved in her academic and extracurricular activities. Mirabal reported that some peers marginalized her for having a parent who was actively engaged in her life. Irrespective of her connection to Black culture, Mirabal shared how her mixed heritage and phenotype contributed to confusion regarding her AfroLatinidad:

I sometimes feel confused. Although I identify very much as an AfroLatina, my appearance has always been confusing for other people. Some people think I’m Black or they’ll think I’m (long pondering pause)...I don’t know, it’ll be like Puerto Rican or they’ll just be off. Like why can’t I be both? They’ll be like, “oh the way you speak...I feel like you’re Black. You identify with the Black community.” No, I’m AfroLatina. I’m Dominican. I’m both. Then they’ll see my hair and be like, “your hair is very soft and smooth.” Then the way I speak Spanish, they get confused. So, I grew up confused, too (pause)...although I look like many Dominicans, I also have my strong Black genes. The curls, the lips, and the nose, I love it! I see myself in the mirror and I see a combination of both.

Additionally, Mirabal reported that there is some confusion on the part of her peers as to which Latinx group she belongs to. She suggested that some Black peers view Blackness as associated with Latinxs who phenotypically fit their perception. Due to her light skin pigmentation and accentuated Eurocentric features, Mirabal discussed how some Black peers connect her
identity with Latinx groups who historically are perceived as White Hispanics (i.e., Venezuelan, Chilean). Mirabal shared:

At ECU, many in the Black community think I’m Puerto Rican or belong to some Spanish group, like Venezuelan. I don’t know how they perceive me. I don’t know how they view Puerto Ricans because I’ve never really identified as one. I’m Dominican, not Puerto Rican...we are all one and the same. For the Black community, they don’t see it as one and the same. They’ll think, her hair isn’t as curly. I don’t think she’s Dominican. I think she’s Puerto Rican because they have finer features, light skin.

Conversely, Patria described how she now fully embraces her Blackness and Dominicanidad and is openly accepted and embraced by her Black American and Afro Caribbean peers. Patria described “feeling accepted by peers who naturally embrace Blackness” regardless of their ability to speak Spanish. Patria’s medium brown complexion allowed her to traverse between both Latinx and Black worlds. Also, she spent significant time with peers of mixed heritage to mitigate marginalization and in/validation experiences:

It has to be people of color. I can’t just say Latino or Black because most of the people I hang out with are mixed, too. Mixed like Jamaican/Dominican, some are Hawaiian and Black, some are Puerto Rican and Dominican. It just happens to be that way. Sometimes we speak Spanish, sometimes we don’t. Sometimes I forget I’m with friends who don’t speak Spanish. She may be Latina and doesn’t speak Spanish, but that’s okay.

III. Social Integration Experiences of AfroLatinx Collegians

A salient theme relative to sense of belonging centers on social integration and acceptance by peers and student organizations that embrace Blackness. Drawing on Tucker’s (1999) modified version of Tinto’s (1993) Social Integration Theory relative to finding a sense of community, my findings further suggest that AfroLatinx collegians who belong to ECU’s Academic Enrichment Program (AEP) and/or are engaged in diverse social clubs and organizations reported a strong sense of belonging. Many AfroLatinx participants credited AEP for helping them transition and
adjust to ECU via the summer bridge program. The majority of participants attributed their strong sense of belonging to the university’s diverse student body. ECU is one of the most diverse public, research universities in the Northeast with more than half the student population comprised of Blacks, Latinxs, Asians, and individuals belonging to more than one racial/ethnic group. Latinx students comprised 17.7 percent of the total undergraduate student body, approximately 2,324 students for fall 2019 (IPEDS, 2019).

**Sense of Community as an AfroLatinx Collegian**

Based on Tinto’s (2010) Social integration model, sense of belonging varied by participants' academic interest and personality (individual commitment), including programs and spaces (institutional commitment) available to them to celebrate their AfroLatinidad. Some AfroLatinx participants reported that it was less stressful on their part—socially and mentally—to limit their engagement in students’ clubs and organizations that didn’t acknowledge AfroLatinidad. In doing so, some participants lessened or avoided potential intragroup marginalization experiences. This was most evident for AfroLatinx collegians who had a stronger connection with Black peers.

One area that received mixed responses regarding sense of belonging centered on the mission and membership of the oldest and largest Latinx student organization at ECU, Somos Unidos (pseudonym). According to the organization's mission, Somos Unidos “…is an all-inclusive, Latino-based group dedicated to exploring all aspects Latino.” However, half the participants expressed never have attended a Somos Unidos event or general membership meeting. Many AfroLatinx collegians reported feeling “invisible,” “unwelcomed,” and/or “misunderstood” as a result of their racialized identity and the lack of programming that celebrates and honors their AfroLatinidad. Although Chatuye reported that Somos Unidos is doing better to be more
inclusive, especially with diversifying its membership and programming, the role of educating others about Latinx identity and contributions is one-dimensional:

I know that there is an organization on campus that is Latinx-based, but I don’t see them doing the work about AfroLatinxs. I see them doing the work to educate students about countries in Latin America. I don’t see them doing the work to educate students about the indigenous people of Latin America.

Other participants reported similar concerns about Somos Unidos’ intentions to focus on Latinidad but did not want to say anything negative since many of their friends were active in the organization. One AfroLatinx participant refused to say anything negative since this person’s partner was on the executive board. During the focus group, some participants described Somos Unidos as “mixy.” I asked participants to explain what they meant by this term. They defined mixy as “mixing it up” with other people or organizations. Since Somos Unidos in the past had focused on promoting Latinidad, members would collaborate, or mix it up, with other multicultural organizations to be more inclusive and expand programming efforts. When I asked participants in the focus group to describe this experience at ECU, Nativa shared that she chose not to become involved with any Latinx-based organizations and/or clubs because they lacked inclusivity as it related to AfroLatinxs:

I feel like my identity has stopped me from connecting with so many other people. It wasn’t until recently, about a year ago, that I started meeting people with my identity because it would come up in a conversation about being AfroLatinx. But I feel like it has stopped me from joining groups, for example like the largest Latinx student club on campus. During my undergrad, I thought about joining, but then I would look and I’m like, “But no one looks like me. I don’t want to be there.” So, I stopped myself from connecting with other people because in the back of my mind it’s always, “Are they going to accept me?” or “Do I have to prove myself again?” Or will they look at me and be like “Oh, she looks so
different.” There’s so much more networking I could have done, but then again, I stopped myself because I’m so drained.

Patria reported that limiting how she self-identifies forces her to negate one identity over another, especially when joining racial/ethnic-based student clubs and organizations. When asked to elaborate on this experience at ECU, Patria mentioned that she avoided joining exclusively based multicultural organizations to mitigate allegiance and/or placing importance on one organization over another:

I feel like I alienate myself rather than them [peers] alienating me. I feel like, if I join Somos Unidos, then I definitely have to join the Jamaican student organization! If I’m joining the Jamaican student organization, then I’m negating my Dominican side. I’m not about to choose sides.

Some participants reported joining other non-multicultural based student clubs and organizations that aligned with their academic and personal interests and were comprised of peers with a similar lived experience. In finding their sense of community, AfroLatinx collegians joined clubs and organizations that were a mirror representation of themselves. For example, Patria, Juana, and Amara joined student organizations that were welcoming of AfroLatinx collegians and acknowledged their ethnoracial identity as an asset. More importantly, the two student organizations that AfroLatinxs were involved in focused exclusively on women empowerment and advancing women issues.

Amara was president of SURGE (pseudonym), a student organization that “strives to bring women of color together to discuss everyday topics including self-esteem, empowerment, and careers…” As Amara described, the organization provided a “safe space for women of color to talk about their experiences and empower each other.” Once she joined, Amara began establishing friendships with other AfroLatinx, Black, and Caribbean women. However, she still felt more
connected to her Black and Caribbean peers than the three Dominican women who members of SURGE. Amara shared that the other three Dominican peers, who also self-identified as AfroLatinxs, “had a connection among themselves and the Caribbean and Black women automatically accepted me.” When I asked to describe her relationship with the Black American and Caribbean SURGE peers, Amara reported that she still spends considerable time educating peers about her ethnoracial identity. She stated that many of her peers perceive Latinxs as having negative views about Blackness. Amara shared the following:

They just consider me different. I’m not racist. I’m not, umm…like I wouldn’t say anything negative about Black people. They consider me different than “Hispanics.” But I’m like, “I’m both!” So, technically I am them [Latinx] but not every Hispanic is racist or speaks badly about you in Spanish. Not all Hispanics are rude or like that. So, they always end it with, “but you’re not one of them.”

As for Patria, she is president of a women’s empowerment organization with a similar mission called Supporting Our Women (SOW: pseudonym). According to the student organization’s website, the mission of SOW is to “create leadership and self-awareness among women while fostering a supportive sisterhood and promote a joyful living experience.” This organization allowed Patria to openly celebrate and promote the intersections of her racialized and gendered identity without feeling alienated by Latinx and Black peers. Both participants used their leadership roles to promote inclusivity and raise awareness of AfroLatinidad. Patria reported how she works with her executive board to ensure that SOW is about engagement and not a social club for its existing members:

I’m the president of SOW. When I talk to my e-board and we have our mass meeting, I always remind them that I don’t want us to just talk to each other. That’s when people start coming to mass meetings interested, but they only see them [e-board] talking to each other. I remember when I sat in those seats to show interest and I would see people talking among
themselves and not trying to engage with anybody else, it just shows that you’re closing yourself off.

My findings also suggest that AfroLatinx collegians who belong to a multicultural Greek-letter society (GLS) that embraces and celebrates AfroLatinidad felt more connected with their Black peers. While a large number of AfroLatinx collegians admitted to learning more about their Blackness once enrolled in college, the majority of participants joined student organizations and GLS to reaffirm their AfroLatinidad. Out of the 17 AfroLatinx participants, three women belong to a Latinx-based Greek-letter sorority; one man belongs to a Latinx-based Greek fraternity; two men belong to a Historically Black Greek-letter fraternity, and one woman belongs to a Historically Black Greek-letter sorority. Participants who are members of Historically Black Greek-letter societies spoke about the importance of their organization’s mission in promoting Blackness and embracing their AfroLatinidad.

For example, Juan wore his artifact to the interview to affirm his Blackness as a member of a Historically Black fraternity. His sweatshirt was adorned with the fraternity’s Greek letters. Each arm was stitched with lettering and cultural representation. The right sleeve included the term/year pledged and chapter letters. The left sleeve included a badge of the Dominican flag. Juan candidly shares the meaning behind the fraternity and how it aligns with his AfroLatinx identity:

I’m part of a predominately Black fraternity. It is part of the Divine Nine which is culturally based on African Americans. I joined the organization for two reasons. I joined it because it showed me that they accept everybody for who they are. Also, they care about tracing back to our ancestors. I put the Dominican flag on my sleeve because it represents where my family is from. When I first got to college and started becoming interested in this organization, people always thought I wasn’t representing my people. So, I felt like I was leaving out the Latinx part of me while I was joining this organization because people kept feeling that. I put this flag to show that I’m always going to remember my culture. I wear
the letters on my chest because it is African American based. There are a lot of Latinx organizations I could have joined, but I didn’t fully feel like it represented me. This organization resembles me. Putting it together, the Afro-Latino shows it in the sweatshirt itself.

Felix reported that he began to connect with more AfroLatinx and Black American peers. In his second year at ECU, Felix joined a Historically Black fraternity. The brotherhood is steeped in Blackness with many members who are Black American, African heritage, Afro Caribbean, and AfroLatinx. Felix reported:

A lot of my brothers are African American, so it helps me feel connected. It’s an African American fraternity. The other orgs in the council are African American, too. When you’re in an org like that, you’re always supporting similar orgs. It also doesn’t have to be Greek orgs. For example, Black-based orgs. I go to those events and I meet a lot of other people that are just like me. I still support the other Greek Councils. Sometimes I go to the Latino org events. Being in a Black fraternity has helped me a lot to connect with other Blacks. It does help, but not so much with connecting with Latinos.

Also, my findings suggest that collaboration between Black and Latinx-based student clubs and organizations is integral to raising awareness and educating the university community about AfroLatinx collegian identity and challenges. For instance, Juan credited his Black fraternity for helping connect with the larger AfroLatinx community on campus. Also, Juan enthusiastically shared how being part of Black fraternity contributed to his leadership development and learning to work more collaboratively with other multicultural student clubs and organizations as opposed to operating in isolation:

Amazingly, people always thought that I was part of the Latinx community, and next thing you know I’m in a culturally based, African American organization. Now I’m representing my Black side but coming back to my people [Latinxs] and representing them, too. So, I do collaborations with other Latinx organizations and collaborations with Black
organizations, which is pretty dope because you get to see both sides. You get to see how people work. We do programs separately like with D9 (Divine Nine) and the LGC (Latinx Greek Council) but when we collab you get to see a clash of cultures and it is really cool! Two different people standing for the same thing, standing up for something. We put both our cultures together and make something beautiful.

However, Adelita, a first-generation student of Dominican-Mexican heritage, shared her perspective as to how she views ECU as more divided than integrated, specifically among Black and Latinx students:

I grew up around mostly Black and Latinos. But when I got here, I found that I’m only around Latino people. I think this place is very cliquey. I feel like people just stick to their own. When I first arrived at the university, everyone was like, “oh, everyone is always together, they mix it up with each other.” But then I got here, and Latinos are with Latinos. Blacks are with Blacks. Asians are with Asians. Nobody really mixes together.

Irrespective of ECU’s student diversity, one AfroLatinx collegian doesn’t feel that he belongs here. Angel, a first-generation student who self-identified as Black/Latino of Dominican (father) and Puerto Rican (mother) heritage, shared that he has yet to find a sense of community. Angel has a very limited connection to both Latinx heritages and no fluency in Spanish. Blackness is attributed to his street race credibility being raised in the Bronx, NY, primarily among Black peers. Similar to Adelita, he reported that ECU is segregated when it comes to collegians choosing to align with who they perceive as Black and/or Latinx. Moreover, Angel believes that a person’s skin color may play a factor in joining social clubs and groups to feel accepted:

I feel like everyone is very cliquey to an extent. Communities are cliquey here. Spanish people are with Spanish people. African and Caribbean people are with African and Caribbean people. Asians are with their people. I’m not saying that there isn’t any room for crossing barriers…it happens on a daily basis but it’s just not noticeable. As for me, I am comfortable with anybody. I find myself now living and hanging out with a lot of Dominicans and Spanish people…I guess something about skin color does play a role.
When asked to describe his interactions with peers and finding his sense of community, Angel pondered quietly for more than 30 seconds. The question was rephrased, and Angel was asked to reflect on his positive experience in AEP and describe how it compared with and in other spaces and social communities across campus. He candidly reported:

I know it’s horrible. You want me to be honest? I don’t feel like I belong here. I feel like I can make the best of it. I can make the best out of any situation. But in terms of a sense of belonging, I felt the open arms with the academic opportunity program, but as for the whole school, nah. College is different. If you’re not coming in with friends or people that you know or like you, it’s hard to make a life and have fun…you really have to put yourself out there, but then you get here and it’s not all about me. I’m all alone.

**Impact of the Academic Enrichment Program (AEP)**

A recurring theme during the individual interview phase centered on the importance of ECU’s AEP in helping AfroLatinx participants adjust to college and connect with other AfroLatinx collegians. Participants who belong to the AEP expressed greater self-confidence in making friends. This finding supports Tucker’s (1999) Sense of Community theory in that students with a greater sense of belonging have an easier time transitioning and adjusting to their new collegiate setting. According to the AEP data, in 2018 the first-year retention rate for program participants was 96.5 percent with a six-year graduation rate of 67 percent. Retention, persistence, and graduation rates for program participants—half of whom are Latinx—was higher than the overall general student body. Additionally, a tenet of Rendón’s (1994) validation framework supports this finding relative to peer-support and an increased sense of worth. The findings suggest that AfroLatinx collegians who were part of AEP during their time at ECU had an easier time becoming socially integrated into college life. As scholars suggest, participants with similar collegiate
experiences helped shape others’ understanding through their educational insights and encouragement (Castellanos and Gloria, 2008).

Many of the participants spoke favorably about AEP’s summer bridge program, a 5-week intensive residential experience for incoming freshmen that provides college readiness instruction and support services. Tinto (2012) posits that “academic support programs abound and take on a variety of forms, including summer bridge program” (p. 31) which are designed to improve retention and academic success among at-risk populations in postsecondary education (Lonn et al., 2015; Strayhorn, 2012). These summer experiences are designed to facilitate the transition from high school to college to acclimate incoming students to the university environment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) by providing ongoing advising and counseling that will translate into higher rates of retention and persistence (Tinto, 1993, 2017).

Approximately, 10 out of the 16 participants took part in the AEP summer bridge experience. Overall, these AfroLatinx participants reported that the summer experience helped them transition as a freshman and instilled a strong sense of community with other opportunity cohort members who were from similar backgrounds and communities. Many AfroLatinx participants expressed that they established long-term friendships with other AfroLatinx collegians during their summer bridge experience. For example, Nativa credited AEP for helping her to connect with peers of similar lived experiences, many of whom are Black, AfroLatinx, and Afro Caribbean. The summer program was instrumental in helping her transition from the Bronx, NY to ECU. She reported that the program helped in providing her with a supportive community. Nativa stated, “The five-week summer program helped me a lot because there were like 200 of us. I just loved that I made friends. That’s where I met like all of my close friends that are with me now.”
Similarly, Maribel reported how she was constantly surrounded by peers from all walks of life. She credited her city grit and resilience in connecting with others with similar lived experiences because they endured the transitioning to college together:

Being in this program, I don’t see any color or boundaries. I think it’s more about when you go through things with people. I went through a whole 5-week program with individuals where we all felt the same frustrations, we were all enduring the same rules and regulations, the strict program, waking up early for classes. We were all going through it together. So, we can all empathize with each other.

For AfroLatinx collegians who were not part of an academic opportunity program, my findings suggest that they experienced more challenges connecting with other AfroLatinx peers. Studies show that Latinxs may experience tension due to acculturative—stress associated with adapting to a new culture and peer groups—causing psychological and physiological distress (Adames et al., 2016). A few participants reported feelings of depression, anxiety, and self-exclusion due to a lack of peer-support and a sense of community. For example, Felix was not an AEP participant and did not receive the same level of academic, social, and financial services as many of his AfroLatinx peers. As a freshman, he reported difficulty transitioning to ECU because he was not around peers who shared a similar racialized identity. Felix described feeling depressed being around “peers who were different”—racially, ethnically, and culturally:

I stayed in my room all day, played video games all day. I really didn’t go out. Didn’t go to any programs or do any of that. It made me depressed for the whole freshman year. I was in bed like...I had bad depression. I went to counseling and psychological office. I went to see a psychologist. There was a moment when I took antidepressants. Freshman year was bad, but I did well in school because I still focused on my academics.

Felix reported that there were many opportunities afforded to him to become involved, but he didn’t receive adequate institutional guidance and/or assistance with transitioning to ECU.
During his sophomore year, Felix took matters into his own hands to become socially integrated to find a sense of vision and community:

I applied to be an orientation leader. And as an orientation leader, I worked with a whole bunch of other people of color. I found people that were from the same place as me. I connected with them a lot. From there, those relationships stayed throughout the year. I became an RA and I worked with people that were like me, too. That also helped connect me to a lot of other people. And then when I joined a fraternity, I met so many different people who were just like me, who helped me get integrated into that community.

Felix went from an introverted student to becoming more actively engaged. His extroverted personality allowed him to get along equally with both his Black and Latinx peers.

**Summary and Conclusions**

In sum, families, communities, and peer groups played an integral role in shaping and influencing the identity of the AfroLatinx collegians who took part in this study. Many of the participants expressed great pride in their Latinx identity, especially the collegians of Dominican heritage. However, many collegians felt conflicted and lost having not known much or anything about their African heritage while growing up. It wasn’t until they left their homes that these collegians began to research and learn about their racialized identity as being both Black and Latinx. The artifacts that the participants shared served as an effective strategy to reflect and make connections to their African roots. The artifacts they shared allowed participants to recount personal events in their lives that would not have been possible solely with an interview protocol. Their stories helped to illuminate the complexities and challenges associated with being Latinx but racialized as Black.

Additionally, my findings illustrated the racist ideology, microaggressions, and intragroup marginalization that many AfroLatinx collegians endured growing up and continue to encounter
as young adults. The anti-Black messages received during their developmental years has manifested into internalized and perceived racism among many of the participants. My findings contribute to the growing empirical research (Fergus, 2009; Haywood, 2017; García-Louis & Cortes, 2020) on how Spanish fluency, Afrocentric phenotype, and colorism is used to in/validate and marginalize AfroLatinx collegians as “not Latino enough.” Many collegians shared various forms of bullying and shaming they received for not being able to speak Spanish and/or for partaking in cultural norms and practices rooted in Black authenticity. As a result, these AfroLatinx collegians reported a stronger connection to their Black peers growing up and at ECU. Lastly, a sense of community was paramount relative to retention and persistence. Sense of belonging was most evident for AfroLatinx collegians who were part of AEP, a Historically Black Greek-letter society, and/or student clubs’ organizations that promoted and embraced AfroLatinidad among participants with a shared lived experience.
CHAPTER FIVE
DISCUSSION

Introduction

This study examined the experiences of AfroLatinx collegians growing up in traditional Latinx homes and how they negotiated their racialized identity to persist at a diverse public university in the Northeast. The narratives told by the participants provide readers with a glimpse into their lived experiences and daily encounters as being Black and Latinx simultaneously. These stories allowed for a better understanding of the duality and reality of AfroLatinx identity that is sparse in educational literature. Moreover, the ways race, racism, and racial ideologies influence collegiate interactions to remain under-researched (Yosso et al., 2009).

The combination of race- and ethnic-based frameworks—Critical Race Theory and LatCrit—were instrumental in guiding this study and helping me understand how AfroLatinx collegians negotiate their racialized identities in navigating different environments—particularly at home and at East Coast University (ECU)—among their Latinx, Black, and Caribbean peer groups. In terms of validation and sense of belonging, Rendón’s (1994) Theory of Validation coupled with Tucker’s (1999) modified version of Tinto’s (1993) Social Integration Theory served as integral prisms to assess and unpack how AfroLatinx students handled inter- and intra-group differences while searching for their sense of community.

collegians reported a strong sense of belonging at ECU due to its diverse student body and being part of the Academic Enrichment Program (AEP). However, participants reported limited involvement in student clubs, organizations, and communal spaces that failed to acknowledge AfroLatinidad. Many AfroLatinx collegians described their existence as invisible. Aside from well-known factors (i.e., college access, affordability, academic remediation) relative to Latinx student success, more information is needed on other factors, such as understanding identity, in explaining Latinx students’ sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2008).

The findings also suggest that the racialized identities of AfroLatinx collegians create socialization challenges that impact their sense of belonging across the university, especially among peers. Negotiating between two social constructs—Latinx/Hispanic and Black/African American—was problematic when searching for a community or space that values and embraces the intersectionality of AfroLatinx identity. Moreover, group labeling affects individuals' self-identity and perception which is critical to the establishment and maintenance of social structures (Cruz-Janzen, 2002). For these participants, their desire to “fit in” wasn’t necessarily about picking a Black group over a Latinx group, or vice versa. On the contrary, students were selective in choosing peer circles that aligned with their lived experience, personality, and academic and social interests. Furthermore, many were in search of spaces and communities that allowed them to embrace their AfroLatinidad without needing to constantly and separately validate Latinx and Black identity. Group labeling was further compounded by how collegians were raised relative to family, community, and social network influences during their formative years.

This chapter is divided into three themes, including implications, that are associated with the findings and theoretical frameworks used that guided this study. The chapter concludes with
future direction and recommendations relative to Latinx identity formation and a sense of belonging for AfroLatinx collegians in higher education.

I. Family, Education, and Community on AfroLatinx Identity Formation

My findings suggest that family, education, and community life play a significant role in influencing and shaping AfroLatinx students’ identity. Many of these AfroLatinx students did not learn about their African heritage growing up. Instead, they were subjected to longstanding racist ideology and anti-Black messaging, which is linked to stereotypes associated with African Americans and Haitians. As a result, students questioned, compromised, and compartmentalized parts of their ethnoracial identity to blend in and/or mitigate in/validation incidences that they experienced among Latinx and Black peers. Despite the myriad of racist occurrences that many participants were subjected to growing up in traditional Latinx homes, none of them reported having overt forms of racism towards their Black peers.

However, internalized racism was evident based on some of their responses. For example, while most participants spoke positively about the empowering effects of Afrocentric phenotypes, such as wearing their hair naturally or embracing waves, some responses were contradictory when referring to these features as “bad,” “nappy,” “rough,” “not pretty,” or “pelo malo.” The internalized racist messaging that collegians were exposed to as children and adolescents manifested into an inferior view of Black identity. It is no wonder that these students are only now beginning to learn about their AfroLatinidad away from their families. While the majority spoke positively about parental involvement in their collegiate journey, many struggled to fully grasp what it means to be an AfroLatinx under the banner of Latinidad. As many shared during the interviews, students such as Juan, Mirabal, Patria, Juana, and Adelita are researching and learning
about the full history of their AfroLatinx identity on their own or via educational forums, social media, and/or ethnic study courses offered at ECU.

It is plausible that family influence on collegians is reflective of post-colonial whitening practices, or *blanqueamiento*, that many immigrant Latinxs correlate with upward mobility. *Blanqueamiento* is rooted in White desirability such as the “whitening” of skin pigmentation by marrying individuals with fair or lighter skin complexion—an anti-Black practice referred to as “*mejorando la raza*” (bettering the race). To paraphrase Morrison (2010), it has been postulated by many writers and researchers in the multicultural field that light skin is a quality that allows people of color in this racist society to achieve the high status, benefits, and privileges usually reserved for White people (Feagin et al., 1996; Spring, 2004). Along the color spectrum, the lighter and whiter a Latinx person is the greater chance for increased economic, educational, and political opportunity. Collegians spoke about their parent’s desire for them to marry lighter skin partners to “*mejora*” (to better) the chances of producing offspring who are mixed and/or possess phenotypic features most associated with Whiteness. Some participants reflected and spoke about how watching *telenovelas* (soap operas) with their mothers and relatives influenced how they perceive themselves in society. They reflected on how elite Latinx families and lead characters were mostly portrayed by white, fair skin actors while the less desirable roles (i.e., criminals, maintenance crews) vis-à-vis “the help,” were typically portrayed by actors who were indigenous and/or darker-skinned.

The CRT lens, combined with LatCrit, helped investigate and unpack the racist, anti-Black messages that collegians were exposed to as youth. CRT scholars suggest that race and racism play a major role in the overall students of color experience. Scholars have successfully applied CRT to examine racialized experiences of students of color in postsecondary education (Delgado
Bernal, 2002; Hubain et al., 2016) to better understand the influence of race and racism on students’ collegiate experiences. Furthermore, LatCrit amplified the voices of Latinxs (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), specifically AfroLatinxs, while illuminating the importance of cultural context, nuances, and knowledge in analysis within learning spaces (Gonzalez & Morrison, 2016) and counter spaces (Yosso et al., 2009). Counterspaces provide places of refuge both on and off-campus for Latinxs to challenge notions of unworthiness (Yosso, 2005). As an educational framework, LatCrit was integral in examining how race and racism explicitly and implicitly impact AfroLatinx collegian sense of belonging.

During the interviews, students spent considerable time reflecting and discussing the racist messaging experienced within their Latinx homes and communities. Many of them spoke about these occurrences as commonplace and would dismiss them as, “You know how Dominican families are” or “That’s just how it is.” As they entered high school, some collegians shared how they respectfully challenged their parents and relatives about their racist views towards African Americans and Haitians. These challenges were met with frustration and anger for questioning their parent’s views. When students attempted to engage in discussions regarding colorism and other blatant forms of racism, parents changed the subject or shut down the conversation leaving collegians feeling confused, lost, and disconnected from their AfroLatinx identity. Some collegians were negatively impacted and devalued by these anti-Black messages which affected their ability to create friendships with and date African American or Afro-Caribbean peers. While many grew up in diverse, urban neighborhoods comprised of Black and Latinx residents, some shared that their primary circles consisted mostly of Latinx relatives and friends only, thus reinforcing the importance and value placed on Latinidad over AfroLatinidad.
In a recent interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation (2019), academy award-winning actress Lupita Nyong’o discussed the impact of colorism while promoting her children’s book entitled, *Sulwe*, about a girl with darker skin than her family. In the interview, Nyong’o states that colorism “is the daughter of racism in a world that rewards lighter skin over darker skin.” She also shared that as a child she ascribed to Eurocentric standards of beauty to fit in with society. Similarly, the effects of colorism were reported by darker-skinned participants. The collegians who reported on these experiences were all AfroLatinas. Their personal stories of anti-Blackness and *antihaitianism* provide an in-depth, candid look into their experiences dealing with colorism.

There were four dark skin Latinas—two Honduran/Garifuna and two Dominican—who spoke candidly about their anti-Black experiences growing up. Two participants became slightly emotional discussing childhood experiences relative to colorism and politely asked to stop the interview and move unto the next question. Surprisingly, these racist instances were experienced at the hands of immigrant Latinxs, primarily Dominicans, who resided in their respective communities and/or worked together. For example, Nativa shared how growing up as a Black Dominican required her to speak Spanish from the outset—even if other native Spanish speaking neighbors and peers spoke English—to avoid being perceived as Haitian or racialized as a Black American. The negative and racist stigma associated with Blackness forced Nativa to limit her interactions with some Latinxs, including her Dominican peers.

Amara shared her colorism experience growing up in a predominately Latinx community in the South Bronx. Amara reported instances of receiving cold treatment or dismissive behavior from Latinx peers and coworkers who perceived her as not being “Latinx enough” unless she spoke Spanish. Amara shared that when she speaks in Spanish, Latinx peers and coworkers feel at ease and comfortable in her presence as if to convey, “well, why didn’t you speak Spanish in the first
place” to minimize their discomfort and confusion. Conforming to Latinx norms is both burdensome and inescapable proposition for many AfroLatinx students seeking a sense of community, even at the costs of negating their Blackness. Although these participants reported having not experienced overt forms of colorism as college students, they still experienced various forms of intragroup marginalization and microaggressions (i.e., questioning Spanish proficiency, what music they listen to, or type of food they prefer) as it relates to Latinx authenticity. Microaggressions are insidious verbal, non-verbal, and/or visual acts toward people of color (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

In a study on the examination of skin color involving immigrant and U.S.-born Latina college students and its impact on self-perception, Telzer and Vasquez Garcia (2009) postulated that “one way to help protect darker-skinned Latinos from poorer self-perception is through racial socialization and ethnic identity” (p. 371). Based on these reported experiences, racial socialization and identity formation should be strongly encouraged and practiced as early as possible accompanied by learning opportunities—formal and informal—that focuses exclusively on AfroLatinidad. As Haywood (2017) asserts, “such that if they [collegians] received racial socialization messages from their parents and felt more connected to their ethnic group they had higher self-esteem and feelings of attractiveness” (p. 763).

Lastly, there was a strong sense of pride and connection among the AfroLatinx participants of Dominican heritage. However, most of these collegians experienced regularly anti-Black messaging growing up. As for the families of these collegians who engaged and supported anti-Black views, it was most likely connected to grandparents who passed on this racist ideology having been raised during the President Trujillo era from 1931 to 1961. According to Garcia-Louis & Cortes (2020), “there is a distinction between Blackness and Latinidad in the Dominican
Republic as the result of Black denial, or *negrophobia* (Torres-Saillant, 1999; Wright, 2015; Heredia, 2009) that stems from the history of slave revolts in Haiti and Haiti’s subsequent conquest of its Dominican neighbors on the other side of the island” (p. 8).

**Implications**

The findings of this study augmented the empirical literature on the experiences of AfroLatinxs in collegiate environments. Using semi-structured interviews and a focus group to better understand how AfroLatinx collegians negotiated their racialized identities to persist, these stories and reflections offer practical implications for understanding ethnoracial identities, practice, and theory within the context of postsecondary education.

While my findings contribute to the sparse literature on the role that Latinx families, communities, and social networks play in shaping and influencing the formation of AfroLatinx identity and its impact on socialization, there are implications for supporting and understanding racialized identities within higher education. As noted by García-Louis and Cortes (2020), “what happens in society and within family units directly and explicitly informs what happens on campus” (p. 12). First, participants with multiracial identities had varying experiences depending on which parent raised them. Some collegians reported being raised solely by a monoracial African American or Afro-Caribbean parent. This finding is critical to the identity formation of AfroLatinxs who are raised by a single, separated, or divorced non-Latinx parent who is solely responsible for shaping a child’s ethnoracial identity. Haywood (2017) posits that dual-minority AfroLatinxs with a monoracial Black parent and a Latinx parent may receive different racial socialization messages from their families. This was the experience reported by Patria, Cardi, and Maria. As a result, some collegians didn’t have a connection to their Latinx identity and experienced greater difficulties finding welcoming spaces within the Latinx campus community.
In a study conducted by Smith & Moore (2000), they found that parental support in teaching about and accepting both backgrounds impacted individuals’ biracial identity. Therefore, further research is needed to better understand racialized identity formation, especially for Latinx families, fixated with Latinidad ideology in shaping a child’s identity.

There were theoretical implications associated with these findings. While CRT and LatCrit provided the necessary lenses to illuminate and juxtapose issues relative to race, racism, and colorism encountered by AfroLatinx students, each prism is designed to operate separately to uncover nuances linked to race or ethnicity. While AfroLatinx participants acknowledged and embraced their Blackness, some were confused with what AfroLatinidad encompasses within the context of being both Black and Latinx. This is problematic since AfroLatinidades is an ideology that recognizes the joining of Latinidades and Blackness as one identity.

As for intragroup marginalization due to colorism, CRT and LatCrit do not adequately address the complexities associated with skin color relative to within-group differences. CRT was designed as a legal framework to dismantle racism and oppressive systems and structures most associated with Black American social injustices. As Haywood (2017) states, “as it currently stands, CRT does not account for monoracism or colorism” (p. 777) and “to truly combat racism and White supremacy, CRT scholars must address all the components of racism, specifically colorism” (p. 778). As for LatCrit, it is centered on understanding Latinx identity and experiences from a Latinidad lens that is based on years of empirical studies involving a large segment of Mexican/Chicano students.

II. “It’s a Tug of War”: Validation of AfroLatinx Identity

The need to continuously validate Latinidad produced heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and frustrations for many of these collegians. To better understand these experiences,
Rendón’s (1994) Validation Theory served as a critical lens to investigate the complexities and nuances associated with validating AfroLatinx identity. Validation refers to the “intentional, proactive affirmation of students by in- and out-of-class agents (i.e., faculty, student, and academic affairs staff, family members, peers) to 1) validate students as creators of knowledge and as valuable members of the college learning community and 2) foster personal development and social adjustment” (Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011, p. 13). Moreover, validation theory was instrumental in uncovering “subtle and overt forms of racism, sexism, and oppression on college campuses” (p. 17). As an educational framework, LatCrit was used to theorize and examine how race and racism explicitly and implicitly impacted the educational structures, processes, and discourses, particularly for people of color and Latinxs specifically (LatCrit Primer, 1999). To assess validation experiences, LatCrit provided an ancillary lens to contextualize AfroLatinxs experiences and draw attention to the myriad of intragroup marginalization and microaggressions that collegians encountered regularly and its impact on their sense of belonging.

Irrespective of self-identification, AfroLatinx collegians were perceived as being only Latinx—not Black and Latinx simultaneously—by their peers. As an ideological lens, Latinidad was used by Latinx peers in determining a collegian’s connection to their Latinx heritage regardless of their affiliation with Blackness and visible Afrocentric phenotype. Spanish fluency was the primary indicator invalidating an AfroLatinxs’ connection to Latinidad. This finding is supported by Haywood (2017) in which AfroLatinx participants in her study showed that due to their limited Spanish language proficiency, coupled with their Afrocentric phenotype, “they were placed outside of the bounds of Latino ethnicity in postsecondary education” (p. 773).

Also, my findings suggest that any association with Blackness was perceived as allegiance to African American or Afro Caribbean culture over participants’ Latinx identity. While most
collegians self-identified using the “Afro” prefix, some shared how they were unaware and/or worried about using the prefix before their pan-ethnic label for fear that it would diminish or erase Latinx affiliation. For example, Adelita felt uncomfortable claiming AfroLatinidad due to her strong mestiza features mostly associated with her Mexican ancestry. However, Adelita was unaware that approximately seven hundred thousand enslaved Africans were brought to Mexico and Peru combined throughout the slave trade accounting for more than a quarter-million more Africans that came to the United States (Gates, Jr., 2011). There were other collegians such as Julia and Mirabal who were not well informed about the meaning behind the AfroLatinx label. As a result, they were not confident in using the prefix due to the lack of knowledge regarding Latinxs connection to Africa. Some collegians felt that using the prefix would draw unwarranted attention by both Black and Latinx peers in questioning their newfound identity.

For AfroLatinxs who fit the “Black body” profile more so than others, these participants reported that predominantly Latinx spaces and communities were unwelcoming and limiting based on how Latinx peers perceived them on campus. Darker-skinned collegians reported greater levels of microaggression and intragroup marginalization due to their Afrocentric phenotype. My finding supports Sanchez & Espinosa (2016) in which 40 percent of Latinxs reported being discriminated against by other racial and/or ethnic groups, particularly Latinxs. Scholars have posited that Latinxs have historically denied membership in Latinx groups (Cruz-Janzen, 1997; Escobar, 1999) who fail to preserve norms and traditions (Castillo et al., 2008).

My findings confirm that many AfroLatinx collegians had a stronger connection with their Black peers, compared to their relationships with Latinx peers. CRT was integral in helping uncover and illuminate matters of race and microaggressions that was perpetuated by Black peers in questioning an AfroLatinx’s identity. Contrary to the experiences encountered in validating
Latinidad among Latinx peers, AfroLatinx collegians reported feeling more comfortable and accepted by their African American, Afro-Caribbean, and African peers at ECU. While the majority of AfroLatinx collegians established and maintained positive relationships with both Black and Latinx peers, many reported having had an “easier time making friends” with African American and Afro Caribbean collegians due to less validating experiences.

In speaking about their ethnoracial identity and acceptance by Black collegians, most experiences reported were positive. However, these in/validation and intragroup marginalization experiences varied by gender. Four AfroLatina collegians expressed having a less than desirable socialization experience with Black peers. The majority of AfroLatinx males expressed feeling more connected and prouder of their Black identity due to acceptance by their Black peers on campus. Collegians who reported a less than desirable experience among Black peers were AfroLatinas with visible mestizo phenotypes. Moreover, some of the AfroLatina collegians reported that acceptance into the Black community was further complicated due to their strong connection with Latinidad and Dominicanidad. Although they embrace Blackness, many AfroLatinas still reported a strong desire for Latinx culture and tradition tied to food, music, and entertainment. These collegians “re-contextualized Blackness and Latinidad to be inclusive, and unequivocally not exclusive, of one another” (García-Louis & Cortes, 2020, p. 11) while “further developing their conceptualization of AfroLatinidad and ethnic politics” (p. 12). Mirabal embraces her Blackness and credits the South Bronx community and Black residents for helping to shape her racialized identity. However, she reported feeling alienated by Black peers because of her Dominican pride and allegiance. Mirabal also spends most of her time in Dominican peer circles, but she is still active with ECU dance clubs that are comprised of Black peers.
Finally, collegians belonging to more than one ethnic group reported that it was difficult and draining to negotiate their racialized identities among certain Black student-based organizations. For example, Patria who is Jamaican and Dominican preferred to engage in peer circles with other collegians who shared similar programming interests rather than forcing herself to choose between being a part of the ECU’s Jamaican or Latinx student-based organization. Although occurrences of in/validation and intragroup marginalization were present, these encounters were less pervasive. AfroLatinx collegians sought out counter spaces, events, programs, and communities that required minimal validation and marginalization experiences.

**Implications**

Findings from this study illuminated the role that in/validation and intragroup marginalization plays in AfroLatinx collegians’ collegiate experience. As it pertains to AfroLatinidad, validation theory was integral in shedding light on peer interactions relative to a sense of belonging. As a conceptual and analytical definition, intragroup marginalization was appropriate in understanding the perception and alienation experienced by AfroLatinxs. The racialization of AfroLatinx as Black, as opposed to both Black and Latinx, was key in understanding validation associated with skin color and Afrocentric phenotype.

Marginalization by both Black and Latinx peers is linked to how race is constructed and operates within the United States as a Black-White binary. The longstanding racial hierarchal division in America has created a self-identity conundrum for AfroLatinxs. As a social construct, race is understood and viewed as a dichotomous relationship between Whites and African Americans in the United States. Ethnicity is typically viewed as a social construct associated with family heritage and widely used throughout Latin America and the Caribbean Islands to convey the importance of ethnic culture and traditions. Given this contrast in definition, it is challenging
for peers to grasp how AfroLatinx can be two identities on equal planes. This finding has research and social implications for how Black and Latinx peers interact with each other daily. These social constructs within the U.S. contribute to confusion and division among Black and Latinx peers who traditionally view race and ethnicity as competing identities, which in turn impacts the socialization process on college campuses. Moreover, this raises some debatable questions as to “Who is Black?” or “Who can claim Blackness?” in the United States. Therefore, validation theory as a tool was similar to a “Litmus test” in determining which AfroLatinx collegians were “Latinx enough” or “too Black” relative to Spanish fluency, skin color, and phenotype.

While many scholars have utilized Rendón’s (1994) Validation Theory to assess college success involving students of color, the existing literature tends to focus on validating students as scholars as it relates to faculty and student interactions. The literature on validation theory to understand peer to peer interactions and a sense of belonging is scarce. While Rendón’s theory “emerged as a theoretical construct directly from the voices of students themselves, the analysis did not specify how the theory could apply to all kinds of students with a multiplicity of diverse backgrounds” (Rendón Linares & Munoz, 2011, p. 27). Given the diversity and intersections of Latinx identity, the application of this theory requires further development for examining the experiences of all students of color, specifically AfroLatinxs, within postsecondary education.

Lastly, the experiences of AfroLatinas relative to colorism contributed to them feeling devalued, invalidated, and marginalized by Latinx and Black peers were dependent on how they were perceived. Based on the intersections of identity regarding women of color (i.e., gender, skin color, phenotype, gender expectations), this finding poses implications for theory and practice related to future research on AfroLatinx women collegians. Theoretically, intersectionality as a framework allowed for more careful analysis in learning how AfroLatina collegians negotiated the
intersections of their identity to persist. Although all AfroLatinas reported marginalization experiences tied to colorism, it is imperative that when “highlighting the intersections of identities simultaneously” we recognize “students’ uniqueness and their similarities with one another” (Winkle-Wagner & McCoy, 2013, p. 56). AfroLatinas with lighter skin and mestizo phenotype reported less than desirable experiences among Black peers. It is conceivable that Black peers used Black body-profiling as a criterion to establish whether these collegians were “Black enough” to be accepted within their peer circle. Due to their multiple identities, AfroLatinas may feel compelled to choose a path of least resistance by compromising parts of their Latinidad and Dominicanidad to feel welcomed. Conversely, darker-skinned AfroLatinas may negotiate elements associated with Blackness among Latinx peers to feel accepted, such as communicating primarily in Spanish.

As a framework, intersectionality acknowledges the collective experiences of AfroLatinas while appreciating their uniquely nuanced self (Winkle-Wagner & McCoy, 2013). Feagin, Vera, and Imani (1996) argue that a one-size-fits-all approach to practices aimed at supporting students of color is not appropriate. When examining the intersections of AfroLatinx collegians, scholars should allow for flexibility and diversity when examining student identities since the role of the family cannot simply be divorced from AfroLatinx lived experiences while away from home.

III. Social Integration Experiences of AfroLatinx Collegians

My findings highlight that AfroLatinx students experienced varying levels of marginalization that impacted their sense of belonging at ECU. Drawing on Tucker’s (1999) modified version of Tinto’s (1993) Social Integration Theory, Sense of Community helped guide my study in understanding college transition, socialization, and integration experiences of AfroLatinx collegians. Most participants shared that they were selective about the peer circles and
student groups and clubs they joined. Existing research has shown that students of color frequently use fraternities and sororities, classrooms, and relationships with professors as counter spaces (i.e., areas carved out for themselves) to create a sense of belonging and navigate the academic terrain (Saenz et al., 2007).

In response to these marginalization experiences, scholars postulate that “Latinas/os foster academic and social counter spaces in which they build a culturally supportive community and develop skills to critically navigate between their worlds of school and home” (Yosso et al., 2009, p. 660). It was essential for these students to self-exclude and, in some cases, isolate themselves from participating in Latinx-sponsored events, programs, and organizations to minimize intragroup marginalization by Latinx peers. Many of the collegians reported that shared ideals, interest—academic and social—and lived experiences were a major factor in positive peer relationships and/or reasons for joining a specific student organization. For example, Angel and Manny shared that personality and where they come from was key in establishing peer relationships. Both placed greater importance on being ‘from the hood’ and as Angel stated, “knowing where you’re from to get comfortable with you.” While being AfroLatinx was key in connecting with peers who share similar ethnoracial identities, having a shared lived experience—irrespective of skin color or Afrocentric phenotype—was a salient theme for many of these collegians.

Also, many AfroLatinx participants belonged exclusively to African American and/or Afro Caribbean-based student clubs, organizations, honor, and Greek-letter societies as opposed to Latinx-based student organizations. This finding is consistent with García-Louis & Cortes's (2020) study as it relates to handling microaggressions from other Latinx collegians. Similarly, AfroLatinx's interaction with other Latinxs was best described as “conflict-laden and
uncomfortable” (Haywood, 2017, p. 775), particularly for student organizations whose mission is grounded in Latinidad. As a result, participants joined student clubs and organizations that embraced their Blackness without the need for continuous validation. While many spoke indifferently or negatively about Somos Unidos, the collegians appreciated that there was greater collaboration happening with other multicultural student organizations in raising awareness and creating welcoming spaces for AfroLatínx students.

The findings suggest that the Academic Enrichment Program (AEP) instilled a strong sense of belonging for AfroLatínx participants in providing academic resources and services, including socialization outlets, to support retention and persistence efforts. This finding aligned with Tucker’s (1999) Sense of Community tenet in that many collegians found their sense of belonging through AEP. In particular, the summer bridge program provided the necessary structure that contributed to a positive transitional and adjustment experience for AfroLatínx participants who belonged to AEP. Similarly, participants spoke highly of the AEP staff as a “family away from home” in helping them address academic and personal issues, on and off-campus. Tinto (1993) suggests that institutions that make significant commitments to help students become socially integrated will experience greater levels of student persistence. In the end, participants who found a sense of community credited their success to AEP staff for providing ongoing guidance, advisement, tutoring, financial resources, and most importantly, helping them find their voice at ECU. However, with the growing body of AfroLatínx students at ECU, AEP is limited to admitting 200 students per year and serving no more than 800 combined. Furthermore, it is a highly competitive admission-based program in that students must be both academically and financially disadvantaged to apply.
Implications

For university leaders and practitioners to grasp a better understanding of this growing student demographic in the United States, it is imperative that campus culture—including student-centered communities and counter spaces—utilize equity frameworks that honor incoming and existing AfroLatinx collegians. The reliance on monolithic approaches to serving Latinx students not only undermines the heterogeneity of AfroLatinxs, but it fails to acknowledge them as contributing to the vitality of campus life. University professionals are partially to blame for not supporting and advancing programs and policies that expand beyond Latinidades. This is commonplace for many colleges and universities serving Latinx students, including Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI). Existing literature, or the lack thereof, continually focuses on traditional equity theoretical frames aimed at serving Latinx college students. Higher education researchers have failed to study the complexities associated with AfroLatinx identity “in part due to their inability to move beyond the monoracial categorization of Latinxs and an obliviousness to AfroLatinidad altogether” (García-Louis & Cortes, 2020, p. 2).

A key implication centers on the lack of frameworks that can be applied to design and create programs—curricular and cocurricular—that acknowledges and celebrates the ethnoracial identity of AfroLatinx collegians. While Tucker’s (1999) modified version of Tinto’s (1993) theory was key in illuminating the importance of Latinx family in absentia and finding communities that embrace AfroLatindad, there is a need for more qualitative research in the area of Latinx identity and persistence.

Future Directions and Recommendations

As Latinx enrollment at public and private universities continue to grow, it is paramount that academic and student affairs practitioners explore avenues for redesigning outdated programs,
policies, and curricula that do not acknowledge the totality of Latinx identity. To understand how higher education institutions can move away from monolithic approaches to serving Latinx students, I offer my perspective on the future direction.

First, colleges and universities should offer regular programming, events, forums, and courses that center on Latinx identity and AfroLatinidades. Many participants reported learning more about their Black identity at ECU than in their homes. Undergraduate enrollment in the Northeastern part of the United States is home to the largest segment of Dominican and Puerto Rican college students in the nation and many self-identify as AfroLatinx. In the 2010 census, Dominicans and Puerto Ricans self-identified as Black at 8.2 percent and 5.8 percent, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Given the upcoming 2020 U.S. Census, we can assume that the number of self-identifying AfroLatinxs enrolled in postsecondary education has increased.

Second, as this invisible student population continues to grow, there is a need for further studies to better understand how AfroLatinxs navigate campus racial climates and assess how this impacts their sense of belonging academic opportunities, and their racialization within and across racial groups (García-Louis & Cortes, 2020; Haywood, 2017). Since institutions of higher learning vary in size, types, and mission, AfroLatinx experiences may differ. In support of Haywood’s (2017) recommendation, scholars should investigate the experiences of AfroLatinxs across various postsecondary institutions such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), PWIs, and HSIs. Furthermore, there is a need to revisit theoretical models that employ a race and cultural lens to study students of color experiences on college campuses. Intersectionality as both a theoretical framework and an analytical tool holds great promise in studying race-gendered experiences of AfroLatinas in contrast to Eurocentric perspectives. As Delgado Bernal (2002) posits, critical raced-gendered epistemologies offer unique ways of knowing and understanding
the world based on the various raced and gendered experiences of people of color. My study underscores the importance of advancing scholarship in the area of AfroLatinx student development and persistence. As U.S. colleges and universities become more diverse, AfroLatinx collegians will comprise a large segment of Latinx enrollment over the next decade. These findings are timely as Rendón Linares and Munoz (2011) call for theoretical enhancements to better understand how validation theory contributes to student development.

Third, there is a need for additional research to better understand the concept of AfroLatinidades within the context of educational research. In claiming AfroLatinidad, there is an embedded political project rooted in resistance to dominant Eurocentric ideologies, centering of AfroLatinx history, and a call for agency in creating new holistic narratives (Vega, Alba, & Modestín, 2012). Moreover, existing literature suggests that there are limited Black identity development models that recognize the role of culture or ethnicity (Fries-Britt, George Mwangi, & Peralta, 2014; García-Louis & Cortes, 2020; Haywood, 2017; Hernandez, Ngunjiri, & Chang, 2015). Therefore, my findings call for CRT and LatCrit scholars to collaborate to investigate and develop theoretical frameworks that center on AfroLatinidades to honor and recognize the voices of this understudied and misunderstood Latinx subgroup.

Fourth, AfroLatinidades expands across other Latinx groups. While many participants in this study were of Dominican ancestry, many AfroLatinx collegians have similar, yet different experiences relative to race and racism within their Latinx ethnic group. Haywood (2017) encourages studying other AfroLatinx subgroups to “avoid an essentialist perspective on AfroLatinx” (p. 777) in postsecondary education. These AfroLatinx subgroups include Afro-Mexicans, Afro-Cubans, and Afro-Hondurans with a Garifuna identity to better understand their lived experiences and how it may impact their sense of belonging in higher education.
Fifth, AfroLatinx stories provide a perspective that is best understood and appreciated using a composite narrative. Methodologically, compositing allows for the integration and weaving of multiple narratives and is presented as a collective voice. It requires a keen and nuanced understanding of AfroLatinx experiences, particularly when personal stories and events are individually shared, to present a compelling narrative. While a disadvantage to this methodological approach requires participants “to simply put their faith in the researcher’s judgment” (Willis, 2019, p. 474), that is the case for most qualitative research involving ethnographic interviews. Compositing allows for greater appreciation of AfroLatinx experiences because it ensures anonymity and helps readers appreciate the complexities associated with racialized identities. Additionally, a key advantage of composite narratives is that, by providing contextualized and personalized accounts, they can help to build an understanding of particular people and groups, specifically AfroLatinx collegians, in ways that are accessible to non-academic audiences (Willis, 2019).

Lastly, AfroLatinx participants involved in this study were asked to offer their recommendations for improving college adjustment and a sense of belonging. Their voices are paramount in helping to provide direction for the future of higher education. At the end of each interview, collegians shared recommendations for university leaders and practitioners to help with strengthening persistence. Below is a collective list of their recommendations for consideration:

1. Establish AfroLatinx student clubs and organizations that honors and promotes AfroLatinidad;
2. Offer regular programming, forums, and events on Latinx racialized identities to educate the faculty, staff, and student community;
3. Encourage faculty to establish a cross-referenced curriculum that includes course offerings on Latinx and AfroLatinidad so that students can take courses as an elective and have them count towards graduation. Furthermore, explore opportunities to decolonize history and ethnic studies courses that have been historically developed and told from a majoritarian perspective.

4. Strongly encourage all Latinx students to enroll in courses that expand their knowledge on the history of AfroLatinx identity as part of general core studies.

Conclusion

The central argument of this dissertation is that AfroLatinidad as an ideology is significantly understudied within the context of higher education. While there has been a steady growth in AfroLatinidad literature over the past two decades via “The Afro-Latin@ Reader,” a collection of readings and essays that center on race and culture of AfroLatinxs, there is a lack of empirical studies contributing to this area. To understand and appreciate AfroLatinx identity, collegian voices must be included in future studies due to the complexities associated with AfroLatinidad. Furthermore, the burgeoning literature on AfroLatinx identity in higher education, albeit limited, calls for scholars to augment and enhance CRT and LatCrit lenses to study the racialized experiences of Latinx college students. There is a need for advancing scholarship on theoretical frameworks and models that honor ethnoracial identities (Haywood, 2017) that “call for new epistemological perspectives” and “reject the hierarchical relationships based on social identities, and who critique the impact intersecting colonial histories have on AfroLatinx student’s – both on and off-campus” (García-Louis & Cortes, 2020).
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APPENDICES

INFORMED CONSENT INFORMATION
FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPATION

Study Title: An Examination of Intragroup Marginalization among AfroLatinx Collegians and its Perceived Impact on Students’ Intent to Persist at a Diverse Public University

Principal Investigator: Alfredo Medina, Jr., Doctoral Candidate in Educational Policy and Leadership

Co-Principal Investigator: Teniell Trolian, Ph.D., Assistant Professor in Educational Policy and Leadership

IRB Study Number: IRB Sub 5882

I am a doctoral student at the [University] in the School of Education’s Department of Educational Policy and Leadership. I am planning to conduct a research study, which I invite you to take part in. This form has important information about the reason for doing this study, what we will ask you to do if you decide to be in this study, and the way we would like to use information about you if you choose to be in the study.

Why are you doing this study?

You are being asked to participate in a research study about the academic and social experiences of Afro-Latinx students at the [University]. The purpose of the study is interested in understanding how Afro-Latinx college students negotiate their racial and ethnic identity to manage relationships among faculty, staff and peers and how these experiences may impact them, both academically and socially. To be eligible for this study, participants must be 18 years or older.

What will I do if I choose to be in this study?

You will be asked to participate in an individual, confidential interview about your experiences growing up as an Afro-Latinx. You will be asked interview questions that focus on family influence in shaping your Afro-Latinx identity, sense of belonging among faculty, staff and peers—particularly peers of color—and how you manage your dual-identity as both Black and Latinx in a college setting. Also, during the interview you will be asked to share an artifact (e.g., image, object, poem, drawing). The artifact can be from a present or past event to help tell your story about being an Afro-Latinx. The sharing of an artifact is optional and you do not have to share anything during the interview.

Study time: Study participation will take approximately 90 minutes in duration or less. Participation consist of one (1) interview session. After the interview session is complete, a copy of the interview transcript will be emailed to you for review to ensure the responses you provided are as accurate as possible. The review and edits of the interview transcript should take
no longer than 30 minutes in duration. In addition to an interview, you will be contacted to be part of a focus group with other Afro-Latinx participants. The focus group is optional and you are not required to participate.

**Study location:** All study procedures will take place in a private room located on the second floor of the Campus Center. The room is located in an area only accessible to limited staff and it is an area not visited by other students. The reason for this location is to keep students from inquiring about your participation in this study.

**Audio-Recording:** I would like to audio-record this interview to make sure that I remember accurately all the information you provide. I will keep audio-recordings locked in my office and they will only be used by me to access the recordings for transcribing and data analysis. The interview questions are developed to facilitate a fluid and open dialogue and to ensure that my undivided attention is on our conversation. Therefore, audio-recording is required for this study.

I may quote your remarks in my dissertation, presentations or articles resulting from this work. A pseudonym will be used to protect your identity, unless you specifically request that you be identified by your true name.

**What are the possible risks or discomforts?**

Based on the nature of this study, your participation in this study may emotional and/or psychological risks, including risks of emotional discomfort from being asked about an event or discussing sensitive issues. If at any time during the interview you feel emotional or upset with a question, tell the interviewer at any time if you wish to take a break or stop the interview. You may be uncomfortable with some of the questions and topics I will ask about. If you are uncomfortable, you are free to not answer or to skip to the next question.

If you are still emotionally and/or psychologically distressed after the interview, you are encouraged to visit the [University] Office of Counseling and Psychological Services. The staff has been notified about this study. You are welcome to visit the office for counseling services:

Office of Counseling and Psychological Services
Hours: M-F, 9:00am-4:30pm

As with all research, there is a chance that confidentiality of the information I collect from you could be breached. I will take steps to minimize this risk, as discussed in more detail below in this form.

**What are the possible benefits for me or others?**

The possible benefits to you from this study include sharing your personal and collegiate story as an Afro-Latinx college student for the first time. The interview is structured to facilitate a conversation and help reflect on your experiences as both being Black and Latinx. The sharing of your lived experience may aid other Afro-Latinxs, both present and future, while contributing to the limited knowledge and literature on Afro-Latinx college students. Given the complexities associated with racial and ethnic identities, faculty, staff and students will learn about your
collegiate experience which can lead to greater inclusivity and enhanced learning and engagement on university campuses.

**How will you protect the information you collect about me, and how will that information be shared?**

Results of this study may be used in publications and presentations. Your study data will be handled as confidentially as possible. If results of this study are published or presented, individual names and other personally identifiable information will not be used.

To minimize the risks to confidentiality, I will assign you a random numerical code in place of your name and any other identifier. Any company hired to transcribe responses will only know you by this code. The audio recording of the interview will be destroyed after your remarks have been transcribed. The transcript, without your name, will be kept in my locked office until the study is complete. Once your remarks have been coded and analyzed, the transcript will be destroyed.

All data collected by audio recorder will be kept in a locked file cabinet in my locked office, and no one else will have access to it. I may share the data collected from you for use in my dissertation, future research studies or with other researchers – if I share the data collected about you, I will remove any information that could identify you before we share it.

If we think that you intend to harm yourself or others, we will notify the appropriate people with this information.

**Financial Information**

Participation in this study will involve no cost to you. You will not be paid for participating in this study.

**What are my rights as a research participant?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You do not have to answer any question you do not want to answer. If at any time and for any reason, you would prefer not to participate in this study, please feel free not to. If at any time you would like to stop participating, please tell me. We can take a break, stop and continue at a later date, or stop altogether. You may withdraw from this study at any time, and you will not be penalized in any way for deciding to stop participation. If you decide to withdraw from this study, any information collected from the participant will not be used if the participant decides to withdraw before finishing the study.

**What if I am a [University] student or employee?**

You may choose not to participate or to stop participating in this research at any time. This will not affect your class standing, grades, employment, or any other aspects of your relationship with the [University].

**Who can I contact if I have questions or concerns about this research study?**
If you have questions, you are free to ask them now. If you have questions later, you may contact the researchers at:

**Principal Investigator**
Alfredo Medina, Jr., [University]

**Co-Principal Investigator:**
Teniell Trolian, Ph.D., [University]

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, you can contact the following office at the [University]:

**Institutional Review Board**
[University]

**Consent**
I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form.

______________________________________________________
Participant’s Name (printed)

______________________________________________________
Participant’s Email Address

______________________________________________________
Participant’s Signature Date

**Please initial below:**

_____ I am 18 years or older

_____ I give permission to be audio-recorded for this study
INFORMED CONSENT INFORMATION
FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPATION
IN A FOCUS GROUP

Study Title: An Examination of Intragroup Marginalization among Afro-Latinx Collegians and its Perceived Impact on Students’ Intent to Persist at a Diverse Public University

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Why are you doing this study?

You are being asked to participate in a study to understand your academic and social experiences as an Afro-Latinx student at the [University]. The purpose of the study is to better understand how Afro-Latinx college students negotiate their racial and ethnic identity to manage relationships among faculty, staff, and peers and how these experiences may impact them, both academically and socially.

What will I do if I choose to be in this study?

You will be asked to participate in a confidential, optional focus group with other [University] self-identified Afro-Latinx college students to share and discuss experiences growing up as an Afro-Latinx. The focus group will be guided by four questions that focus on family influence in shaping your Afro-Latinx identity, sense of belonging among faculty, staff, and peers—particularly peers of color—and how you manage your dual-identity as both Black and Latinx in a college setting. The focus group is an opportunity to come together in a safe space to learn collectively regarding experiences as an Afro-Latinx college student at the [University].

Study time: Participation in the focus group will take approximately 120 minutes in duration or less depending on the level of conversation. Participation consists of one (1) focus group. After the focus group is complete, a copy of the transcript will be emailed for your review to ensure the responses provided are as accurate as possible. The review and edits of the focus group transcript should take no longer than 45 minutes in duration.
Study location: The focus group will take place in a private conference room to be held in [University]. The focus group will be held after normal business hours to accommodate participant’s busy schedules. Entrance to the building and conference room will be accessible to the PI and focus group participants only. The reason for this location is to protect your identity from other individuals who may be inquiring about your presence in the study.

Audio-Recording: I would like to audio-record the focus group to make sure that I remember accurately all the information you provide. I will keep audio-recordings locked in my office and they will only be used by me to access the recordings for transcribing and data analysis. The focus group questions are developed to facilitate a fluid and open dialogue and to ensure that my undivided attention is on our conversation. Therefore, audio-recording is required for this study. In addition, I will take written notes on oversized Post-It pads to ensure that the highlighted issues shared by the group are captured and reported back in a transcript for participant review.

I may quote your remarks in my dissertation, presentations, or articles resulting from this work. A pseudonym will be used to protect your identity unless you specifically request that you be identified by your true name.

What are the possible risks or discomforts?

Based on the nature of this study, your participation in this study may emotional and/or psychological risks, including risks of emotional discomfort from being asked about an event or discussing sensitive issues. If at any time during the interview you feel emotional or upset with a question, tell the PI at any time if you wish to take a break or stop the interview. You may be uncomfortable with some of the questions and topics I will ask about. If you are uncomfortable, you are free to not answer the question.

If you are still emotionally and/or psychologically distressed after the focus group, you are encouraged to visit the [University] Office of Counseling and Psychological Services. The staff has been notified about this study. You are welcome to visit the office for counseling services:

Office of Counseling and Psychological Services
[University]

As with all research, there is a chance that confidentiality of the information I collect from you could be breached. I will take steps to minimize this risk, as discussed in more detail below in this form.

What are the possible benefits for me or others?

The possible benefits to you from this study include sharing your personal and collegiate story as an Afro-Latinx college student for the first time. The interview is structured to facilitate a conversation and help reflect on your experiences as both being Black and Latinx. The sharing of your lived experience may aid other Afro-Latinxs, both present and future, while contributing to the limited knowledge and literature on Afro-Latinx college students. Given the complexities associated with racial and ethnic identities, faculty, staff and students will learn about your
collegiate experience which can lead to greater inclusivity and enhanced learning and engagement on university campuses.

**How will you protect the information you collect about me, and how will that information be shared?**

The results of this study may be used in publications and presentations. Your study data will be handled as confidentially as possible. If the results of this study are published or presented, individual names and other personally identifiable information will not be used.

To minimize the risks to the confidentiality, I will assign you a random numerical code in place of your name and any other identifier. Any company hired to transcribe responses will only know you by this code. The audio recording of the interview will be destroyed after your remarks have been transcribed. The transcript, without your name, will be kept in my locked office until the study is complete. Once your remarks have been coded and analyzed, the transcript will be destroyed.

All data collected by the audio recorder will be kept in a locked file cabinet in my locked office, and no one else will have access to it. I may share the data collected from you for use in my dissertation, future research studies, or with other researchers – if I share the data collected about you, I will remove any information that could identify you before we share it.

If we think that you intend to harm yourself or others, we will notify the appropriate people with this information.

**Confidentiality among Focus Group Participants**

While your responses are confidentially held by the researchers, you should realize that there will be other focus group participants present during any comments or remarks you make who may or may not share information outside of the focus group, including information that you may feel, is sensitive or private. Therefore, I ask that you respect the privacy of other focus group members.

**Financial Information**

Participation in this study will involve no cost to you. You will not be paid for participating in this study.

**What are my rights as a research participant?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You do not have to answer any question you do not want to answer. If at any time and for any reason, you would prefer not to participate in this study, please feel free not to. If at any time you would like to stop participating, please tell me. We can take a break, stop and continue at a later date, or stop altogether. You may withdraw from this study at any time, and you will not be penalized in any way for deciding to stop participation. If you decide to withdraw from this study, any information collected from the participant will not be used if the participant decides to withdraw before finishing the study.
What if I am a [University] student or employee?

You may choose not to participate or to stop participating in this research at any time. This will not affect your class standing, grades, employment, or any other aspects of your relationship with the [University].

Who can I contact if I have questions or concerns about this research study?

If you have questions, you are free to ask them now. If you have questions later, you may contact the researchers at:

Principal Investigator
Alfredo Medina, Jr., [University]

Co-Principal Investigator:
Teniell Trolian, Ph.D., [University]

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, you can contact the following office at the [University]:

Institutional Review Board
[University]

Consent

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form.

______________________________________________________
Participant’s Name (printed)

______________________________________________________
Participant’s Email Address

______________________________________________________  ______________________
Participant’s Signature        Date

_____ I am 18 years or older

_____ I give permission to be audio-recorded for this study
Recruitment Email/Letter to Students

Dear Student,

Hello. My name is Alfredo Medina and I am a doctoral candidate in the School of Education, Department of Educational Policy and Leadership at the [University]. I am conducting a study to better understand the academic and social experiences of Afro-Latinx students at the [University]. By Afro-Latinx, I am interested in speaking with individuals who self-identify as Latinx of African Heritage and/or who self-identify as both Black/African-American and Latinx. **You must be 18 years of age or older to participate in this study.**

This is a great opportunity for interested participants to reflect and share their experiences to help faculty, staff, and peers better understand Afro-Latinx’s racial and ethnic identity in a college setting. Your experiences may help the [University] academic and student leadership strengthen and improve the university environment for Afro-Latinx college students. Participation in the study consists of a confidential interview that will last no more than 90 minutes. Interviews will take place in a private location in the [University] and only accessible to the investigator (me) and participant. There will be a focus group later in the semester for individuals who participated in the interviews who wish to come together and share their thoughts with other Afro-Latinx college students. The focus group is optional and you are not required to participate.

If you are interested in being part of this study, please respond to me at your earliest convenience. I will then follow up with additional information to schedule a date, time, and provide the location for the interview. Thank you.

Best regards,

Alfredo Medina, Jr.
Doctoral Candidate
Educational Policy and Leadership Ph.D. Program
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

INSTRUCTIONS

Good morning (afternoon or evening). My name is Alfredo Medina. Thank you for meeting with me.

This interview will ask you about your experiences as a student at this university. The purpose of this study is to better understand your academic and social experiences as an Afro-Latinx student at the [University]. I am interested in learning about your Latinx and Black identity growing up and how you negotiate both identities in building and maintaining relationships among peers, faculty, and staff at [University]. There are no right or wrong or desirable or undesirable answers. I would like for you to feel comfortable with saying what you think and how you feel.

AUDIO-RECORDING INSTRUCTIONS

If it is okay with you, I will be audio recording our conversation. The purpose of this is so that I can get as many details as possible, but at the same time be able to carry on an attentive conversation with you. I assure you that all your comments will remain confidential. I will be compiling a report which will contain only your comments without any reference to your name or any identifying information. I will now share more information about your rights as a participant in this study before we begin.

INFORMED CONSENT FORM INSTRUCTIONS

Before we get started, I would like for you to take a few minutes to read the Informed Consent Form.

(Hand participant the informed consent form).

I would like for us to read the form together out loud. After reading the Informed Consent Form, I will give you as much time as needed to ask any questions before agreeing to participate.

(After addressing questions, have the participant sign the informed consent form and inform him/her that a signed copy will be scanned/emailed to the email address provided on the form).

At this time we will begin the interview (turn audio-recorder on).

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Q1. Before we dive in, I’d like to take some time to get to know you. Feel free to tell me about yourself.

- Where are you from?
- What is your ethnicity? How do you self-identify?
- What is your major and year (e.g., junior, senior)?
- Were you born in the United States?
- Do you speak Spanish?
- Are you familiar with your heritage’s national anthem?
• From your experience, what is it like living in the U.S. as a...[their self-report ethnicity/cultural preference]?
• Were your parent(s)/guardian born in the U.S.?

Q2. Thanks for telling me about yourself and opening up. Now that you’ve been at [University] for a couple/few years, how would you describe your experience as a student?

• How do you like [University]?
• How is living in [University location] different from where you are from?

Q3A. I’d like to shift gears to learn more about your experience as a Latinx, particularly as an [self-report ethnicity/cultural preference]. For this part of the conversation, I’d like for you to share the artifact you brought with you. If you don’t have anything to share, that is perfectly okay.

[If a participant forgets to bring and/or wishes not to share an artifact, skip to interview Q3B].

• Tell me about the artifact. Feel free to share its significance/meaning as it relates to your Afro-Latinx identity (Refer to the name of the item if known, e.g., picture, writing, poem, physical object).
• Why did you choose this artifact to share?

[After participant responses, proceed to Q3B]

Q3B. Thank you for sharing a part of you to better help me understand your Afro-Latinx identity. I would like to learn more about your surroundings growing up. How much of a role did your family and environment play in influencing your Afro-Latinx identity?

• Please share any Latinx traditions and events you participated in.
• What does being Latinx (insert ethnicity label if known) mean to you? Please feel free to share whatever comes to mind.
• When you think about being Black, what does that mean to you? Please feel free to share whatever comes to mind.
• How important is Latinx culture to you?
• Can you describe what it was like when you realize that your identity was both Black and Latinx?
• Can you describe your experience identifying as Afro/Black in a Latinx household?
• Describe how you were received and treated by Latinx family and peers growing up as an Afro-Latinx.
• Describe how your surroundings/environment influence your Afro-Latinx identity.

Q4. How would you describe your experience as an Afro-Latinx student at [University]?
Feel free to share with me how your experience has been as an [self-report ethnicity/cultural preference] so far.

• How would you describe your experience in making friends with other Latinx, Black, and/or peers of Caribbean heritage?
• How would you describe your relationship with them? Please elaborate on any experience.
• How would you describe your interactions with other Latinx, Black, and/or Caribbean friends on campus?
• Have there been any instances in which your skin color and/or physical features may have played a role in how you were/are perceived by your peers? Feel free to share any experiences.
• Have there been instances in which you may have felt alienated or not accepted by your peers? Feel free to share your experiences.
• Can you share some more information about how that [refer to phenomena experience] made you feel?

Q5. Is there anything else that you’d like to share about your Afro-Latinx identity as a student at [University]?

END

This concludes the interview. Thank you very much for your participation.
FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

PART I

INTRODUCTION AND INSTRUCTIONS

Hello. My name is Alfredo Medina. I’d like to start by thanking each of you for taking the time to participate in this focus group. The reason we are here today is so that you have an opportunity to share your thoughts collectively about each other’s experiences as AfroLatinx students attending the [University]. We’ll be here for about 90 minutes.

I am interested in learning about your Latinx and Black identity experiences and how you negotiate both identities in building and maintaining relationships among peers, faculty, and staff at [University]. I’m going to lead our discussion today. I will be asking you four questions to facilitate the conversation.

I would like you to know that this focus group will be audio-recorded. The identities of all participants will remain confidential. The purpose of this is so that I can get as many details as possible, but at the same time be able to carry on an attentive conversation with you. I assure you that all your comments will remain confidential. I will be compiling a report which will contain only your comments without any reference to your name or any identifying information.

Remember, there are no right or wrong or desirable or undesirable answers. I would like for you to feel comfortable with saying what you think and how you feel about your experiences.

I will now share more information about your rights as a participant in this study before we begin.

INFORMED CONSENT FORM INSTRUCTIONS

Before we get started, I would like for you to take a few minutes to read the Informed Consent Form.

(Hand participant the informed consent form).

I would like for us to read the form together out loud. After reading the Informed Consent Form, I will give you as much time as needed to ask any questions before agreeing to participate.

(After addressing questions, have the participant sign the informed consent form and inform him/her that a signed copy will be scanned/emailed to the email address provided on the form).

At this time we will begin the focus group (turn audio-recorder on).

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Part II

GROUND RULES

Before we begin, let’s go over some basic ground rules that will allow our conversation to flow more freely.

1. Only one person may speak at a time. This is especially important as our goal is to make allow each person to be heard. Your voice and what you have to share is very important. Also, it is difficult to capture everyone’s experience and perspective on our audio recording if multiple voices are speaking at once.

2. Please try to avoid side conversations. If you have a thought to share that cannot wait, just raise your hand.

3. Everyone doesn’t have to answer all the questions, but I’d like to hear from each of you today as the discussion progresses.

4. This is a confidential discussion in that I will not report your names or what you said to anyone outside this room. This is a safe space and I ask that each of us honor this space by not sharing with others what we privately discussed in this focus group. Individual names of participants will not be included in the final report about this meeting. Remember, except for the report that will be written, what is said in this room stays in this room.

5. Confidentiality and respect are paramount. Therefore, we want all of you to have open conversations and feel free to comment on each other’s remarks without fear your comments will be repeated later and possibly taken out of context. This also means we will engage in civil conversations and refrain from arguing, yelling, and/or being rude with each other.

6. There are no “wrong answers,” just different experiences and opinions. Say what is true for you, even if you’re the only one who feels that way. Don’t let the group sway you in how to feel. Your experience is honored and respected.

7. Let me know if you need a break. The bathrooms are [share location]. Feel free to enjoy a beverage and a snack (to be provided by the PI as an out-of-pocket expense).

8. Are there any questions before we begin?

Q1. Before we dive in, I’d like to take some time to get to know you each other. Let us go around the room introducing each other. State your name, year, and how you self-identify.

PI begins with self-introduction.

Q2. Thank you for introducing yourselves and sharing a part of your identity with all of us. I would like to learn more about your experiences growing up as an Afro-Latinx. Feel free to start wherever you’d like.

• What does being Latinx (insert ethnicity label if known) mean to you? Please feel free to share whatever comes to mind.
• When you think about being Black, what does that mean to you? Please feel free to share whatever comes to mind.
• Describe how Black/African culture has embraced and/or shared in your home.
• What did you learn about from your parents, family, and friends about Black/African culture growing up?
• Describe what it was like when you realize that your identity was both Black and Latinx.
• Describe your experience identifying as Afro/Black in a Latinx household.
• Describe how you were received and treated by Latinx family and peers growing up as an Afro-Latinx.
• Describe how your surroundings/environment influence your Afro-Latinx identity.

Q3. How would you describe your experience as an Afro-Latinx student at [University]? Feel free to share with me your experience as an [self-report ethnicity/cultural preference].

- Describe your experience and interactions making friends with other Latinx, Black, and/or peers of Caribbean heritage? Please elaborate on any experience.
- Have there been any instances in which your skin color and/or physical features may have played a role in how you were/are perceived by your peers? Feel free to share any experiences.
- Have there been any instances in which you may have felt alienated or not accepted by your peers? Feel free to share your experiences.

Q4. Is there anything else that you’d like to share about your experiences at [University] and/or make any recommendations for improvement?

END

This concludes the focus group. Thank you for coming today and talking openly about your shared experiences as AfroLatinx individuals. Your candid responses are appreciated. Thank you for your time and participation.