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Storying Reality: Preserving Counterstories Through Oral Histories of Latinx Graduate Students

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

STORYING REALITY: PRESERVING COUNTERSTORIES THROUGH ORAL HISTORIES
OF LATINX GRADUATE STUDENTS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

ENGLISH

by

Melissa Texidor

2022

To: Dean Michael Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by Melissa Texidor, and entitled *Storying Reality: Preserving Counterstories Through Oral Histories of Latinx Graduate Students*, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Anne Castro

Luke Thominet

Vanessa K. Sohan, Major Professor

Date of Defense: April 1, 2022

The thesis of Melissa Texidor is approved.

Dean Michael Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

Andrés G. Gil
Vice President for Research and Economic Development
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2022

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

STORYING REALITY: PRESERVING COUNTERSTORIES THROUGH ORAL
HISTORIES OF LATINX GRADUATE STUDENTS

by

Melissa Texidor

Florida International University, 2022

Miami, Florida

Professor Vanessa K. Sohan, Major Professor

“Storying Reality” aims to preserve counterstories told by Latinx graduate students in Florida International University’s English graduate program through the recordings of oral history interviews which have been compiled into a podcast of the same name. This thesis emphasizes enacting the methodology of counterstory through the method of oral history as a way to fill the gap in FIU’s archive regarding Latinx graduate students’ experiences. This thesis also serves as a way of engaging with counterstory through the underutilized modality of sound. The podcast features a close-reading of Gloria Anzaldúa’s use of counterstory in *Borderlands*, five oral history interviews, and a reflection on the interview process. The written portion of this thesis explains the theoretical frameworks I utilized, the methods for creating the podcast, and transcripts of the interviews.

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Introduction

While the practice of counterstory as methodology has seen more usage in recent years within the field of cultural rhetoric, much of the scholarship portraying these narratives tends to do so through written text. This thesis explores ways these stories can be represented to continue in decentering the Western rhetorical standards of validating knowledge. One way to do so would be gathering these valuable stories through the collection of oral histories as a way of developing a substantial archive of counterstories. Presenting these pertinent narratives through a modality like audio would not only reinforce the benefits of utilizing counterstory as a methodology, but it would also provide academics with the opportunity to preserve these stories in a medium that engages with a sense (sound) which is fundamental to the storytelling process. Due to storytelling's notable roots as an oral tradition, this research takes the form of a podcast.

This thesis combines the methodology of counterstory with the modality of audio to examine the narratives created and told by Latinx scholars of the past (Gloria Anzaldúa) and archive those of the present (Florida International University's Latinx English graduate students) in FIU's Digital Commons site. The podcast will serve to do the following: analyze Anzaldúa's use of counterstory within *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* and preserve the counterstories told by Latinx graduate students in FIU's MA English program through the gathering of oral history interviews. Assessing Anzaldúa's use of narrative as a means of countering widely held beliefs provides an opportunity to examine the effect of storytelling based on various intersectionalities. The gathering of counterstories by Latinx students through the means of oral history

interviews highlights a method to prioritize the knowledge of these students within a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI).

The Way We Use Stories

Although there has been progress made in decolonizing the Western rhetorical traditions, their influence is still prevalent in the academic sphere. Raúl Sánchez notes that Western epistemology is limited due to how it theoretically “has some difficulty imagining other, perhaps more fundamental, functions of writing” (80). This dichotomy naturally results in the exclusion of African American, Latin American, Asian American, and indigenous scholars from being considered credible scholars as “[their] theorizing...is often in narrative forms, in the stories [they] create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language” (Christian 52). By contrast, standard rhetorical tradition utilizes theory as a means of argumentation.

The Western ideation in the field of writing and rhetoric discounts the differing ways other cultures create and perceive knowledge (Sánchez 78). Jacqueline Royster emphasizes this contradiction by stating, “I speak, but I can not be heard. Worse, I am heard but I am not believed. Worse yet, I speak but I am not deemed believable” (36). As a result, writings from disenfranchised peoples are considered “minority discourse” (Christian 70) or “alternative discourse” (Powell 403), differentiating their theories from the Western canon which is posed as universal (Sánchez 78). This categorization puts scholars of color as well as their communities at a disadvantage as it gives way for white scholars to speak over said communities, putting minorities in a position in which they

are not considered authorized to speak up about the misrepresentation of their own knowledge (Royster 32).

This is not to say that marginalized communities should reclaim this authority by abandoning storytelling in favor of mainstream rhetorical methods. Much of Gloria Anzaldúa's scholarship argues that emotionality in storytelling is considered an art for minority communities, one that is so inherent that it can not be severed from their everyday lives (66). And yet, the emotionality and personable nature existent in storytelling does not align with the general standards of Western rhetoric. To deny groups this mode of theorizing would be forcing them to exclude their identities and knowledge from academic discussion.

Criticism of the use of storytelling within academia has stemmed from the belief that narratives, especially ones created by people of color, are not authentic or credible sources of information (Villanueva 52). Barbara Christian notes that the theorizing of scholars of color is often depicted in a "Western dualistic or 'binary' frame" (54) which posits a world in which Western modes of thought are more trustworthy when compared to the epistemic processes of non-Western groups. Such a dynamic may result in the resistance of accepting storytelling methods as valid. This issue of authenticity when speaking of the self remains pervasive in the discussion of using storytelling as a valid way of theorizing. Scholars note that this may be due to how the inclusion of such a method relies on white scholars perceiving it "not just as 'simple stories' to delight and entertain, but as vital layers of a transformative process" (Royster 35). Even so, scholars of color have regularly portrayed their narratives as anything but entertainment. Scholars have described the incorporation of stories into their work as one that is lifesaving

(Christian 61, Powell 14), validating in their experiences as minorities (Villanueva 15), serving as a documentation of injustices (Martinez 51) and the unmasking of truths (Royster 35). In short, storytelling exists as a powerful methodology to establish scholars of color as essential sources of knowledge.

Counterstory as Methodology

Coined by Richard Delgado in his 1989 article “Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative”, counterstory is defined as a methodology which is regularly used by members of an outgroup (minorities) as a way of legitimizing their cultural experiences in the academic sphere while decentering the knowledge perpetuated as universal truth by members of an ingroup (2415). The preservation of this “universal truth” is done through the telling of stock stories which are accounts collectively told by those belonging to the group in power to justify the exclusionary nature of academia. Counterstories oppose these stock stories and utilize narratives to challenge the epistemological status quo in a way that reflects the preexisting storytelling practices among those belonging to minority groups. Perhaps one of the more known examples of the counterstory vs stock story dynamic is shown within Aja Y. Martinez’s article “A Plea for Critical Race Theory Counterstory: Stock Story vs. Counterstory Dialogues Concerning Aja’s ‘Fit’ in the Academy.” In this article she creates composite characters to illustrate a scenario in which a graduate committee discusses the future of Alejandra, a Chicana graduate student who has failed her qualifying exam. The first story regards a conversation among the committee members in which they discuss how Alejandra is not

a “good fit” for the PhD program because of her unconventional writing practices, her underdeveloped research interests, and her lack of participation in class. However, when juxtaposed with a conversation Alejandra had with her mother explaining her experience in the program, it is revealed that the committee members made little effort to understand her interdisciplinary approach to rhetoric and composition due to their preconceived ideas of what progress in graduate school should look like. In this example, counterstory exposes the underlying prejudices existing in the ideologies spread within the stock story.

Martinez expands on the definition of counterstory as an interdisciplinary research approach and highlights its potential within the humanities in *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*:

This methodology rejects notions of ‘neutral’ research or ‘objective’ research and exposes research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of color...

Counterstory is methodology that functions through methods that empower the minoritized through the formation of stories that disrupts the erasures embedded in standardized majoritarian methodologies (3).

Her scholarship has shaped the current understanding of counterstory as a methodology that is highly accessible to marginalized communities and which works at bridging the longstanding gap between theory and practice in the field of rhetoric (82). Additionally, she argues that counterstories insist that we as academics return to widely circulated stock stories and analyze them with a critical lens through the narratives of scholars that are rarely told.

Counterstories are known to present themselves in different formats such as critical autoethnography, *testimonio*, narrated dialogue, and autobiographic reflection.

Critical autoethnography is described as the cultural analysis of one's own personal narrative used to research oneself in relation to others within the same community (Alvarez 88). While there is no definitive definition for *testimonio*, the method demonstrates an aim to express one's experience with injustices and is more often than not utilized by Latina women (Huber 644). Narrated dialogue resembles a play script and details a conversation among two or more composite characters representing individuals within an ingroup or outgroup (Delgado 2421). This format serves as a way to visualize common discussions fueled by stock stories and opposed by counterstories. And lastly, autobiographic reflection is described as the synthesis of personal anecdotes which facilitates questions used for further analysis of the recounted experiences through a more critical lens (Martinez 98).

For my research, I'll be employing the methodology of counterstory both as a narrated dialogue through the creation of a stock story and as autobiographic reflection through the collection of oral history in a podcast. Aja Martinez notes that counterstories align themselves with the following tenets: permanence of race and racism, challenge to dominant ideologies, intersectionality and antiessentialism, centrality of experiential knowledge, commitment to social justice, and accessibility (99). I believe that juxtaposing a narrated dialogue with autobiographic reflections in the form of oral history interviews from English graduate students will exhibit these fundamental tenets and prove to be significant in the legitimization of these students' narratives. Namely, the combination of counterstory as a method to view and collect these narratives as oral history interviews will challenge dominant ideologies of stock stories through the centering of the students' cultural knowledge within the recorded interviews.

Narrating from the Margins: Anzaldúa's Influence

In the epigraph of *This Bridge Called My Back*, Gloria Anzaldúa emphasizes how crucial it is for scholars of color to utilize their own methodologies and theories to carve out a space for themselves within academia:

Because we are not allowed to enter discourse, because we are often disqualified and excluded from it, because what passes for theory these days is forbidden territory for us, it is vital that we occupy theorizing space, that we not allow white men and women solely to occupy it. By bringing in our own approaches and methodologies, we transform that theorizing space (xxv).

Anzaldúa's scholarship regarding ethnic identity in the academic sphere highlights the significance of integrating the self into theorization as a way of countering the existent hegemonic standards of creating and sustaining knowledge. Works like *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* reflects the possibilities of the use of storytelling as a means of engaging in critical rhetorical discourse regarding race, gender, and ethnicity.

Therefore, I examine instances of storytelling within *Borderlands* to consider how the narratives Anzaldúa shares exercise authority over Latinx experiences and functions as a form of knowledge reclamation. The examination of these key moments will be presented in the second episode of the podcast as a way of contextualizing how counterstories have manifested traditionally and will also serve as a way of setting the stage for the counterstories told by the participants in later episodes.

I believe that by analyzing key moments in which Anzaldúa creates stories about her experiences as a Chicana academic to disrupt stock stories, I will reveal several

pertinent similarities between the experiences she faced as a scholar and the issues contemporary Latinx scholars such as FIU's English graduate students now deal with as they attempt to balance their identities and their roles within the academy. Moreover, the podcast's analysis of Anzaldúa's status as a Chicana scholar and storyteller will help facilitate a discussion among the graduate faculty and students of how counterstory and its tellings are affected by certain positionalities. What does it look like to narrate from the culturally diverse area of South Florida as opposed to the borderlands of Texas and Mexico? How do these graduate students relay their experiences when they are viewed as part of a nationwide minority, yet are considered part of the majority within the Floridian borders? The collection of these narratives via oral history interviews may shed a light on how these particular participants navigate the unique circumstances of their own positionality within the academic space that FIU offers.

Guardando Historias: The Use of Oral Histories

The term "oral history" refers to the process of interviewing people regarding their recollections of the past as well as the narrative product that results from said interview process (Abrams 2). The interview session itself is only a portion of the process, however. Public historian Donald A. Ritchie emphasizes that oral histories differ from the typical interview practice due to its ultimate goal of preservation which is done through the act of audio/visual recording, transcribing, and archiving of the narrative accounts that have been told by participants for future researchers to utilize (1). I utilize oral history interviews as a method for collecting the counterstories of the Latinx

graduate students of the program. Conducting oral history interviews gives an opportunity for these recorded accounts of counterstories to be further legitimized in the academic sphere through their archiving at FIU, a space in which the preservation of these experiences is missing. Students at the institution may also view and use this source of information for their own research, reinforcing the tenets of the centrality of experiential knowledge and of accessibility that is needed for the effective use of counterstory as a methodology. Lastly, it allows these recorded narratives to engage with an integral aspect of storytelling: sound.

As mentioned earlier, counterstories are commonly told by members of an outgroup to dispel stock stories told by an ingroup. While it is a methodology primarily used by ethnic minorities like the Latinx community, it may seem ineffective to employ such a method within a city like Miami in which nearly 70% of its population is Hispanic (“Miami-Dade County”). Likewise, as the largest HSI in the nation, the National Center of Education Statistics notes that FIU is home to a diverse community of students, over 60% of them identifying as Hispanic. However, the title of HSI does not automatically mean that an institution is properly addressing and considering the needs of Latinx students within the university (Carter 249). The use of storytelling to recount significant educational experiences would seem like imperative knowledge for academic institutions to conserve since, as Dolores Bernal notes, students of color are holders and creators of knowledge that is often misinterpreted or omitted from formal educational settings (106). And yet, oral histories depicting students’ experiences, specifically the experiences of Latinx graduate students, are notably missing in the field of writing and rhetoric. Even with its status as a HSI, FIU’s archives surprisingly reflect the omission of such material

as well. Conducting oral history interviews as a mode of collecting the counterstories told by Latinx graduate students aims to fill this noticeable gap.

Additionally, conducting oral history interviews allows these narratives to be portrayed through sound, an underutilized way of presenting counterstories. Several scholars who have utilized counterstory in their work such as Richard Delgado, Aja Y. Martinez, Daniel G. Solorzano and Tara J. Yosso have prioritized the presentation of counterstory in a written format. The lack of engagement with sound for academic narratives may in part be due to the fact that written text is considered to have more value than other mediums such as the spoken word within academia. José Cortez traces this belief back to the colonization of non-Western peoples and contends that “as colonialism’s narrative presupposed and acted on a prior ontological difference based in language—that is, that letter and book warranted truth, records, history, and most importantly, sovereignty—this same European ‘cero-point’ remains as the infelicitous coordinates from which alterity is formulated” (52). European colonizers established an epistemic dichotomy which reinforced their own written forms of knowledge as the most credible source of information. This dichotomy was weaponized against the communities who did not exchange and retain knowledge through writing and was used to justify the inferior label of “other” placed upon them. Therefore, the oral traditions of marginalized cultures like storytelling are often devalued. This is especially true for Latinx cultures which are so often marked by such oral traditions (Torrez et al. 44).

As a result of the prioritization of the written text, much of the scholarship regarding counterstory as a methodology has been published as a written text. The most recent (and one of the few) aural additions to counterstory in writing and rhetoric, Cecilia

Valenzuela and Magnolia Landa-Posas's "AudioVoice: A Relational, Subaltern Praxis of Listening to Testimonios and Composing with Sound," offers a relevant perspective of why alternative mediums should be used. Valenzuela specifically states, "After everything, we learned that listening to and really documenting our lives through sound became a way to theorize, render audible, and also reflect upon our embodied sonic relationships. This was possible because across our project, sound surfaced as a third voice with and in between us, alongside us, and in front of us." Both scholars note that sound is an intrinsic element of the storytelling process that provided them with a unique discursive potential while using *testimonio* simultaneously allows them to both interact and resist a variety of rhetorical themes. All things considered, the combination of the auditory element in oral histories and the utilization of a methodology like counterstory has the potential to not only prioritize the knowledge formulated from the experiences of Latinx individuals, but also encourage them to reclaim the cultural practice of depicting stories orally and may contribute to the decentering of the written text as an optimal form of knowledge creation.

What's in a Podcast?: Methods

This podcast consists of eight episodes: an introductory episode, an episode featuring a close-reading of Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*, five oral history interviews, and a concluding episode. The first episode serves as an introduction to the methodology of counterstory. The second episode highlights significant moments of its use in Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*. The following five episodes contain the oral history interviews I've conducted with five Latinx graduate students in FIU's MA English program. Each

interview is in its own standalone episode. The final episode serves as a conclusion in which I reflect on the content of the interviews and experiences of the participants.

Participants were sent a recruitment letter and an informational form regarding the podcast via a listserv. Interested participants who identify as Latinx were encouraged to contact me to determine their availability for an in-person interview session conducted at FIU's Modesto A. Maidique campus. Due to the risk of COVID, additional measures were taken to ensure a safe interviewing experience. Interview sessions taking place on the same day were scheduled 30 minutes apart to avoid participant overlap. This allowed time for all high-touch points and interview equipment to be disinfected before and after each session with the participants. These sessions lasted approximately 30 minutes and only involved the participant and I in the room sitting 6 feet apart during this time to comply with social distancing rules.

The session was recorded with the participant's knowledge and consent and was later transcribed in order for both the audio recording and the written transcripts to be archived. I asked participants about their identity as a Latinx person, how they partake in storytelling inside and outside of academia, how the practice of storytelling has shaped their identity as a Latinx person, what their experiences are as a Latinx person in graduate school, how they have practiced storytelling in an academic setting, and how the setting of FIU plays into these various aspects. The oral history interviews were recorded using a Blue Yeti USB microphone and the software Audacity. Afterwards, the audio recordings were transcribed using the Otter.ai software. The podcast is archived in the FIU Digital Commons site in its entirety.

Stock Story

Setting. Three English professors at a Hispanic-Serving Institution sit down to have a chat during their lunch hour. One of the professors, F. Mason, is white non-Hispanic man and is tenured. The second professor, A. Taylor, is a white non-Hispanic woman and is also tenured. The third professor, C. Garcia, is Latina and is not tenured, but is in the process of becoming tenured. Mason has recently received feedback by a student from one of his classes and decides to discuss this with the other professors.

Mason: It's been a rough week.

Taylor: Definitely. But it's Wednesday, so the week's halfway over.

Mason: Only Wednesday? Between all these midterm papers I've got left to grade and the feedback I got, I'm just really looking forward to this week being over and done with.

Garcia: You know, I don't think you ever explained what type of feedback you received. By the sounds of it, it must have been pretty harsh.

Mason: Well, I had a conference with one of my students on Monday. She had wanted to talk about her discussion posts as of late.

Taylor: Has she not been doing well on them?

Mason: That's the thing. She's aced them so far.

Garcia: Then what's the problem?

Mason: Well, she said that she was having trouble making connections to the class readings. She hesitated a bit to tell me this, but she eventually told me how it was difficult to have to relate to “old white guys” as a Latina.

Taylor [*laughing*]: She did *not*!

Mason [*shrugging*]: She did. Said that she liked Michel Foucault’s ideas, but thought that he was over-cited.

Taylor: Is there such a thing as “over-citing” someone? That should just go to show how integral his body of work is.

Mason: I suppose. Though I do understand where she’s coming from. I remember being fed up with having to read about Aristotle back in the day.

Taylor: I still teach Aristotle. It’s inevitable, you know? After all, the field of rhetoric owes a lot of its foundation to his teachings. It would be difficult to teach a course without at least using his ideas as an introduction to the material.

Mason: You’ve got a point there.

Taylor: And as for Foucault, his theories are necessary to grasp some of the more complex material in our field. It would be a shame to not include him and have our students confused about these frameworks later on down the road.

Garcia: I’ve heard similar comments from my own classes. Granted, I’m more literature based, as you know.

Mason: Really?

Garcia: Yeah. I overheard some of my students talking about what classes they were thinking of taking next semester and how there weren't many options.

Taylor: That's odd. I caught a glimpse of the literature courses available last week and I thought I saw plenty of classes. Shakespearean Tragedy in Modern-day, British Literature Before the 19th Century, and Literary Criticism to name a few.

Garcia: Well, my students weren't really interested in any of those. They said they were disappointed that there weren't any courses on Latinx literature specifically.

Mason: That's understandable. They probably want to see themselves in the course material.

Taylor: Garcia, didn't you teach that special topics class a while ago? Intro to Latinx Literature?

Garcia: I used to. I haven't taught it in about two years now. There's just so much on my plate with this tenure process. It hasn't really given me much time to update the old material or even rework any of it into my current classes.

Mason: We've all been there.

Taylor [*nods*]: Of course. Even if we did have the time, it would be a challenge to integrate that material anyway. Think about it from our perspective. Not only do we have to teach the basics of rhetoric and composition, but we also have to teach some feminist rhetoric, some digital rhetoric, some queer rhetoric...

Mason: Oh, for sure. Not to mention that there's not a whole lot of material out there to really make up an entire lesson on it. You really have to search for the good stuff. There's just not enough time.

Taylor: Plus, even if we had separate classes dedicated to Latinx topics, who would teach it? We're already overworked as it is. And many of us have other areas of interest.

Garcia: I suppose you're right. I try to make up for it by letting my Latinx students share any cultural experiences that they think may relate to the readings.

Mason: Same here. They know that they're always welcomed to share.

Garcia: Though I do find that some of my students hesitate whenever I bring it up.

Taylor: Well, if you're giving them the opportunity to then there's not much else we can do. At the end of the day, it's up to them if they want to share with you.

Garcia: I agree. I guess it just makes me wish that I could do more...

Mason [*interrupting*]: Oh, wow. Is it 2 pm already? Well, good talk, everyone. I have to start heading to class.

Garcia and Taylor: Bye!

Interview Transcripts

Interview of Joy Serrano

Date: February 14, 2022

Melissa:

Hello, hello, what is your full name?

Joy:

My full name is Joy Alexandria Serrano.

Melissa:

Hi, Joy. Thank you for sitting down with me to talk about your experience here.

Joy:

Okay, of course.

Melissa:

So, to start us off, when and where were you born?

Joy:

So, I was born on April 9 2000 in Miami Beach, Florida. I was born at Mount Sinai Hospital where my mom worked.

Melissa:

Nice. And tell me more about your mom and your, like, your family in general. Where are they from?

Joy:

My mom's Cuban. She was born in Havana, Cuba and she came here in, like, 87, the same year that my dad came. And he was born in a really small village in rural Nicaragua.

Melissa:

And have you ever been?

Joy:

I have been to Havana once. I went when I was eight years old. I don't remember much of the experience. I remember not liking it. [*laughs*] And I went once the following year, when I was nine years old to Nicaragua. I was there for four days. And I remember that we went to my dad's village, we went to the National Cathedral. And I think we saw, like, the old school house where my dad went to school. But outside of that I don't really have too many memories of those places.

Melissa:

And I think I already know the answer to this, but do you speak Spanish?

Joy:

I do speak Spanish. That was my first language.

Melissa:

And what has been your experience so far speaking Spanish in a community like this in Miami where it's, like, so diverse?

Joy:

Right. So like I mentioned, my first language is Spanish. My grandparents who did the majority of my caretaking when I was, like, young—I didn't go to daycare or anything like that—did not speak any English. So, my experience with them was largely that I spoke Spanish with them. And I remember thinking in Spanish, until I was about three or four years old. And at that point in time, my grandma was just too old to watch over me. So, I had a babysitter who was American. And you know, we call Americans—people who aren't Hispanic are just the Americans. And she didn't speak any Spanish. So, I remember that after a few months with her being my babysitter, and, you know, putting Sesame Street on, that kind of thing. I didn't think in Spanish anymore.

I remember that at that point, I thought in English. And I remember that growing up after that starting preschool and everything, Spanish became kind of like this secondary thing. And the main thing that I spoke at school was, you know, English, right? I don't even remember going to ESOL or anything. And my mom, I remember, did speak English, but

will refuse to speak it to me because she was afraid that I would stop speaking Spanish. And I don't really feel any difference in comfort, speaking Spanish or speaking English. I do know that when I go to restaurants and stuff, or when I'm at the supermarket or anywhere, I don't like to speak English if I can avoid it. And just a preference kind of thing.

Melissa:

That's really interesting that your mom refused to speak Spanish to you.

Joy:

No, refused to speak English.

Melissa:

Oh, refused to speak English. And why do you think that was?

Joy:

I think our parents, I mean—when I say our parents, I mean immigrant parents, generally. I think they kind of view us and our upbringing as very much tied to social mobility. And my mother thought that if I didn't speak Spanish and English, that I was going to be at a great disadvantage compared to my other peers who for the same reasons, brought up in the same cultural context as I was, were going to be able to speak two languages. And that was her main thing. I don't think there was, like, a kind of nostalgic loss of culture

thing going on. I think it was more just, like, she was terrified that I wasn't going to have the same opportunities because I wouldn't be bilingual.

Melissa:

I understand. Moving on to—well, let's backtrack a little and go back to your parents.

They were immigrants here. Did they bring any sort of knowledge on and, like, pass it on to you through stories, for example?

Joy:

Like stories?

Melissa:

Like, are there any stories that your family constantly told that you remember about?

Joy:

I remember being, like, irritated a lot when they would tell the same stories. And it was not really my dad. My dad's not a really talkative person. It's mostly my mom and, like, my *tias* and stuff—my aunts. They would tell, like, the same stories about Cuba over and over again about the parties they would go to and the things they would do over there and, like, who and who or whatever, and when they came to this country, and how my mom had to get on a boat to, like, from Colombia to Panama to the United States and everything that they went through. And I remember as a child being so, like, annoyed. That's all they would ever [*laughs*] talk about. And I guess when I got older, the stories

were less about Cuba and more about my grandmother who died when I was around six years old who—the same grandmother that I mentioned earlier who took care of me for most of my baby years. And yeah, like those kinds of stories.

Melissa:

So, looking back at it now—because you're saying, "Oh, they were always telling these stories" and you would get annoyed at them. Now, how do you look back at them?

Joy:

At those stories? I guess I can't really experience them the way that they do because I wasn't there. Like I don't—when I think of myself and how I self identify, I can't say I'm Cuban. Right? And those stories are like—they're Cuban stories. And I don't know, I don't really identify with them too much.

Melissa:

So since you say, like, you know, you don't really identify as Cuban or at least, like, fully Cuban. Have you found yourself ever retelling the stories that your family has told you?

Joy:

Oh my gosh, you know, it's so funny. It depends on what you mean by retelling. So, I recently moved out and got married, and I live in an inherited house that my grandma used to own. The same grandma that I've been talking about. And [*laughs*] what's funny is that my mom always told me this story about how when you would walk into my

grandma's house, there'd be like this vapor that would come out of the house, because she refused to turn the air conditioning on. And because she would, like—she was, like, really cheap. And so she hated turning it on. And [*laughs*] I'm sorry. [*laughter*] So, she was always telling that story and other stories about how cheap my grandma was and how she would like to sit down with the weekly specials every day at her kitchen table. And, like, all kinds of things like that.

And the other day, my mom visits me, right? And I'm living in my grandma's house, right? Which is now my house. And she's, like, "God, it's so hot in here!" Like, "why don't you turn the air on?" I'm like, "I'm not turning the air on! Are you crazy? Do you know how much the light bill's gonna be if I turn the air on?" And like, the middle of spring, and—I'm sorry, the middle of December in Miami. It's hot, right? And she's like, "Oh, you're just like your grandmother." And another time she's visiting me and I'm like, "Hey, listen. I can't pay attention to you right this second. I have to look at the weekly specials. And I have to finish making my grocery list. I can't lose my train of thought." And I feel like I didn't really, like, consciously notice it at the time. But in a way, I feel like I was retelling those stories by just experiencing the things that my grandma would experience in this way. If that makes any sense.

Melissa:

No, that totally makes sense. Yeah.

Joy:

And another way, like, retelling the stories is—so, my spouse is Hispanic, but doesn't really speak too much Spanish. Like, just in the same way that my parents forced me to speak Spanish, his parents really didn't. So you know, yeah. And his parents also speak English. So, I remember that whenever he's at our family functions and my mom and my *tias* are telling all these stories about Cuba. You know, I just think it's rude to leave people out of the loop of what's going or what people are saying. So, I'm like, "Oh, yeah, like, you know, my mom and my *tia* are talking about the story from Cuba about, you know, whatever happened." So, I guess, like retelling? Those are probably the two biggest contexts I can think about.

Melissa:

Do you think anything gets lost in translation there when you're retelling the stories?

Joy:

Oh, of course! Okay. It's not to, like, go on a tangent, but there's a story that [*laughs*] my *tia* and my mom tell at every family function. And it's basically that they are in their teens, right? And they're going to a *fifteens* party in Cuba. And this is like the 1970s, right? 1970s Cuba. And they're at a *fifteens* party and you know what *fifteens* parties are for us. You know, like, the biggest deal ever. And it's this girl's party, and her name is Barbarita, right? And [*laughs*] I'm sorry. And Barbarita is, like, super shy. She doesn't want to dance or whatever, right? And so, like, my aunts and my mom are like dancing, right? And Barbarita just kind of wallflowered. And so, the emcee—Like, you know, he speaks over the [*laughs*] I'm sorry. He talks over the microphone. He's like, "*Por favor*.

No le arruinen los quince a Barbarita." [laughter] Like, I know it's not that funny. [laughs] But like, I can't explain that to someone in English. You know what I mean? Like, I can't say it. It's not funny. And to be honest, it's probably not that funny. Like I said, the context of me and my family. But obviously, you can't—please don't ruin Barbarita's fifteens? Like, that doesn't make any sense. So yeah, of course.

Melissa:

Really interesting stories. Especially the one with your grandma.

Joy:

Yeah.

Melissa:

I feel like I also have some experiences like that. And so, like, with the example of your grandma—for example, do you think that the stories that have been retold and that you're sort of retelling in your own way, do you think they play a role in how your experiences or the knowledge that you've gained over the years is, like, passed down?

Joy:

Of course. I feel like these stories or these actions that we replicate through our stories are just—they're the core of, like, who we—that sounds so corny.

Melissa:

[*laughs*]

Joy:

But I feel like that is like what we are, right? Like, that is—that makes up [*laughs*] everything, our day to day things. And I'm sure that if I had children, one of them would probably end up, like, not turning on the air conditioning because they want to save money. Like it's just—you know.

Melissa:

So, we're going to be moving on a little away from your family background. Well, still going on the background, but maybe a different aspect. So, tell me a little bit about your family's, like, educational background. You said that your parents were immigrants?

Joy:

Yeah. So, my dad didn't finish—like, Nicaragua has mandatory military service, or at the time that he was 18 and 19 they did. And so, he had to, like, whatever the equivalent of high school is over there, he didn't get to finish it. But after his military service, he came to the United States and got a GED. And I think he has a computing thingy from, like, a technical college, but that's it. My mom had high school in Cuba. And over here, she started going to community college. But it was too expensive. And she struggled way too much with English, so she just dropped out. But yeah, that's about it.

Melissa:

So, when you were little were you encouraged to pursue, like, higher education?

Joy:

I knew that I had to go to college. That wasn't like a choice I ever got. Like, I don't remember not thinking that I, you know, had to go to college.

Melissa:

But what about grad school? Did you think you're gonna go to grad school when you were little?

Joy:

I think that one's more complicated. I think at a certain point in time, like maybe after the 2008 recession. Which I was, like, eight years old, when that happened. We kind of understood implicitly that a bachelor's degree just wasn't enough anymore if you wanted to be someone. And so at that point, I knew that, like—I mean, you know, earlier when I was like—sorry. Later when I was more conscious of, like, what college was or whatever, and knew that a bachelor's degree wasn't enough and that I was going to have to go to grad school or whatever. Whatever that meant.

Melissa:

So, was FIU your first choice? Like, how did you decide to come to FIU?

Joy:

Oh my goodness. Yeah...Okay, like, it's kind of a long story, I guess. Originally when I was in high school and stuff, my sights were kind of set on UF. Like, that was my dream school, that's what I wanted. That's what I as a first generation college student thought was like the roof, right? The ceiling that I could, like, you know, bump my head against. I mean, at the risk of tooting my own horn, like, I was valedictorian. I got in and everything. And I applied to FIU as like—and again, I love FIU. But I applied to FIU as a safety school. I knew that I was gonna get into FIU. Like I mentioned, I had a very good GPA, I had good SAT scores. But my dream was UF. And I could have objectively gone—you know, the Bright Futures scholarship was like—don't know if it's still going on. I graduated high school a long time ago. But I had that, so, I could have gone to UF, right?

My plan was originally to have gotten a job to pay for, like, room and board or an apartment. Their college town wasn't that expensive at the time. Um, but I was an only child, or I am an only child. Like, I'm not dead. And I was born to very—my parents are in their 60s and I'm 21. So, I was an only child born to old parents. You know, old objectively, in terms of like, you know, having a child. Very conservative, evangelical Christian parents who were very offended at the idea of me leaving them to go to college. You know, why? Like, there's a perfectly good school here. Like, you don't need to go anywhere. And when I was younger, I had a very hard time standing up to my parents or saying no to people generally. And so, you know, my mom kicked, and cried, and screamed for me not to leave and said that if I left she was never going to speak to me again, or whatever, and all sorts of things. And I don't know.

That probably wasn't true. You know, I'm an only child. And that's how I made the decision to come here. It was a—I don't regret it. It was an affordable decision. I had the Bright Future scholarship, and I also had the FIU scholarship. And I think that more than anything probably was, like, the nail in the coffin. Not the nail in the coffin. The motivating factor that led me to choose to come to FIU.

Melissa:

And just to clarify, were you at FIU as your undergrad as well?

Joy:

Yes, I did do my—Oh, were you asking me about grad school? [laughter]

Melissa:

No, no, no.

Joy:

Yeah, I was at FIU in undergrad. For grad school, the decision was more so, like—at this point in time, I'm an adult. Like, I can't leave anymore. You know, I have plans to marry someone, like I—you know, I can't really leave anymore. It's not feasible. I had already planned to live my life in Miami. So, it was either going to University of Miami or going to FIU. And I—to be honest with you, I didn't know that UM had a program for English.

I didn't apply to it or anything. I just—I was kind of like one track mind to FIU because it was all I knew. I knew that I could afford it in the worst of cases so...

Melissa:

Well now—looking back at it. Now that you're, you know, you're in. [*laughs*] You know, in the program. What do you think of FIU, like, as an institution?

Joy:

As an institution? I'm allowed to say like—[*laughter*]

Melissa:

Go ahead.

Joy:

Okay. I mean, I love FIU. Okay, I—FIU is one of my great loves. I feel like I am eternally grateful to FIU. I would not be the person I am or have a conversation without FIU. But to be honest, I feel like after...when you're an undergrad at FIU, you feel really taken care of, right? But when you're a grad student, it's kind of like, well, gosh, you don't really contribute to our graduation rates anymore. So, who cares? And especially as a TA, I was very disillusioned with a whole bunch of stuff, but whatever. I love FIU. That's the end of the message that I have about FIU.

Melissa:

So what about grad school specifically? Like, what are some expectations of grad school you had beforehand—like, before being admitted to the program?

Joy:

Beforehand? I thought it was gonna be like two years. It's what everyone tells you, even though that's not necessarily true. I mean, for our program it is, but you know. I knew that I was gonna have to do a thesis, whatever that meant. [*laughter*] And I just kind of had an expectation that it was going to be more challenging, more academically rigorous than undergrad had been. Yeah, that's generally what I thought.

Melissa:

So now that you're—How far are you now in the program?

Joy:

This is my second semester in the program.

Melissa:

So, you're two semesters in. How are you feeling about it? Like, what expectations have changed? Which ones have stayed the same?

Joy:

I guess the ones that would stay the same are that...what I mentioned about it being more academically challenging and rigorous, and that—I feel like that met my expectations. It

is more academically challenging and rigorous than undergrad was. In terms of expectations that changed. I'm trying to think. Give me— Could just give me a second? I'm a lot more lost than I thought I would be. So, yeah. And I'm a lot more tired than I thought I would be. But that has less to do with the program. Just the fact that I'm tired of being in school. [*laughs*] But yeah.

Melissa:

So let's elaborate a little bit about that. So have you had, like, trouble adjusting to grad school life in general?

Joy:

To be fair, yes. I feel like—and this is, like, gonna sound like such a crybaby thing. But I feel like when you're an undergrad, everybody holds your hand through everything. Like, you can't even sign up for your classes on your own. Like, you got to go to a special meeting and everyone has to sit down with you and sign you up for class and show you how to do it, or whatever. And, you know, everything's like that. And then I remember—that's just an example of stuff in undergrad. And I remember that everyone makes such a fuss about all the resources that are available to you and everything. And when you get to your master's program, it's kind of just like, you know, figure it out yourself. And like, you know, you're an adult now. You figure it out, right? And I feel like, I didn't really know too much.

I recently found out how to do the M1 form, and I'm still not clear on it. I've spent, like, 20 minutes just opening up the PDF and, like, staring at it. *[laughs]* And I don't want to mistakenly send it the wrong way or something to my committee. So, I've been trying to do that. And, you know, I was thinking about it this morning. Just like a lot of things that I don't really like—like, how do I put this? I'm trying to think of a way to express that—

For example, I didn't know how you're supposed to ask people to be on your committee. I didn't know if they rejected you and if so, how they did it. How the best way to, like, reach out to them was.

Like, growing up—not growing up, but, like, when I was an undergrad, I remember that being told, "Oh, yeah, you know, if you want someone to be on your committee when you're in grad school, just go to their office hours and make conversation with them."

And I generally did not find that was something I had to do to get people on my committee, but it was something that terrified me, and I didn't know, right? It's just like those little things that are a part of the unique social context of a master's program that no one really cares to explain to you and you just feel stupid for asking and for not knowing automatically. Like everyone seems to have everything figured out and you're the only one that doesn't. Maybe that sounds a bit too whiny of me.

Melissa:

No, definitely not. Definitely not. So what about the material that you've been covering in class specifically? Have you felt similar feelings about, like, being lost?

Joy:

To be honest? Yes. Because [*laughs*] at the risk of sounding like such a cry baby, I remember that, like—God, being an undergrad, you would read like a book, right? And it was like, “Oh, yeah, let's talk about the symbolism of the color red in this book.” And then suddenly, when you're in grad school, it's like “Guys, we're gonna look at the theory of like, this this this and the sustentation” and it's like, what? The things are so hard to read. It looks like alphabet soup to me sometimes. And it's like a very sharp difference and no one prepared you for it in undergrad. I guess, you know, they didn't have to. Whatever. But it's kind of hard to transition into that, having had things kind of made easier in undergrad. I don't know.

Melissa:

Yeah, I totally get it. And speaking specifically, like, about the material again, do you feel like there have been moments in which whatever you've been learning, in your class whether it be theory or just books that they've assigned you, do you feel like it's ever like contradicted what you've learned so far as a Latina?

Joy:

As a Latina, specifically?

Melissa:

Yeah.

Joy:

I have to think. Well...okay, a little. I remember that, like—I'm sure you also had to take the rhetorical theory course that everyone takes, right? I remember that we were on a lesson about where it gives you kind of this, like— Well, I took it with Dr. Sohan. It was like this story that we read about. And I don't think it's like a real story. I think it's like a fictitious thing. And it's basically this student who is a Latina, right? And she goes to college. And on her committee, or her advisory committee or something it's like three white professors, so they don't really relate to her, they don't really get what she's talking about. And they don't like that she constantly talks about social justice and Latinidad or whatever in her class. I understand how that's probably a really big truth for most people outside of the context of Miami. But like, when I read that sitting here at FIU where the majority of professors that I've encountered personally are Hispanic, I have a hard time relating to that. And so I understand that it's true, but like, my brain can't wrap its head around that. And in terms of things that contradicts, like, my experiences as a Latina, I wouldn't—I wouldn't really say too much does, to be honest. But I think it has a lot to do with just the way that we're situated socially in Miami.

Melissa:

And, like, expanding on that point, since you like feel you're pretty comfortable here as a Latina within the program.

Joy:

Oh, yeah.

Melissa:

Have you ever had the opportunity to share your Latinidad within class—your experiences, your knowledge, or the stories that, you know, you've been retelling over and over?

Joy:

Yeah, I think one of the best examples that I can give is again in that rhetorical theory course and I only mentioned that because like, I don't have too much experience—this is only my second semester in the program. So, what I focused on for my final project for the rhetorical theory course that everyone has take care here at FIU is I did it on telenovela—like Latin American telenovelas as feminist rhetoric and discourse. And one of the things I, like, kind of hyper focused on was— you know, Betty La Fea? Right. That narrative has been told over and over again, right? You know, obviously, the pattern of stories being told over and over again. I've watched all of those versions, with my *tias* and my mom. And, like, I felt that I was talking about something that was, you know, wonderful and unique. And I probably felt that way because I personally related to it. But yeah, I think that's probably one of the most concrete, core examples that I can offer.

Melissa:

What about you know, integrating like Spanish within your work? Because you mentioned that you're bilingual. Have you ever been given the opportunity to just, you know, write in Spanish, for example?

Joy:

No. In fact, I think—and it's not like I disagree with it or anything. But when you look at most prompts and like—I'm sorry—yeah, prompts that you're given in like school and stuff. It's like, you know, make sure that you are writing in English. If you're gonna say something in another language or in Spanish, italicize it. It's pretty much that. So, no. I would say that even in this kind of context, we're told that, you know, keep it separate. And I don't necessarily disagree with that. Like, I mean, whatever. But, maybe it has a lot to do with the way that we're raised—not raised—that we are participant in the system and you know, English. You speak English. Spanish is *pa la casa*, right? And English is *pa la escuela*, you know? The same way that my parents always divided like—you know, "*Español en la casa y English en la escuela.*" So, yeah.

Melissa:

Yeah, I think I can also relate. It's very much, you know, you speak Spanish at home, you only speak Spanish at home. And then you know—well the world, like, outside is English.

Joy:

Yeah, yeah, exactly. And even then, like, I don't know, when I was growing up—I grew up and I live in Hialeah. So you know, it's very much like, I don't think I really speak English too much. Unless I'm at school, you know, at work, which is also school. But I remember growing up, I was really upset that all those signs were in English. And I

thought to myself, like, "What is the point of them being in English? No one can read them. I can't read them." And I was born here, like, so—I don't know. I remember that was always frustrating to me as a child. And you know, as a child, you don't really understand the nuance of, you know, why the signs are in English, not Spanish. But *[laughs]* but yeah, so that's that.

Melissa:

So backtracking a little to that—You said it was a project, right?

Joy:

Yeah.

Melissa:

So, going back to that project, and you said that it was a really fulfilling experience for you overall. And what do you think that the sort of projects where you're, like, allowed to share your stories and your knowledge and your experiences as a person from marginalized communities, so to speak—What does that do for your field in general?

Because I believe you're in literature, right?

Joy:

Yes.

Melissa:

So what do you think that does for the field?

Joy:

I want to see more of it. And I think it's one of the best things that can happen to us. I am so tired of every single class—classes that I don't even feel would benefit from it. We're told the same stories about—I mean, this is a little controversial, but Shakespeare, about things that I personally, as Latina, do not like care about. And I think that, you know—I mean, obviously, everything is not supposed to be all I care about personally. But I do think that we would benefit from that, from being able to share our stories and our narratives, and not have these very specific cut down narratives presented to us and being told to digest them.

And something that I think about a lot is that you can really only find these kinds of narratives and—at least in literature. I'm speaking more for literature, because as you mentioned, it's my program. You can really only find these narratives in specialty courses about, you know, postcolonial literature or Latinx literature. They're the only spaces that you have for these. Everything else, everything that is the standard normal English or English courses are just all, you know, like Shakespeare, you know. Whatever. And not to say those things don't inherently have value, but you know, yeah.

Melissa:

And do you think that, you know, outside of these sort of specialty courses, do you think they're valued the same way? These narratives that you're telling?

Joy:

Of course not. They're looked at as, like—how to put this. And again, I'm not saying that everybody who participates in these views it that way. But I think it's kind of like, "Oh, you know, there you go, Latinos. You get to have your input. We get to look at your little stories, and we get to talk about them", but you know, they're not as important, as good as X stories or whatever other things. They're viewed as kind of like this little pocket of something different within this big norm that—You'll never really be part of that norm, as much as you would like it to be.

Melissa:

Speaking of, like, specialty courses, specifically--because I just realized that since we, you know, we are in Miami and FIU proud of its status as a Hispanic Serving Institution. Like, we're majority Hispanic people here. I don't think there are a lot of these specialty courses specifically. Like, specifically dedicated to Latinos or Latinx literature.

Joy:

Yeah. So I remember that the year that I took Latinx literature was—I think it was 2019. And at that point in time, it was not considered its own class. It was a special topics class. I think the following year it was considered its own class. That is to say that it was not under the special topics in literature anymore. And so that's interesting to me. How is it that you are at a Hispanic Serving Institution and yet Latinx literature isn't its own course, you know—until very recently wasn't its own course. So, I don't know. I mean,

maybe again--maybe I'm not looking at it with proper nuance or I'm not sufficiently informed about that. But I don't know. It seems strange to me so...

Melissa:

Alright. Well, as we are wrapping up, I just want to ask. Was there anything that you know, we didn't get to talk about during this interview so far?

Joy:

No, I don't think so.

Melissa:

All right. Well, that being said, thank you so much for sharing your experiences with me. It was lovely to have you here.

Joy:

Thank you. It was good to be here.

Interview: Jennifer Peña

Date: February 14, 2022

Melissa:

Hello, hello, welcome. What is your full name?

Jennifer:

Hi. My full name is Jennifer Peña.

Melissa:

Hey, nice to have you here, Jennifer. Thank you for agreeing to talk with me.

Jennifer:

Thank you for inviting me.

Melissa:

Alright, so getting into the questions, when and where were you born?

Jennifer:

So I was born in Miami, Florida. My parents are not from Miami, but they both moved here when they were young and then at some point in their 20s they met. And so this has been where most of my family has been for the last couple of decades.

Melissa:

Alright, and tell me more about your family. Where are your parents from?

Jennifer:

So, my mom is from Santiago de Cuba in Cuba. Funny to say Cuba and then Cuba, back to back like that. And my dad is from Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic.

Melissa:

Awesome. And have you ever been?

Jennifer:

I have not been to either country. I've heard some stories. I imagine we'll talk about that. *[laughs]* But I haven't been to either country. Some of my relatives have gone. Like one of my sisters has gone to the Dominican Republic. I might call it DR by accident.

Melissa:

That's fine.

Jennifer:

Out of habit. And some of my cousins I know have been to Cuba. But a lot of my family is directly from there, especially my aunts, my grandparents. Yeah, extended family.

Melissa:

So, since you said you haven't been there, what do you know about Cuba, like in general?

Jennifer:

So, my mom came here when she was—I want to say eight years old. I've heard stories of how it was a long time ago. So, kind of mixed. I've heard good stories and bad stories, you know. Nostalgia kind of colors things differently, I guess, over time. I've heard the specific place that my mom is from, Santiago, that it has a lot of hills. Sometimes now she'll look up "walking tour of Santiago" on YouTube just to look at it and say, "Oh, look! My family's house was around here." Yeah, and I don't have pictures of it, but I've been told kind of what my mom's house was like when she was little. Like, those lasting memories that she brought with her. The main thing that I know about it was that it had a courtyard apparently. *[laughs]* Yeah. And then when she was eight, she came here.

She also has stories about being a new immigrant to the US in New York, and then eventually moving to Miami not long after. So, because my mom was so young, when she left Cuba, her memories are kind of like that. Like, details about the house, about the hills, those kinds of things. Rather than, you know, things about, like, government and whatnot, because she was so young at the time. The stories that my aunts tell would be different. I remember—it's my mother's aunt actually. She told us a story about how when she first came to the US, she read 1984 by George Orwell. And she said that it reminded her of what she saw happening. So, that's kind of like the other side of it, you

know. Less nostalgic but [*laughs*] you know. I guess everyone brings different things here with them.

Melissa:

All right. Now, let's talk a little bit more about you. So, do you speak Spanish?

Jennifer:

Yes.

Melissa:

Right. And what's that been like for you? I mean, especially living here, you know, in Miami.

Jennifer:

So, it's kind of like I've developed the skills more now that I'm older, now that I appreciate it more as a skill, I guess. And the importance of speaking multiple languages, and especially speaking Spanish in Miami, where it's part of our everyday lives, really. But I remember when I was little, it was kind of like, I didn't feel as much that I had to learn Spanish. Like I was learning it kind of passively in a way because it was being spoken by the older people in my family. And then as I got older, I started to think, "Well, I want to be able to talk to them more." You know, especially like now that I'm older. Sometimes I will sew together with my grandma and I want to understand her. So, those kinds of changes in perspective I guess have made it more important for me to

practice my Spanish skills. Now that I'm an adult, I think my Spanish has gotten a lot better because I've actually been using it more.

And I had an experience my first year of college as an undergrad. I lived in Georgia for two semesters when I went to another university. And I was very much a minority.

[*laughs*] Very much a different demographic compared to what we have here in Miami and at FIU. Yeah, I think there were maybe—there was one other Hispanic girl on my floor of my dorm. And there was— of the guy side, there was like one person who was half Hispanic, who was also from Miami, but he didn't speak Spanish. So, it was weird.

[*laughter*] It was weird. It really made me realize kind of how important Spanish is to the local culture, I guess. So, that made me appreciate it even more. I started listening to more music in Spanish because I missed hearing it, I guess. [*laughs*] I missed the language. Yeah, so that perspective kind of changed things as well and made me appreciate the bilingualism that we see here more.

Melissa:

And just out of curiosity, when your family members were telling you stories about, like, back home in Cuba, are they telling you those in Spanish?

Jennifer:

It depends on who tells the story. So, some of my family members who have moved here, they're more comfortable with English now. And then there are others who, like, never fully adopted English as their main language. So, it's mixed. Like some of my aunts and

my grandma, they would speak—they would tell stories in Spanish. Whereas, for instance, my mom's aunt who moved to North Carolina where there aren't as many Spanish speakers as there are here. She's gotten used to speaking English. So, like the story about 1984, I remember that when being in English. So, it really depends on who's telling it. And I guess where they live/where they've lived since they've moved here, too.

Melissa:

So going back to that specific story about the 1984. When you think of those stories and the stories that your mom used to tell about, like, "Look! Her house used to be around here." You know, what do these stories mean to you? Like looking back at them now?

Jennifer:

Well, I think of it kind of as a place that I probably won't get to go in my life, a place that distance wise is not that far. Like, you look at it on a map and it's like, "Hey, Cuba's kind of right there." [*laughter*] Compared to where Miami is on the map. And yeah, I feel like those are the only details that I'm going to be able to have to imagine how they lived there because I feel like it's unlikely that I would go. So, it's kind of like those little details are what I have to imagine. You know, what I have to work with.

Melissa:

And have you ever found yourself, like, retelling these stories that everyone in your family is always telling?

Jennifer:

It depends.

Melissa:

Depends.

Jennifer:

Yeah, so sometimes the same story will come up several times. I feel like I don't often retell stories, like, to my friends or maybe outside of the family that much. I think I might have shared stories from my dad's side but that's just totally different. He came here when he was older already when he was around 16. So, different story.

Melissa:

Different story.

Jennifer:

Yeah.

Melissa:

So, since you mentioned like, you know, you don't really tell the stories outside of your family. It's more of like a family thing, or like a family tradition, so to say. Do you think that these stories then reflect how your family—specifically, how they share and pass down information?

Jennifer:

I think, well... pausing here. [*laughter*] I think a lot of it is passed down orally. Like, we tell these stories to each other. And sometimes the older people will be reminiscing and they'll tell the same stories a couple of times over the years. And then I remember them but then, you know, I know that the people around me have also heard these stories. So, it's like I wouldn't necessarily bring it up to them again. But then I think the things that we don't talk about—They're not getting written down. It's like we remember them and then I guess that's it. Every once in a while my mom will bring up something like a story about my aunt who passed away last year and it'll be something that I didn't know.

[*laughs*]

I guess this applies beyond the context of the family as well, but the things that we know about people might just be forgotten. I think even the family history as well can just be forgotten eventually. Like, if we don't have pictures, if we don't keep talking about it. Those kinds of things.

Melissa:

Right. And let's talk a little more about your parents. What is their educational background?

Jennifer:

So, my dad is a pharmacist. He came to the US in high school. I remember him telling me stories about how he would be taking geometry classes, and he would have a dictionary. Like, English Spanish dictionary. But he just kept going. And then he went to the Navy after high school, and then he went to pharmacy school. My mom, she...trying to think how to describe it. She did, like, a bunch of community college credits. She couldn't decide what she wanted to do and then in the end, she didn't decide. *[laughs]* So she didn't graduate. But she tells me, "I had so many credits. I tried so many different paths." But yeah, she was doing kind of office work. And then, I mean, my parents had four kids, so after a while my mom stayed home when my dad was a pharmacist.

Melissa:

And what about you? When you were little did you think, you know, "I'm definitely going to college?"

Jennifer:

I did think so. I didn't have a definitive idea of what I was going to do. I had a couple of ideas. None of which are what I ended up doing, but that's life. *[laughter]* Yeah, so I guess, grad school. One of my sisters who's a teacher, a middle school teacher right now, she has a master's. But that was like, when I was already kind of older that she got it. She's around eight years older than me. So it wasn't like when I was little, I was seeing everybody go to grad school or anything. You know, I don't think I knew what grad school was for a long time or less that I would be doing it. *[laughs]* But here we are.

Yeah, so I guess not knowing a lot of people who are in higher education plays into that, right?

Melissa:

So would you say then that your sister sort of, like, influenced you a little to, like, take that step?

Jennifer:

She has influenced me, but *[laughs]* in general. I don't know necessarily that she influenced me in this. I feel like I kind of decided that I wanted to go to grad school when I started doing research. So, as an undergrad, a professor asked me if I want to assist in one of her research projects. And then that turned into my first big research experience. And I really--I think that that time was like a turning point for me. And then, I was like, "I think I want to keep doing this. I like it." And...I'm losing my train of thought.

[laughter]

Melissa:

That's okay. And what do your parents think of, like, your decision to go into grad school?

Jennifer:

I think at this point, they're kind of trusting the process. *[laughs]* So, my first year of college, I was an engineering major. Things have changed. Then I was a communications

major. Now I'm an English graduate major. And yeah. I feel like when I was—because I want to continue to a doctoral program, I'm pretty sure this is what I want to do with my life now. *[laughter]* And I feel like when I was having doubts at some point last year, my mom was telling me that my dad had told her—you know, this is like one person says to someone else, and then she tells me whatever. So she said, "Oh, your dad was telling me 'oh, what happened? Like what happened? She was so confident that she wanted to continue'."

So, in the moment that I was faltering, they reminded me, like, you know "what happened?" It kind of centered me. And I was, like, "No, I do want this. I'm not going to take a break. I am going to apply. I'm going to try." So yeah, I guess in that sense, they're supportive. Not that they necessarily want me to leave Florida again. But yes, *[laughs]* I think generally, they've been supportive of the process, I guess.

Melissa:

And what brought you to FIU?

Jennifer:

My first year of college, I wasn't here and then I transferred here. It was kind of like, after being away for a year I wanted to come home. So, I was checking out different options basically. And then from high school—something that a lot of people who are from Florida would be familiar with is Bright Futures. So, I was, like, "Okay, I have that that I can fall back on when I move back to Florida." And, yeah, I never had anything against

FIU. *[laughs]* On the contrary, a lot of my friends from high school graduated from here or are still here.

So, I was looking into programs at FIU and then I saw the relatively new Digital Communication and Media program. And I was like, "I'm going to try this. This looks like it would be cool, like it would be useful." And yeah. So. I needed my new direction. And I thought that that would be a good path. One thing led to another. Here I am.

[laughs]

Melissa:

And how did you make the decision to continue here at FIU for grad school?

Jennifer:

That was a much faster decision. So, the director of the Writing Center sent out an email—I was still working at the Writing Center at the time. He sent out an email advertising the graduate program in English. And I saw it *[laughs]* you know. And I started looking through the, I guess you'd call it a brochure, that had the list of the classes. I was just starting to think about grad school and I was like, "Okay, I think this one aligns with what I want." So, it was kind of a quick decision to apply. Like, I started working on the application very soon after I saw it. The short timeline that was. Yeah, and it worked out.

Melissa:

So, now that you're in grad school, let's think about, like, some of the expectations that you had first off for grad school. So, what were some of those expectations before you were admitted to the program?

Jennifer:

I guess some of my expectations were that it would feel different despite being in the same location. *[laughs]* Accurate, I guess. And smaller classes. That turned out to be true. Calling professors by their first names. Sometimes the case as well. *[laughs]* Yeah, and I was expecting the workload to be crazy. I would say that it is. You know, nothing that we can't handle but also *[laughs]* also what I was expecting, I guess. Yeah, I think it's too hard to imagine how much you're reading until you look back on it.

Melissa:

And have there been any expectations you had that remained the same?

Jennifer:

Can you clarify what you mean?

Melissa:

Oh, I mean, have there been any expectations that have actually, like, changed afterwards? That's what I meant, my bad.

Jennifer:

I guess something that has changed, or that was different from my expectations, I guess would be the course availability, but you know. Yeah, I guess because that changes every semester. So, not everything that I would have liked to take lined up with what I would have been able to take it kind of thing. So, that was the thing that was different. But yeah, for the most part, I've liked my classes, so it's okay.

Melissa:

And can you describe for me your experience in the program so far? Because you're in the final stretch already.

Jennifer:

The final stretch. I'm in my last semester right now. I'm working on thesis revisions. I'm at that stage now. And I guess overall the experience I feel like I think differently.

[*laughs*] Like I think differently about things now. I think that I tend to analyze things automatically. [*laughs*] I'll read something and I'll already be analyzing it. [*laughs*] Or somebody says something and I start thinking about some theory I had to read for a class.

And like things like social norms that I've been made aware of. Those kinds of things.

Yeah, so that's been interesting. Seeing how everything that we've been reading and writing about and talking about in the program kind of has changed I think, I guess.

Hopefully, for the better. I don't know. [*laughter*] Who's to say?

Melissa:

And did it take you some time to adjust to that sort of, like, quick analytic thinking?

Jennifer:

Yes. I remember in the first semester—well, this was my grad school strategy for when I have a lot of things to read. I use text to speech on my computer. That was my—I don't know how close that is to answering your question, but [*laughs*] I had to learn how to manage things differently, I guess.

Melissa:

And when it comes to the graduate course material, like, overall, do you feel like there have been moments where the stuff you learned through reading the material—do you think it ever contradicted your own knowledge as a Latina?

Jennifer:

I don't know about contradicted, but I guess something that has been a point of contention, I guess, would be the use of the term Latinx. So, I think I've mentioned this before in class discussions. And I don't bring it up just to be contentious. I just, you know—I don't feel like I had really heard it before, or not very much, but I feel like it's used a lot in the program. And I don't think that people, like, in the community for the most part use it, you know? That's why I tend to personally not use it. Like, I would sooner just use Latin, you know. Like Latin American. Latin America cafe in Hialeah, you know?

Melissa:

Yeah.

Jennifer:

Other than that, I don't know if I can think of anything that contradicts my experiences other than—yeah, that was the first thing to come to mind.

Melissa:

Alright. And when it comes to, like, your own experience as a Latina, have you had the opportunity so far to share your experiences in class and integrate that into your own coursework?

Jennifer:

Yes. So, both? Yes to both. So, it's been relevant in the class that I'm teaching now. And it has also been relevant in the classes I've taken as a student. So, especially related to writing center classes that I've taken, both as an undergrad and now as a grad student because there's a lot of language interactions, I guess, at the Writing Center. So yeah, this is tied into some of my research to relate it to the Writing Center, which is usually built on my final projects for those classes. Thinking about, like, from the perspective of someone who also speaks Spanish and would sometimes have to bring in Spanish language skills with the people I was tutoring when I worked at the Writing Center as a tutor. There's been a lot of [*phone rings*] Oh, I'm so sorry. I did not mute myself. Okay. Okay, we're going to continue. [*laughs*]

Okay...Wow, okay. I lost my train of thought. Okay. So basically, it tied in when I was tutoring, it tied in when I was doing reflections on those tutoring experiences and now with my students. We have our first project in ENC 1101—it's the literacy narrative. So, sometimes our topic for the day has been related to, like, dialect and language and those kinds of things. And I asked the students if they would share examples of words that are used in a dialect that they speak that might not be used in another dialect. And one time—so, I got the students used to sharing in that way, a lot of them also speak Spanish or, well, different dialects of Spanish as well. And for me, I would say that I pretty much speak Cuban Spanish. And one of my students one time asked me, she's like, "Oh, you're Cuban, right?" And then she asked me something. And I don't remember the question, but it was related to that topic of dialect and whatnot. I thought it was interesting. A student was like, "Oh, how about you?" [*laughter*] Like she wanted me to share an example. I would say it's tied in both with coursework and teaching, and research and tutoring.

Melissa:

Alright. I noticed most of your examples are in the form of, like, you know, "Oh, when I worked at the Writing Center, I did this. Well, now, as an instructor I do this." Do you have any specific examples of you—Or maybe any opportunities that you can recall given to you to integrate Spanish as a student?

Jennifer:

Off the top of my head, I can't think of anything. I can't think of anything...Yeah, I do mention the Writing Center a lot in general. [*laughs*] Let's see. I mean, I know you didn't

want a teaching example but like [*laughs*] one of my students asked if it would be okay to write her literacy narrative in Spanish, and then translate it. And I said that I thought that was fine, you know. I think if I had the opportunity to do that, I wouldn't do it because English is my stronger language for writing and reading as well. I would consider it my primary language. But I feel like other than that—I don't know. Other than times when I've shared personal examples. I can't think of anything, I guess part of it is that not everybody is bilingual. Not everybody speaks Spanish. So, I can see how it might be complicated in the classroom to do in-class activities that are explicitly related to multilingualism, I guess? Unless you're using, like, other dialects of English as well.

Melissa:

So, let's talk a little bit more [*clears throat*] Excuse me—about your experiences as a student, so...can you describe a time for me where you were given the opportunity to share any experiences you had or any stories you had about your family, about yourself as a Latina?

Jennifer:

Let me think about it. I am once again thinking about the writing center classes. [*laughs*] Because I feel like this—maybe out of comfort. I don't know. I feel like those have been classes where I've been open to sharing a lot and also where language has been a major point of discussion at least once in the semester. Like a major point of discussion, you know? I was thinking of one example, but I lost it. [*laughter*]

Melissa:

That's okay.

Jennifer:

Related to the writing center class. Oh, I remember it now. It was one time that we watched—This isn't directly related to Spanish but related to non-English languages in general. We watched a video, kind of an old one, where students who were not native speakers of English or who were international students were talking about their writing processes and how writing is different for them in their native languages versus in English and how that impacts their thinking. In the context of that video, we had some time to reflect on that and also to think about how the other languages we speak influence how we think and how it can influence how we work with students as well. Yeah, kind of reflection as a way of promoting understanding.

Melissa:

So keeping all of these, like, experiences that you've gained in mind, what do you think that these other perspectives and these experiences add to the field? Writing rhetoric specifically, because that's what you are.

Jennifer:

Right. Well, I feel like it was inevitable that it would be part of the larger conversation, language. Especially now that there are more conversations about fairness and power and agency and how students should have the right to their own language. I think that was

what Vershawn Ashanti Young was writing about before. So yeah, that idea of a student's right to their own language, I guess, I think is key. I do think that it's inevitable that this field was going to come in this direction as diversity, and you know, some more concepts of fairness and education come into play. I feel like language is so key. It's key to reading and reading comprehension and the ability to participate in discussions and everything. I think with the direction of the field it totally makes sense to me that language is so important. Does that answer your question?

Melissa:

Yeah. [*laughter*] And with the way that the field is currently, do you think that the knowledge that we are bringing in not only as students, but since, you know—being an instructor for you is like such a big aspect of, well, your academic career right now. Do you think that the knowledge that we're bringing in as students and as instructors is being valued and appreciated?

Jennifer:

I hope so. [*laughter*] It's hard to say for sure. I don't know what actually happens, if there are regular department meetings. I don't know. I don't know what conversations are being had, I guess, among the non TAs (teaching assistants), of course. And so, with that it's hard to say for sure. I would like to think so. I mean, I hope that by talking over our ideas and everything in classes maybe we're inspiring each other. And then hopefully, some of us will be future faculty. [*laughs*] Hopefully. I had something else I wanted to say, but I'm once again forgetting it. [*laughs*] Oh, I remember it now.

So, I was thinking about our experiences with students and I feel like even if the influence that we have is on a small scale, if it's just with individual students, I feel like even that level of change matters. Like, being able to inspire even a small number of students. I feel like that matters. I guess that's kind of my philosophy. Even if our work isn't producing major drastic changes to the whole world, we can still make a positive change in our classrooms, have positive impacts on people, especially in ENC 1101. Having the students hear there isn't necessarily a wrong way to speak. They're just different dialects. Some ways of speaking are the right way to speak to certain people or the right way to speak in a certain context. And when you're saying good morning to your family, you don't have to say it like you're giving a State of the Union address, you know? *[laughter]* Rhetorical context.

Melissa:

And overall, do you think that you're given enough opportunities in the program to share stories about your experiences as a Latina person?

Jennifer:

I would say there are opportunities. I guess—maybe part of it is because I was born here. I'm not sure. I like to participate in class, but if there are people who have more direct ties to other countries—like, they're from there, then usually I would not even volunteer in those contexts. I would let them share their more direct experiences.

Melissa:

Alright. Well, before we wrap things up, was there anything that you wanted to talk about that we didn't get to?

Jennifer:

I think that was about it.

Melissa :

Alright. Well, thank you so much, Jennifer, again for sitting down with me and sharing your experiences.

Jennifer:

Thank you for having me.

Interview: Amanda Sejio

Date: February 16, 2022

Melissa:

Hello, hello, what is your full name?

Amanda:

My name is Amanda Sejio.

Melissa:

Hi, Amanda, thank you for sitting down with me and sharing your experiences.

Amanda:

Thank you for having me.

Melissa:

Alright. So, when and where were you born?

Amanda:

I was born in Miami in the United States in 1995.

Melissa:

Nice. And tell me a little bit about your family background. Like, where are they from?

Amanda:

So, my father is Cuban and he came to the United States at the age of 13 through Venezuela, so he was an illegal immigrant. Now, fortunately, he's a legal resident, but back in the day, you know, he was 13. So, his family came illegally through Venezuela while my grandfather was here. He came in *El Mariel* and he worked for many years to be able to pay passage from Venezuela to the United States for his family. I think he brought like 12 people over? So, extended families. Well, my mother is not Cuban. She was American. She passed away. But she was American. And my father and her divorced very young. So, my sister and I were raised by our Cuban grandmother.

Melissa:

And have you ever been to Cuba?

Amanda:

I have not been to Cuba. My sister has been to Cuba, but I have not because my father said that I should never go to Cuba until it's liberated.

Melissa:

So, what do you know about the place so far?

Amanda:

What do we know about Cuba?

Melissa:

Yes.

Amanda:

Really only secondhand stories about Cuba. I don't really know what Cuba is like today, for example. I only know what it's like through the eyes of my grandparents and father and the older generation that came when the dictatorship happened. So, I have a pretty skewed idea of what Cuba is.

Melissa:

And the stories that he would tell you, did he tell them to you in Spanish?

Amanda:

Yes. My family speaks primarily Spanish around me. But I speak primarily English around them, so it's hard.

Melissa:

And how has that affected, like, your understanding of those stories?

Amanda:

I don't relate to the stories the way that they do regularly. I didn't live the experiences that they lived. And there's also a generational barrier and a language barrier, I think, because

even if I wanted to ask the questions that I do want to ask, I cannot form them in the way that I want to in Spanish. So, they've definitely—I don't know. I don't understand the stories as well as I would like.

Melissa:

And for you personally, how do you perceive your own Spanish speaking skills, especially here in Miami where a lot of people speak Spanish?

Amanda:

You know, it's funny because I am Cuban American, but I don't speak Spanish the way that I want to speak Spanish. So, my Spanish is, I would say, conversational. I can understand the basics. I can, for example, go to a restaurant and ask for food. I can live off of my Spanish but I can in no way, you know, have a career in a professional setting as a doctor or a lawyer or any other professional career in Spanish.

Melissa:

I think I experienced something similar as well. Being someone who, you know, their parents are born somewhere else, but they came here. I was born here. But going back to the story aspect of your family background, were there any stories that your family, like, constantly retold?

Amanda:

Yeah, the story of how my grandpa got the 12 to 13 people over here was a big story because he had to lie to the government to be able to get on the *Maribel*. Because the way that he says that, you know, there were only putting prisoners and criminals on the boat. So, he had to lie and say that he was a criminal and he did this deed and that deed. And it was kind of like a big thing. They always emphasize the fact that he decided to leave his family behind, take a chance. Because first he tried to convince the other men in the family. Like, "Come with me to the United States, and we'll work hard to bring everybody over." Everybody was on board until it was time to go and everybody kind of—the men backed out. My grandfather was the only one that made the tough decision. So, they like to retell that story about how none of us would be here if it weren't for him.

Melissa:

And looking back at it now, like, with all the experience you've gained, being here as a Cuban American, what do those stories mean to you?

Amanda:

I didn't learn to appreciate them until I was much older, so they didn't mean something to me when I was young, when I was a child. They were just a cool story to listen to. But because I—speaking Spanish as a child because they taught me Spanish before—they didn't speak English, so I learned Spanish first, right? So, when I was in kindergarten, everyone spoke English. And I didn't speak English. I spoke Spanish. So, there was a level of shame, like wanting to fit in.

So, I didn't appreciate the Spanish language or my Spanish—well, Cuban history, until I was much older now where, you know, you consider it a little bit too late, because the older generation is older, right? So, memory plays a part in like when you get senile—not everybody gets senile, but some— you know, you lose memories, and you lose accuracy and facts, or whatever, and you start to tell stories. So, it's a big shame and a disappointment that I haven't really learned to appreciate what I had until now that I'm much older.

Melissa:

And have you ever found yourself, like, retelling the stories that they told you to other people?

Amanda:

Yes, yes, I have. But only around other Cubans, or only if specifically asked, you know, by someone that is curious. I wouldn't just, you know, bring it up in normal conversation. And I imagine that some of the facts I get wrong or I paint in a different light. Like it changes when each person tells it.

Melissa:

And do you feel at least like within the Cuban community—because you say, you know, these are stories that usually circulate among, like—

Amanda:

Other diaspora Cubans.

Melissa:

Other Cubans. So, do you feel like these sort of stories that your family's telling and that you're retelling—Do you think they play a role in how certain information is passed down within that community?

Amanda:

I definitely think that the diaspora Cubans are the ones that are trying to keep that history alive about communism, dictatorship, the pain of leaving a country, of having to leave your home country and not knowing the language in the new country, and being an outsider and raising children in a country that's on your own, but appreciating the opportunity to be in this country. So, they constantly repeat that.

And it's not—orally they do. That's how they maintain—I mean, you could see Cubans in malls, like Westland mall, playing dominoes, and just talking about Cuba, what it was and what they wish it would be like now and how different things are. So, is it going to be the same when that generation passes away? I'm not sure. But I'm sure that the children of those people will at least talk about that history with their children. But it might be lost right to the annals of history with time. Which is why it's important to document that history.

Melissa:

What about you personally? Do you think, like, retelling the stories has like shaped the way that like you think about yourself?

Amanda:

Yeah, when your family has struggled and when you get older and you realize what other people had to go through for you to be where you are, you learn to be grateful. And you learn to appreciate the sacrifices that have been made for your sake, even if they weren't made at that time particularly thinking about you. But I think as children, we tend to be very selfish and to think about me, me, me and I, I, I. And it's just made me a lot more grateful and hardworking, and kind of putting my nose to the grindstone. And if they can leave a country and if they can face their property being seized and starvation and a whole mess of other brutal acts that were committed on them, what do I have to complain about? I have every opportunity in this country. It's made me a lot more grateful, appreciative, hardworking.

Melissa:

So, I wanted to backtrack a little bit and talk about your parents. Tell me a little bit about their educational background.

Amanda:

I'll start with my grandparents. My grandmother, the one that raised me because my mom and dad divorced. She was the one that raised my sister and I. She went up to sixth grade. She was raised in a farm and it was very important, of course, for the kids to kind of help

her on the farm. She was inside with her mother cooking, cleaning, tending the workers on the farm. And she was in a convent school, like, for Catholic nuns. And then the dictatorship happened and the school was closed down. So she went back to the farm and she never went back to school. So she has a sixth grade education.

My father. They lived in the city, in a pueblo—it's what you call it. And he had, I guess, the regular education up until the age of 13 where then he went to Venezuela. And he came here and of course, there was a huge language barrier, right? Because he didn't speak English. So, the only class that he ever excelled in was mathematics, because mathematics is universal. Every other class he failed and he never acclimated to the language. So, my father didn't even graduate high school. And my uncles—his brothers, his younger brothers did poorly in school as well.

I think that language, if you look at that generation of, like, my grandparents and their siblings—and then their children, which is like the generation of my father, the previous one—those cousins, if you—I mean, however you view success, they haven't been very successful. They didn't really go to college, get, you know, "professional careers". They kind of just survived, versus our generation. And then, you know, my second cousins. It was instilled in us to go to college, get an education, be a lawyer or a doctor. You know, “don't go through what we went through and don't make the decisions that we made.”

The language definitely played a role. And then the trauma of also leaving a country at a very young age played a role in my father's life and in his cousin's lives, as well.

Melissa:

So, you mentioned that it was instilled in you that, you know, you have to pursue higher education. That's what you got to do. What about graduate school? Was that something that was always in the plan for you?

Amanda:

I don't think that my parents and my grandparents had a very good understanding of the American education system. So, neither of them were ever, like, "you need to go to college, then you need to go to graduate school and you need to, go to—" They didn't know. They just said, "You need to go to school. You need to go to college." That's what they thought higher education is. Just college, right? And I guess, whatever career that you choose, you need to be the best and you need to get a PhD. So, it wasn't ever a distinction between undergrad and graduate. It was just whatever career you choose, you're going to go to college for that career. And you need to go to college. And it's very emphasized that you either become a lawyer or a doctor.

Melissa:

And what do they think now of your admission to graduate school?

Amanda:

They don't really understand it. To be honest, when I tell them that I'm— even in undergrad when I told them that I'm getting a bachelor's degree in English they were like, "Oh, okay, what do you do? What do you study?" Well, I study English literature, so, you

know, different epics of different writers and authors and analyzing literature. And then the second question is "Okay, well, what can you do with that?" And it's like, all it's pretty cool, but there's not a sense of pride, right?

And then now when I tell them that I'm getting my master's in English, but with the emphasis on the Writing and Rhetoric track, they're like, "Well, what is writing and rhetoric?" You know, "what do you do?" It's always, "what is that? What do you do? What can you do with it? What are you going to do after?" So, aside from the big ones, like doctor and lawyer, the other ones aren't really understood. They don't really understand why I would pursue something that isn't feasibly going to make me a lot of money. It's their mentality, which I understand but...

Melissa:

It's a common mentality, especially among immigrants.

Amanda:

I mean, if you look at it from their perspective it's, "Why did I work my butt off, trying to give my child a good future when they're not willing to work their butt off in something that they don't love? Like, I had to do it. You can do it too when you've had every opportunity to do so." I get where they're coming from.

Melissa:

Well, what about you? What do you think about your admission to graduate school?

Amanda:

Well, since no one else in my family has ever been to graduate school it was a little intimidating to think about coming to graduate school. Would I be able to—there's always that doubt, that imposter syndrome because I've never had an example in my life that you could do it. You know, you're more than capable of doing it. Here, read this book. What do you think about this book? like, I didn't get that growing up. I'm telling you that when I would get home, I was expected to do my homework with no help. Because they couldn't help. My parents couldn't help me. My grandmother for sure was not going to help me. She didn't speak a lick of English. And my father because of the trauma that he experienced, he was always a very distant, you know—provided monetarily, but emotionally distant.

So, my sister and I had to kind of just survive and thank God that we just naturally were good at school, or you know, "good at school." Whatever, right? But there was never, you know—when you get home and you talk about what's going on in the news and politics and reading this. My grandmother doesn't read. She watches *novelas*. And when I've encouraged her to read a book she—No, can't get her to read a book. My father's the same. Can't get him to read a book. So, it's, like, not only was I judged for not being the mathematics genius, the scientifically, you know—"Why can't you study physics", right, from my father. "Why can't you study science and math?" But my love of literature, I can't even share it with my family. I'm like the black sheep it feels like sometimes.

Melissa:

And considering, you know, that sort of—some of the expectations you have for grad school. Like, you know, you have to analyze books and stuff like that. What are some other expectations you had before entering graduate school?

Amanda:

Expectations that I placed on myself? Expectations that I thought were going to be placed on me like? What kind of expectations? Like, from my family?

Melissa:

Expectations that you thought were going to be, like, imposed on you once you entered academia.

Amanda:

From school?

Melissa:

Yeah.

Amanda:

Oh, it was a given. I already knew that the workload was going to be a lot. You'd have to read a lot of material that you probably weren't familiar with and that were written by people a lot smarter than then, you know, me or anybody. So, you were going to have to

grapple—The expectations were expected. I'm going to expect to kind of work hard, struggle with the material, but learn a lot along the way. It's just a given with reading and writing. I'm going to be expected to read a lot and to write a lot. About what? I don't know yet, but it's going to be a lot. Am I capable? I don't know. Do I want to see if I am? Yes, of course. So, it's a challenge mentally.

Melissa:

And do you feel, you know, those expectations that you had beforehand, like, they're still very real expectations now?

Amanda:

I think that with anything in life, you kind of expect it's gonna happen and then you never truly know what's going to happen until you, you know, you're in it. It's a lot like teaching. Like you think in your imagination of what teaching is like, but when you're teaching it's a completely different way of learning while you're doing the thing that you thought you knew how to do, or you had an idea of what you were going to do. So, graduate school has met my expectations, exceeded my expectations.

You know, there are some classes that you just ease your way through. And I don't know, maybe because you love the class or because you just vibe with the professor. I wouldn't say easier, because the material's not easy, but they're just easier to handle, right? To do the work. Whereas others are kind of, like, you're fighting against the grain to just get

through it. So, they're—you know, your expectations change. And especially from the first semester to the last semester. Completely different mentality.

Melissa:

You just mentioned, you know, you're kind of in your last semester now. So, now that you have a sort of general idea of graduate school, I want you to get into your experience here in the program, specifically at FIU. What has been your experience so far?

Amanda:

I've had a great experience at FIU. I can't compare it to any other university because I've never observed other classes in the university, but I was just appalled at the way that the department emphasizes pedagogy. Different, like, pedagogies that cater to diverse perspectives, different perspectives, openness. I remember the first—In undergrad even. I had a class with Ana Luszczynska and it was a Latinx class. I'd never learned about—I'd never heard the term Latinx before that. And it was like a diaspora class talking about—Whatever. We read a whole mess of books. It was great. The point is that I had never seen that in high school, middle school, anything. So, I don't know.

I guess this program has really opened my mind to what we should be taught and how we should be taught and the kinds of voices that we should listen to and the kinds of voices that— you know, it's like so many things I've learned, about society, the patriarchy, everything. It changed my perspective on life basically. I mean, if you compared me to 18 year old me. Night and day. Because of the professors that I've had,

the classes that I've had, and the readings that I've had to read. I've had an amazing experience here. Truly.

Melissa:

Speaking about the readings specifically, were there any moments where you were reading the material in your class—doesn't have to be a specific class—and you felt like that contradicted any of the knowledge or experiences that you came in with, like, as a Latina?

Amanda:

Interestingly enough, I haven't read any Cuban—Well, I think I did. Anna Cisneros?

Melissa:

Sandra Cisneros?

Amanda:

No, no, it was one about—"In Cuba was a German Shepherd." I think that's the only one that I've read that is Cuban, from a Cuban American perspective. And there hasn't really been a lot of like—I can't say it's been like 60% Latinx, right? And, you know— it's like here and there. The majority is still, you know, traditional white, European. Just the big name authors. But there have been more—like if you take specific courses, where it has a specific—Like, if you take the African American literature class, or if you take the Latinx class, or if you take the women's rhetoric class, you might read more diverse literature.

But those classes have been really good at expanding my idea of what it is to be Latina, valuing my own experience, and the experience of my parents and my grandparents. Because back then, when I was a child, when I was a high schooler, when I was in undergrad, I just valued the white American experience, which I didn't have. So, I didn't value myself. But the more I take classes, like, that are not centered around just generic white, Eurocentric, you know, literature, the more I appreciate my culture, the more I regret not learning more about my culture as a child, and the more I want to learn about my culture, and ask my grandparents questions, and my parents questions.

Melissa:

So, you feel like the material within these specific classes—like you mentioned the diaspora class, stuff like that—has really impacted your experience overall in the program.

Amanda:

Yes, as a Cuban American. Yes, it has.

Melissa:

And do you feel like classes like these—Well, not only classes like these, but just your classes overall in the program. Do you think that they've given you the opportunity to, like, integrate that knowledge you have as a Cuban American into your coursework?

Amanda:

You see that's where the regret comes in. Because I don't feel 100% American, and I don't feel 100% Cuban, so I'm not knowledgeable enough on Cuba and the Cuban experience to talk about and write about Cuba and the Cuban experience. I can only write about my experience as a Cuban American in Miami born in 1995, up until, you know, now 2022. That's not a lot of experience. Like, lived experience. So, have I ever felt comfortable writing about my, like, as a credible source my experience? No, never. I can maybe talk about my grandparents or my parents or, you know, some other family members of mine.

But even if I've been exposed to literature like this, it's kind of, like— the literature that I've read, you kind of have to have a certain amount of experience and trauma and stories and failure and success. I don't have that yet. I wouldn't even know where to start. So, no. At this point, I'm not comfortable enough to write about that and share. But I'm more comfortable reading the white, Anglo Saxon Eurocentric, whatever, you know, literature and analyzing it and writing about it than I am with anything that is not that, ironically enough.

Melissa:

Have you ever written about that dynamic that you're experiencing right now? Where you don't feel necessarily Cuban enough, but you're not necessarily full American?

Amanda:

No, and I haven't even begun to dissect that and to find readings that deal with that, because I'm sure there are other people that feel the same way. And they don't have to be Cuban American. It could be any ethnicity, any immigrant, you know, feeling that way. But I haven't started that journey yet.

Melissa:

So, I wanted you to sort of describe to me maybe a moment within the course or maybe in the program where you were given the opportunity to share that experience of yours, where you're a Cuban American. That sort of, like, confliction that you're experiencing.

Amanda:

Off the top of my head, can I think about a moment where I was—I don't want to say that that's never been the case, like I haven't had that opportunity. I'm just saying that I've never been willing to share. So, maybe there has been a moment in my either undergrad or graduate academic career where I was able to write about my experience, where I was able to share a personal story, but like I said, that's a part of me that I haven't begun to unearth, recover, whatever term you want to use. So, I've never been comfortable sharing that history of mine, because— like I said, I don't feel like I'm even tethered— not tethered. Tethered is the wrong word. But like I don't identify yet with that history because I don't know anything about it.

I'm not knowledgeable enough on the subject to kind of identify that—I do think of myself as Hispanic and Latina. How can I not, right? I was raised in Miami speaking

Spanish in Hialeah. Like one of the most Cuban cities you could ever think of. But academically, growing up, you push Spanish to the side. You push your culture to the side to make room for excelling in school, which is taught in English, which you're learning about Greek people and European people and your culture is just a paragraph in the history books. It's not something that is lauded or applauded, or just really appreciated at that age. So, by the time you get to college, you've hid that part of yourself for so long to try to fit in, to look more, I don't know, academically rigorous, I guess? And so now, it's just hard to go back and put all the pieces together that you've worked so hard to kind of push to the side.

Melissa:

And you mentioned before you're focusing right now on, like, Writing and Rhetoric. That's your track. So, what do you think, that us including these stories, and like these experiences, these very unique experiences that you face as, like, Hispanic, Latinx people—What do those add to the field of Writing and Rhetoric?

Amanda:

Completely different perspective. Each language has its own...I mean, a language is used as a form of expression and each language is different. So, they express themselves in different ways. Same goes with writing. We see it all the time. You get people from South America that immigrate to the United States, and you put them in, you know, ENC1101 or ENC1102 class. And it's not that they don't know how to write. It's just that the way that they've been taught to write, you know, whether you're forthright and you

include your thesis in the first paragraph, or whether you say your thesis in a more roundabout way, depends on where you grew up, what language you learned, what the people around you were doing.

So, I think it's essential that we record these histories and write about them, and analyze them and put them forth into the mainstream academia. Because otherwise, we're just getting the same perspective, the same story, the same success and failure stories over and over and over again, and that skews history. It skews what we value as a society, which is wrong, I think. So, I guess the more voices that we record that haven't really been recorded, yet, the more stories that we do that with, the more accurate we depict history as.

Melissa:

And looking at the Writing and Rhetoric field right now, do you think that you know, when we share these stories they're being, like, appreciated and validated?

Amanda:

in certain circles, yes. So, at a university like FIU where, you know, we are a very diverse population, and we emphasize having Hispanics and a whole mess of different ethnicities—not only just white. Where it's predominantly white. It's not. It's not predominantly white. It's actually very diverse, right? So, yes, we can appreciate voices like that. But I think when you get to a university, where it's just predominantly one

ethnicity or one race, it can be harder to appreciate because it is so different from, I guess, what the majority of the experiences that people have.

When you're born in a diverse location, where there are a lot of many different kinds of people, like Miami, it's a given, you know. People are from different parts of the world, people have different experiences, different cultures. You may speak Creole, I may speak Spanish. But somehow we find a way. We fit in even if—you know, locations are segregated. It's like the Cubans have their neighborhoods, right? *[laughs]* And you know where the Venezuelans are and you know where the Puerto Ricans are. Whatever. But even then, there's still a level of, "we're all in this together, we're all different." But you really start to see how different you are when you go to a place that's predominantly one race, or one background.

Like I have friends, for example, who went to law school, where it's majority white. And they feel imposter syndrome, because when they speak they have an accent and they're not white. Their skin color is a little darker. They already go in there feeling stressed and anxious because they look different and sound different and think differently. So, it depends on the university, depends on the atmosphere that is created around you. Whether you feel comfortable in sharing that part of you, or whether you don't, and you hide it just to fit in. That doesn't happen at FIU, I don't think. I think there has been a movement by the department to really create a more open, inviting atmosphere with the years.

Melissa:

And to go more into, like, our program specifically here at FIU, do you think you've been given enough opportunities, you know, as a Cuban American to share these experiences?

Amanda:

Have been given enough opportunities? There is the freedom to. You are free and you never feel you are confined to talk about one thing or another thing you are free to do as you choose. And the professors are, at least in this program, they're really open about helping you and whatever it is that you are passionate about. Now, whether the person will be comfortable sharing their specific experiences and culture, that's a different story. Because there's a lot of other variables that play in there. But is the opportunity present in this program? Yeah, definitely.

Melissa:

All right. And before we wrap things up, do you think that there's anything you wanted to talk about during this interview that you didn't get the chance to?

Amanda:

Off the top of my head? No, not that I can think of?

Melissa:

Well, it's been a great time talking to you. Thank you again for sitting down with me and, like, being willing to share.

Amanda:

No problem. Thank you for hearing me out.

Interview: Rocio Rodriguez

Date: February 16, 2022

Melissa:

Hello, hello, what is your full name?

Rocio:

Hi, my name is Rocio Rodriguez Fonte.

Melissa:

Hi, Rocio! Thank you for agreeing to sit down with me to talk about this.

Rocio:

Of course. Thank you for having me.

Melissa:

All right. So when and where were you born?

Rocio:

I was born April 12 2000 in Cienfuegos, Cuba.

Melissa:

And what about your family? Were they also born in Cuba?

Rocio:

Yes, all my family members were born in Cuba. But I'm aware that from my dad's side, they were from Spain. And from my mom's side, they were from Portugal.

Melissa:

Alright, and you mentioned that you're from Cuba. So do you remember, like, the year that you came over here to the US?

Rocio:

Yes, I came in 2009. I was eight years old, but I shortly turned nine. And I remember everything. I remember—You know, the good childhood that I had with all the barn animals and playing, no technology.

Melissa:

All right, and do you speak Spanish?

Rocio:

Yes, I do.

Melissa:

Alright. And how have you experienced, you know, speaking Spanish here in a place like Miami?

Rocio:

I think it's greatly benefited me especially in the professional environment, because most jobs here in Miami require to be bilingual. And also, being bilingual in general is so beneficial for cognitive thinking, for, you know, going back and forth to languages when you interact with someone. They don't speak one of them, you can use the other.

Melissa:

And have you felt like your Spanish has changed ever since, you know, coming here from Cuba?

Rocio:

Definitely. Because at first, when I came to this country, I learned English very quickly. So, then I started forgetting words in Spanish. And now that I'm fluent in English, I start forgetting words in English. So, sometimes I have to use— you know, I have to go from one language to the other. The struggles of being bilingual. [*laughter*]

Melissa:

And so growing up, were there any stories that your family, like, constantly told?

Rocio:

So, my family— and I feel that this is a very common thing in all cultures that my family spoke a lot about my ancestors so...a lot, like I mentioned earlier, from my dad's Spanish

ancestors, the way that they would speak, the way that they would communicate...A lot about my grandpa. He went to multiple wars in Cuba, and also something that is very prominent in my family is how my parents met, because they've been together I believe for...since they were 15, and now they're 60.

Melissa:

And looking back at these stories, what do they mean to you right now?

Rocio:

I think that they're very meaningful, because they're stories that I will tell my children, and that they will pass on to their children, hopefully. And it's just stories that—they keep our family's memory alive. Because if there's a story that you hear, and you don't share it with other people, then it just stops existing. So, it's as if that person just won't be relevant in the future.

Melissa:

So, you mentioned that these are, like, details that you would retell like and you say that and like the future, like tense. Do you think that these are stories that you find yourself retelling now?

Rocio:

Definitely. I love to brag that my parents have been together since they were 15. And I love my Spanish side because I'm not too familiar with my Portugal side. But I'm a huge

fan of Spanish accent, Spanish movies, Spanish music, Spanish food. So, that's definitely—all the stories that have been told to me I love to share them. I love to share as much stories as I can.

Melissa:

And considering that you and your family have so many stories to tell and that you have been retelling, do you think that the stories play a role in how the information or, like, the experiences within your family are shared and passed down?

Rocio:

I think so. Because stories about the past and, like, gossip and things like that, it helps us be informed. We Hispanics love to be informed. We love to talk about events, talk about our surroundings, talk about anything really.

Melissa:

And what do these stories mean for you? Like, how have they shaped the way that you, like, think and perceive yourself?

Rocio:

I think that the practice of sharing stories that my family has instilled in me, I feel like that has definitely benefited me in many ways. Because I love to tell stories. I love writing about stories, I love to talk to people about the stories. Just in general, I'm a

person who really enjoys storytelling when it comes to, like, any aspect of my life.

Whether it's professional, personal, I just, I love to share, I love to listen.

Melissa:

And you mentioned this a little bit before, but do you think that this does sort of the same thing for, like, the community in general? And when I say community, I mean the Cuban community here in Miami.

Rocio:

I think so. I think that Cubans love to talk about themselves, just like any other culture. But since that is the culture I'm most familiar with since it's my own. Yeah, like I said earlier, we love to tell stories. And, you know, we watch *novelas* and stuff like that that really influences our way of communication, which is, you know—instead of getting straight to the point, we give background information and build onto what we say and we add imagery. And we add sounds, we do a lot of movement with our hands, which I'm doing right now. [*laughter*] We're just very expressive people.

Melissa:

And to backtrack a little bit, because I want to know a little more about your family's educational background.

Rocio:

So, my immediate family, as they call it here. My mom, she's a Doctor of medicine. And my dad, he's a construction worker, but... I'm not a first generation graduate. I won't be a first generation graduate, because a lot of my family members, especially on my mom's side, they're doctors, and they've gotten their PhDs, their masters, etc.

Melissa:

So, do you feel that from a young age, they sort of instilled this idea for you, that, you know, you have to go to college?

Rocio:

Definitely. Since I was little, I've always been very studious. So, they didn't really have to pressure me into doing it, because I genuinely enjoyed it. But I think that, even if I would have been against school, I think that they would have definitely instilled in me that I had to continue studying and, like, pursue higher education because of their own background.

Melissa:

So, from a young age, would you say you knew that you were going to college?

Rocio:

Yeah, but for different reasons. Because when I was little, I wanted to be a ballet dancer. And in Cuba, they have very good schools of the arts. And a lot of ballet dancers go abroad, and they dance in Russia and the US and in other countries. And so that's what I wanted to do. Definitely not what I'm doing now.

Melissa:

And what influenced that shift over from ballet to English?

Rocio:

My high school teachers. They were always complimenting my writing, something that I never really thought about. Because when I was little, even though I was in third grade, the last grade that I was in Cuba. I always loved Spanish, I loved grammar. I loved writing. It was my favorite subject. So, when I moved to this country, and I learned English—and that is something that I also enjoyed in this language. And I never saw the connect that that would have in my future or my professional life, or in the program that I'll be pursuing. But then my English teachers in high school were always telling me "Oh, you should be a teacher. Oh, you should do writing. You should pursue this because you're really good at it." And I'm, like, "Oh, I didn't even know. Thanks!" So, when I was thinking in junior year of high school about all the careers that I was considering, that was definitely, like, up there. Like pursuing a writing program.

Melissa:

And so—what I'm getting from this is that, you know, you had sort of an idea that you wanted to go to school when you were older. But what about grad school? Did you think that you were gonna, you know, end up in grad school when you were young?

Rocio:

Not really. I think this is something that I thought about after I finished my Associate's, because before, like, in high school, I just told myself, "Oh, I'll just get a Bachelor's in English, and I'll be a high school teacher." But then I thought about it and then I thought about how I want to teach more complex subjects and how I want to have real conversations that will impact a bigger audience. Because sometimes high school students, there's some passionate ones, but then there's others that don't really care about the material. So, I wanted to avoid that. And I wanted to interact with students that were here because they wanted to, and because they wanted to do something bigger than just school.

Melissa:

And considering your family's thoughts on education overall, what did they think of your admission to the program?

Rocio:

Well, they were happy for me, obviously, but they still don't understand what rhetoric means. I tell them all the time. It's like they don't get it. And especially because they wanted me to be a doctor. One of the careers that I was considering in high school of pursuing eventually was medicine, because I wanted to be a plastic surgeon. And my family was very supportive of that. Even though they were like, "Oh, plastic surgeon? You're gonna be—*[laughs]* That's rough."

But they were happy for me, that I was going into the field of medicine. But then when I told them that I changed my mind, that I wanted to pursue English, even though they were still happy, and they're still happy that I'm pursuing graduate school and my doctorate, they were still a little bit, like, indifferent. They were like, "Oh, Rocio was going to be a doctor, but she wants to be a professor now. But, oh, well, we have to support her."

Melissa:

So, trying to be supportive. [*laughs*] But what about you though? Like, what do you think about being admitted to the program?

Rocio:

I'm really happy because when I applied to graduate school I was looking at both tracks. I was looking at Literature, and I was looking at Writing and Rhetoric. And I contacted a few of my mentors from high school, that I still kept contact with because they were so influential in my decision to become an educator. And, you know, they told me about the benefits and the drawbacks of both. And then I talked to a professor here that I had for my undergraduate and she said that Writing and Rhetoric had more jobs. That even though the literature track would—there would be more competition and I would most likely get paid better. Writing and Rhetoric had more jobs and then, aside from that, I didn't only think about, like, the money aspect of it, but I was thinking, what would I enjoy more?

I love reading, but I wouldn't want to have reading as...I wouldn't want to professionalize reading because it's something that I genuinely enjoy as a hobby. So, I feel like if I would pursue literature, and I would have to read all these books that I enjoy, and analyze them to the very core, I feel like I wouldn't see those books anymore with the same essence. So, then I thought about Writing and Rhetoric. Writing? I love writing. I've always loved writing. And rhetoric? I love, you know, persuading people. As a matter of fact, in high school, I was in the law magnet program in my school. And my professor would always tell me that I should be a lawyer, because I would always convince people of things.

Melissa:

And before getting accepted into the program, what were some expectations you had about grad school?

Rocio:

I thought that everybody was going to be super old [*laughter*] and sophisticated, that everybody was going to speak with a perfect accent and I was going to be the only young one with a Cuban accent and that they were gonna judge me and that their writing was going to be better. Stuff like that.

Melissa:

And just to clarify by what you mean by, like, perfect accent. You mean an American accent? Like standard sort of stuff?

Rocio:

Yeah. So, the way I speak, it changes depending on the person that I'm talking to.

Sometimes I have a very Hispanic Cuban accent if I'm around a Cuban and Hispanic people. And when I'm with more American people, I sort of, like, code-switch. So, I try to speak very eloquently. And that's what I thought I was going to have to do here and in the graduate program.

Melissa:

So, considering those expectations—other than, you know, the accent part, are there any other expectations that have changed since you've entered the program?

Rocio:

I think all of them because even though I still experienced this imposter syndrome, because I am very young compared to my colleagues and I have a different cultural experience than they do. I still think that—sorry, I don't think any more that I'm inferior to them because now I've seen that all my colleagues are of different ages, they have different accents. And just because they have an accent doesn't mean that they're any less intelligent, which is something I really appreciate, because I thought that that was an obstacle that I was going to face here in grad school.

Melissa:

And do you think this sort of diverse environment here is as a result of, you know, being in Miami?

Rocio:

I think so. I think so because FIU has a very large Hispanic population. So, I feel that because of that —and, and not only Hispanics, but also other cultures, other ethnicities, other—of all races, all genders, all sexual orientations. I feel like because there's so much diversity here in the university I feel like I can be open about my identity, and that others can be open to me and not have to feel ashamed.

Melissa:

And since we're on the topic of FIU specifically, I want to talk more about your experience within the MA program. So, what has been your experience so far?

Rocio:

I've had a very good experience. I'm not—I'm trying to think. What exactly about the program? Well, something I really enjoy about the program is how open it is like I mentioned. I'm not sure if other programs in or outside of the humanities, if they're as open as this program. But I experienced that since the very first semester. My classes were promoting openness, they're promoting equality, something that has been talked about when I was in undergraduate, and even in high school, but it has definitely become very, very prominent that the FIU faculty is being as open as possible with everyone and showing as many diverse texts and diverse experiences as they can to make sure that everybody feels included.

Melissa:

And considering, you know, the positive experience that you're mentioning here, have you had any trouble then adjusting to grad school?

Rocio:

Not really. I feel like I jumped right into somewhere where I feel accepted.

Melissa:

Nice. Now going into, specifically like the material that's being covered in the classes you're taking. Have there been any moments where, you know, where what you've learned in class has sort of contradicted any of the stories or, like, the experiences that you've had as a Latina?

Rocio:

Not necessarily, because, like I mentioned, there's a lot of diversity in the course material that FIU professors have been putting in their syllabi. But definitely, I still see references to a lot of classical philosophers like Aristotle and Plato, that are known to be very, you know, discriminatory and also a lot of Eurocentric rhetoric. For example, when there's a lesson on, let's say, Native American rhetoric, but then there's a white author writing it because there's not enough Native American representation or not enough known Native American writers.

Melissa:

So, what I'm hearing is that a lot of the material within the program is not really reflective of your experience.

Rocio:

Exactly.

Melissa:

And considering that, you know, that a lot of the material is, like, lacking a lot of not only our experiences, but just a different perspective in general. Have you had any opportunities to integrate your own experience? You know, from your Cuban community into, like, your coursework?

Rocio:

So, last semester, I did a blog called "Decolonizing Pedagogy for Latinx Inclusivity." And here, I talked about counterstory, the addition of Latinx texts in the classroom, and safe spaces in and outside of the classroom for Latino and Latina individuals to be able to express themselves and to be able to feel as if they are accepted and included in and outside of the classroom. And this is something I'll be referring to also in my thesis, because I'll be talking about Latinx rhetoric.

Melissa:

So, you're sort of filling the gap here that you're seeing. And since you mentioned—you know, your first language is Spanish. Have you been encouraged to integrate Spanish into your coursework?

Rocio:

I wouldn't say necessarily encouraged. The professor's have definitely let us know that it is okay to add our native languages in our writing, but not encouraged. No.

Melissa:

And do you feel like you would express yourself a little more differently, if you were strongly encouraged to write a piece in Spanish per say?

Rocio:

Definitely because I feel work like 's *Borderlands*—I feel like that work is very important. And other Latino authors who write in their language or who write in English, but have references to words in Spanish—I would definitely love to do that. The thing is that it has been ingrained in our brains for so long that we have to write a certain way with a certain structure. And even though they're trying to unlearn that in the program—that they're trying to teach that you can be creative in the work that you write, it's really hard to stray away from the traditional way of writing. It's really hard to write a piece and say, "I'm going to use 'I' in this piece, and I'm going to be okay" or "I'm going to use a word in Spanish to show my identity and it's gonna be okay." It's really hard to adapt to that.

Melissa:

And so you mentioned earlier that, you know, you find yourself sort of code-switching a little when it comes to class, in speech. So, would you say that that's, like, a similar experience for you when you're writing?

Rocio:

Definitely. If you read my writing, it just sounds like, you know, an American citizen wrote it. Well, I am an American citizen, but you wouldn't see my writing and you would think this is a Hispanic person.

Melissa:

And you also mentioned, you know, the blog that you created, I believe, last semester. And you mentioned how that was a sort of unique experience, because you were able to integrate Latinx sources and Latinx material into something. So, for a project like that, were you able to share personal stories about, you know, your own experiences as a Latina specifically?

Rocio:

Yes. So, in my blog, since I talked about safe spaces, I gave my own experience with safe spaces. Specifically, WhatsApp group chats. And I talked a lot about how not only Latinx individuals, but also any other marginalized individual or an individual belonging to a marginalized group, that when they're in these group chats, they experience a sense of

community. They experience a sense of someone's here for me. I can ask them questions and they'll understand my identity, my experience. So, I feel like that is something very important. Especially now with COVID that a lot of people have, like, online classes and they can't communicate with their classmates in person. And they feel very lonely and very isolated from the program or from FIU in general.

Melissa:

And integrating that personal experience into your blog like that, what do you think the outcome was like for you? Like, how do you think that was received?

Rocio:

I think that everybody who read the blog and who gave me feedback on the blog, they were accepting and they were very encouraging that I included that experience because they have experienced the same thing. They have had a positive experience with WhatsApp group chats. And I think that it adds more to the conversation in regards to digital and virtual rhetoric. Because it shows that through these spaces, we can actually, like, communicate in more complex manners than people are aware of. We might use "BTW", or "LOL", or bad grammar, but we're communicating effectively, regardless.

Melissa:

And a point that you brought up earlier that I find super interesting—When we're talking about other fields of rhetoric or, like, digital rhetoric. So, you mentioned that, you know, there's not a lot of material covering, Latinx experience, especially not in an

interdisciplinary way like with digital rhetoric, for example. So, what are your thoughts on that specifically?

Rocio:

I think that there's definitely not enough studies in the writing program, or in general, about digital rhetoric about Latino individuals. And when I was doing this blog, there was another colleague that was doing something similar but with Black Twitter. She was talking about Black Twitter and Black TikTok, and that side of TikTok. And she barely found, like, any material on these experiences, because it's something very new, but it's still something very relevant. So, I feel like that it definitely needs to be explored.

Melissa:

And speaking about the field of writing and rhetoric, because that's what we both are in right now—What do you think the inclusion of stories, specifically, your types of stories where we talk about our own experiences as Latino people—What do they add to the field?

Rocio:

I think that they add a piece of our culture. Storytelling is, I think, one of the best ways of expressing oneself because it doesn't have a structure. It just...you know, you express yourself with your peculiarities, with your accent—different stories, different experiences. So, they add a lot about individual students or individual persons, which is very important, because a lot of the time there's a lot of stereotypes behind, you know, the

Latino community, and more specifically, the Cuban community. But when we use counterstories, and we when we say our story instead of the stories that are being told about us from people who have not experienced our pain and our journey as immigrants, etc., I feel like that definitely adds a lot more complexity and, you know, reality to the conversation.

Melissa:

And considering the way that the Writing and Rhetoric field is right now, do you think that these stories are being appreciated and valued?

Rocio:

I definitely think so. I think that FIU is trying really hard to be as inclusive as possible. And I have seen many works from Villanueva and Aja Martinez and even Anzaldúa and a lot of more authors that have been cited a lot in the program.

Melissa:

So, within the program, do you think you're given enough opportunities to share your own experiences and your own stories?

Rocio:

I think so. But I wonder if other tracks outside of the humanities—if they're as open. But in the Writing and Rhetoric program, specifically, I feel like I have been able to express myself as a Latina woman, more specifically an immigrant Latina woman. And I'm a

very expressive person as is, so, even if I wasn't allowed, I would still talk about it. I wouldn't shy away from it.

Melissa:

All right. And before we wrap this up, was there anything you wanted to talk about that we didn't get to?

Rocio:

No.

Melissa:

All right. Well, thank you so much Rocio for agreeing to talk with me.

Rocio:

Of course. Thank you for having me.

Interview: Austin Torres

Date: February 18, 2022

Melissa:

Hello, hello, what is your full name?

Austin:

Hi, my name is Austin Torres.

Melissa:

Hi, Austin. Thank you for agreeing to share your experiences with me.

Austin:

I'm so glad to be here.

Melissa:

All right, and when and where were you born?

Austin:

I was born here in Florida in Coral Gables, 1995, January 15.

Melissa:

Nice. And tell me a little bit about your family. Where are they from?

Austin:

So, my grandmother's Colombian. My mom was born in New York. And my father, I believe, is Venezuelan. I believe he was born in Venezuela. But I'm not entirely sure. My grandfather is Iranian.

Melissa:

Nice. And what do you know about these places that your family's from? For example, your mom?

Austin:

Well, my mom loves New York. It's her favorite city ever. I don't know if it's still her favorite city, because she complains about it a lot, right? She thinks it's changed quite a bit, but she thinks it's a beautiful city. I agree with her. She doesn't really say much about it, because she was very young, when she came to Miami. And my grandmother's from Colombia. She's told me a little bit here and there about what it was like to live over there. Not a whole lot. But she says it's a very beautiful country. You know, she had a very lovely childhood, her and her sisters. And yeah, she's specifically from Barranquilla, which I've been to, which is more of a smaller kind of city, as opposed to maybe the bigger ones in Colombia. But yeah, she said it's a very lovely country. She has a lot of love for it. And then my father, I don't really speak to him so much about Venezuela. And my grandfather passed when I was very young.

Melissa:

Do you speak Spanish?

Austin:

I do. Not particularly well, but I speak Spanish. Yeah. Enough to get by, enough to survive, I guess.

Melissa:

And what has been your experience so far, like, speaking Spanish here in Miami?

Austin:

Embarrassing for the most part because my Spanish is so awful. You know, I don't feel particularly comfortable in my Spanish. So, I can't express myself the way I'd like to. Especially within my own family. A lot of my cousins speak Spanish fluently and as well as the older folks—you know, my grandmother. It's her first language. And a lot of other people in my family. They speak Spanish as their primary language. So, a lot of the times it's been difficult to kind of express myself, articulate my thoughts. You know, I have a lot of love for the language as a whole. It's one of those things that I've been meaning to get better at and to polish it, especially now that I'm getting older.

But for the most part, I mean, it's been okay. It's kind of funny. You learn to laugh at yourself, right? Like, I know I'm not good at Spanish and I kind of use it for comic relief.

I don't take it, you know, as personal. I don't—What would the word be? I'm not too hard on myself about it. I guess. I could say or I would say. So, it's funny.

Melissa:

And growing up with your family, were there any stories that they constantly told you?

Austin:

[*laughs*] I mean, yeah. A lot of them. We have a very interesting history. My mom, she's first generation American, so she speaks Spanish beautifully. She speaks Spanish way better than I do, far better than I do. And she's able to articulate herself perfectly in both languages, right? She could switch from English to Spanish seamlessly. And, you know, when she speaks English, she seems like she's a total American. I don't think one would suspect her to be of Latin descent. She looks very white, I guess you could say. She's blonde. She has very fair skin. She's very pale. And, most people are shocked when she speaks Spanish. So, when she was born here, I mean, she was very Americanized. So, her and her other cousins—Like my uncles and my aunts. They used to go out and they partied a lot here in Miami. Specifically, they lived here growing up. So, I mean, it was different for them growing up as opposed to, I guess, the generation that came before them.

Like her mother, my grandmother, her sisters, they immigrated from Colombia, and they came to New York. When my grandmother talks about New York—she talks a lot more about New York than she does about Colombia, actually. You know, it was that big

culture shock of her coming here with her two sisters. They emigrated in their early 20s. And just coming to New York in the 60s is when she came. Every time I play like the Beatles or certain songs from that era, she'll be like, "Oh, it reminds me of New York" and stuff like that. And she tells me funny stories about how she remembers coming in here and everybody—there was so many hippies and stuff, right? New York was a whole different place. So, it's interesting. And certain little things will make her bring up like a story here and there. I won't get too into the details.

I mean [*laughs*] one thing she told me that always stuck with me and she's brought this up a few times. It's weird. But she says, "I knew I was in America. I came here and I realized what a different place this was. I came here and everything just smelled like weed everywhere." Marijuana everywhere in New York City. And there were so many hippies that were making love like right there, you know. Like, right in front of, like, on the steps of their apartments and stuff. Like right there in the crannies and stuff in Central Park. It was free love. It was a whole different world back then. It was crazy. So, I hear stories like that and as well as like what my mom's life was like. Her and her cousins and my aunts and uncles and stuff. And they used to party quite a bit. They grew up more so in the 80s and the 90s.

My mom is—she's now in her late 40s, I think? She's in her mid 40s, late 40s. She refuses to tell me her age. She likes to think that she's 28. But she tells me a lot about what it was like growing up in Miami in the 90s and partying a lot, going to clubs, meeting a lot of celebrities. She has stories with all sorts of celebrities. Like, she met Diddy, she hung out

with Chris Tucker. And I know, super weird. *[laughs]* My mom's lived a very rich life, right? And, you know, that kind of stuff. She met Wesley Snipes at one point. And she's met Madonna, like three times like at three different clubs. So, it's cool stories like that that they tell me. But I'm trying to think.

You know, Miami in the 90s too. I mean, it was like the early 90s, in the late 80s. I mean, it was the height of, like, cocaine trafficking, the Cocaine Cowboys, the cartels and stuff like that. And they have stories about that kind of stuff, too. You know, being Colombian and coming from that background. You tend to know people. It's a small world. So they knew people that were involved in that. You know, some of them are dead. I remember when, when the documentary came out, "Cocaine Cowboys", we all got together. It was like a family event. I remember hearing the older folks watching and be, like, "Oh, I knew him! He used to live right next to your aunt!" I think my aunt lived next to one of these hitmen that were featured in the documentary. I can't remember their name. I mean, it was years ago that we saw it. But those are just the kind of stories that we tell it because, you know, it's so close to home. You come from Colombia, you just know people, you know? You know people.

Melissa:

And looking back at those stories now, what do they mean to you?

Austin:

I mean, they kind of shaped who I am in a sense. I wouldn't say that I'm particularly connected to my culture, like, in any deep way. I don't feel as though I have a deep spiritual connection to my heritage or anything like that, like other people do. You know, I think it's so funny. People are like, "I'm Colombian" or "I'm Cuban" or "I come from this background or that background", but I never felt like that kind of deep identification with any particular culture or anything like that. But they shaped the way I think, the way I see the world. And my connection to, I guess—how could I say this? So, my family, my sense of personhood, I guess you could say.

It's interesting, because now I'm thinking about it. I've never given it that much thought. It's just something to think about. I grew up in a very—what's a good word? It's not like the typical atomic family. And that comes with its own kind of stories and stuff. I have a very interesting family. I feel like my mom, my grandma—everybody's just very eccentric. So, it's weird. I mean, I guess in some ways you never really think about it. You don't always stop to reflect on those things. I haven't, obviously, as it's showing now. But it definitely shapes me in some way or another, you know?

Melissa:

And do you think that telling these stories sort of play a role in how the experiences of your family and the knowledge that you guys have gathered over the years is, like, passed down?

Austin:

You know what? Yeah. Thinking about it more, it definitely informs my worldview and the way that I am. I was just exposed to so much at such a young age and so many different walks of life and so many different lifestyles and so many different stories. There was nothing very standard about my upbringing or anything. My childhood or anything like that. I have a different way of looking at things and I think that it comes out in the way that I express myself in the world and how I talk to others. I'm not really shocked by a lot of things.

You know, like, my mother's just very frank. My grandmother's very frank. I was raised specifically by my mother and my grandmother. My father, who I won't say much about, has never been really around. We don't really speak a lot. So, it was really more of them two. They're very blunt people. They're very open people. They're also of very strong character. And I think that I inherited that. If not inherited, then it kind of rubbed off on me. So, I think I got lost in the question. What was the question again? *[laughter]*

Melissa:

I think you answered it perfectly.

Austin:

Yeah?

Melissa:

So, let's backtrack a little bit. Tell me more about—since you know, you're focusing more on your mom and your grandmother. Tell me a little bit about their educational background.

Austin:

So, my grandmother—honestly, I'm so embarrassed. I don't know to what point she studied. I don't know. Because she didn't go to college and all that. Did she go to college, though? Wow, this is so embarrassing. I'm not quite sure that she did. I don't really know if she did. I don't think that she continued her education when she came here. I know that she came here in her early 20s. And I'm pretty sure she finished what must have been like the high school equivalent of—you know, in Colombia. I don't know if they have, like, a high school. I don't really know. I'm sorry. I'm a little ignorant in that respect.

But I know that my mother did go to college. She went to college at St. Thomas. I think she studied journalism and I also think she studied fashion. I know she wanted to work in fashion, but I'm not sure. You know, I hope that she never hears this because she's gonna be so pissed when she finds out that I don't know exactly what she studied. But I know she went to St. Thomas. I know she did that for sure. Because I remember when she graduated, I was a little kid. But I remember when she graduated. She was so happy. I was happy for her. But um, yeah, I think she did study journalism, but she could have also studied fashion. I know, she said that to me. She wanted to work in the fashion industry.

Melissa:

And when you were a little did you expect to go to college?

Austin:

I never put too much thought into it. I guess I always kind of knew that I did because it's just what you do. Not going to college was never really something that I thought was just a good—It just felt like common sense to go to college. My mom went to college. She told me later on that she went to college, specifically—I'm not sure if this is the only reason but she expressed it in such a way where it feels this way. She said "I went to college so that you couldn't grow up and use that as an excuse for you not going to college." And she was, if I'm not mistaken, the first person in our family to go to college. And she did that so that when I grew up, I wouldn't have that over her head and come back with some smartass remark and say, "Oh, you didn't go to college. So why would I?"

We laugh about it now because I told her I would have gone to college anyways. So she's like, "Well, shit. If I would have known that I would have never gone to college." So I mean, yeah, I always just thought it was something—I like education. I like to learn. My mother, you know, she instilled reading—She incorporated that into our lives. That was something that we bonded over. She always recommended good books to me. She always made it a point to make me read. She introduced me to a lot of good music. She made sure that I was very cultured. My mom is very cool. And she has a great knowledge of

music and books, I would say. I mean, my reading interests, as she would agree, differ a lot from hers.

Now as I'm older, we're just very different people. But she recommended a couple of really good books to me when I was younger, and that's kind of how I got into knowledge. She always reminded me, "This is an avenue. This is a way out. You need to learn. You need to be the smartest person so that you could get through the world. That's the best way to do it. It's to read, to enrich your mind." So, she always made sure that that was something that was cemented in my worldview. And I loved it from a very early age. I loved reading.

Melissa:

So, you definitely know you're going to college, but what about grad school? Did you know that you were going to go into grad school?

Austin:

Did I know? I was on the fence about it a bit. I guess I didn't know. No, I really didn't because I wasn't really sure. I've never had a big plan for my life. I've never been a planner. I've always been very spontaneous. I just kind of make things up as I go. So, no. I have to admit, I didn't always know that I was going to do grad school. That was something that came along. I took a class that I really liked and I like the professor a lot. I like the way that she taught and she was very inspirational. I thought, "Okay, I want to do this." She was so intelligent and she was so well articulated. She seemed to know so

much. I'm obsessed with learning as much as I can, so I thought, "Wow, this seems like a hot ticket. I want to do this. I would love to do that."

So then I figured, you know, why not get my masters? I could be a professor. I'd love to be a professor. You know, I love talking to people. I love conversing with people. I love gathering knowledge. I love to read. I love to learn. And that just seemed like the right ticket. That just seemed like something that was very appealing to me at that point. You know, it was a matter of taking a class with a professor that really, like, inspired me to want to do that. After that I wasn't on the fence about it. I said, "Well, I absolutely want to do this. This seems great. I would love to do what she does."

Melissa:

And what does your family think of you being in grad school?

Austin:

They think it's great. They're actually really supportive of it because I'm the first person in my family to go to grad school. Yeah, I think I am. And is someone else? I'm trying to think now. I think I'm the only one who's doing this. And I'm trying to think if I have another family member who's doing this. I think my younger cousin, she's gonna do it now. She's awesome and she's great. She's getting her BA in Psychology here, as well at FIU. And we're really close. She's like my sister. So, I think she's gonna do it too, but I think that I'm the only one or the first person to get my MA.

So, I mean, they're very proud. They're really supportive of it. They're not like, "Oh, what are you going to do? How are you going to make a living there?" They know that I'll figure it out. I mean, I'm a survivor. So, they're not really concerned about that kind of stuff that, like, other parents, I guess—You know, thank God. Because I know other parents kind of, like, give their kids a hard time. Like, "Oh, how are you gonna make a living at this capitalist hellscape?" Well, I don't know, you know? Doesn't it matter that you follow your passion and you do what you love?

That's kind of, like, more of their philosophy. It's not, like, they don't say that from time to time. They do. My mom does. She's more pragmatic, I would say, than I am. And she's more fearful of the future, in terms of like economic mobility. And she's very a cold realist. My mom and I are very similar. But she's a lot more down to earth in the way—I mean, the difference between her and I is that I'm an idealist and she's not. I'm very much "Let's go save the world! Let's be empathetic and love everybody. You have to save the world." My mom's like, "How are you going to do that if you're starving?" But she respects my path. So, it's not like a huge matter of—what could I say? It's not like a matter of huge contention.

Melissa:

And what do you think about your admission to the program?

Austin:

I like it. I mean, it's been great. It's a lot of fun. I've learned a lot. It's cool. I mean, like I said, I've learned a lot. It's been fun. I think that I have a greater sense of camaraderie with my classmates than I did an undergrad. It feels like a tighter community. The material's better than when I was learning in undergrad. Well, better is, like,—What's the word for what I'm doing there? Like a superlative. Like when I'm comparing something to another—I loved the material in undergrad, but in the master studies you're studying a lot more dense literature.

It's different texts and stuff like that. It's more challenging, it's more rigorous, which is always more interesting for me and I like that. I mean, it's great. And I love the sense of community. It's such a big proponent of, like, a sense of community in whatever you do and I like it. I love the people that I study with. I think the professors are all really kind. They're very helpful. They're all fascinating and brilliant people that I enjoy studying under. And so, it's been fun. I mean, I like it. It's cool. It's definitely been an experience.

Melissa:

And you briefly mentioned the material there. So, I wanted to ask, have there been moments where, like, you've read the material in your classes and they have times maybe contradicted with your own experiences as a Latino?

Austin:

That's a good question. I know what the answer is. I'm just thinking about how I'm gonna articulate it. I mean, it's funny. Grad school is funny because—how could I say this? I

was in a class and we were studying an academic work by this writer. I can't remember, but it's a big work. It's well known. It was "The Signify" and something. I don't know if you remember. I don't know if you know what I'm talking about, but basically, in the book—What was it that this guy said? Basically saying—Signifying was one of the terms that was used in this book. What the writer was arguing was that signifying is, like, this act in black culture and African American culture where black folk will, like, rank on one another—Rank is also vernacular, but when they'll—What's the word for it that's not, like, a colloquialism? They'll disrespect each other, but it'll be from a place of love, right? Like, as a joke. There's other words for, like, "I'm cracking on you." It escapes me. I should have slept.

But basically, what they were saying was that this term is—And I might be wrong about this. I know, this is gonna be on record, so, I hope I don't embarrass myself later on. From what I understood, and I could be wrong, and perhaps I'd have to go back to the reading. So, for for the record, maybe I'm wrong about this. From the way that I understood it was they were saying that this type of expression and way of communicating with one another is particular to black communities. It's like an African American thing that they do. Like, if I'm saying, "Oh, you have a big ass head." And, you know, we're joking with each other. It's not that we're actually disrespecting each other. It comes from love and it's something that you do with your friends. And this academic was studying this as a particular expression within black communities. I thought that was interesting because I'm Latin and I think that we all do that.

So, it was shocking to me because I'm, like, these—Are there Latin writers—And I never looked into it, so maybe there are Latin writers talking about it. But I was, like, "I do this with my cousins and stuff." I do this with my family. We do this. And this has been something that we grew up on. So, he was saying that it was specific to black cultures and I almost wanted to contest it because I said, "I don't think that that's specific to black culture." Well, I think that it might have started there or maybe it's a shared thing that we do. I don't know if other cultures do this, because, you know, obviously, I'm a little ignorant. I'm not sure. But I thought that was really interesting, because it just kind of shows you, I guess—What's the word for it? There's so many experiences that you don't hear about. I'm thinking while I'm reading this in class that this is so popular in my community. But also my community has grown up largely where— I'm specifically from Kendall here in Florida.

I think that me and a lot of the people I grew up with, we all grew up on black culture. We're going to be very specific. Like, hip hop music. We had a lot of black friends. Our music tastes was typically, like, hip hop, and reggaeton too, you could say. But it was mostly hip hop we grew up on. There weren't really any white people where I grew up. White people were the minority. So, it was all just mostly Latin people, and then some black people. And so I thought it was interesting because I'm, like, "Is this a product of an intersection that maybe I haven't seen in the world?" I haven't been around the world enough. I don't really know. I thought it was just kind of confusing.

It was sort of jarring, right? And it's always jarring to see academia talking about something that's just so natural and normal within your culture, you growing up—to see this dissect it on that level and then for someone to say this is specific to this culture. I thought that's interesting. I'm not sure if that's true, you know, but it made me think, like, "Okay. To what extent is this a product of our intersection, like our particular social enclave?" So, I don't know how clear that was. But, you get my drift?

Melissa:

No, yeah, I do.

Austin:

Does that make sense?

Melissa:

Yeah. And speaking of—Well, obviously, we're speaking specifically about the program here. Have you had the opportunity to integrate that knowledge that you're coming with and your experiences as a Latino into your coursework?

Austin:

I don't think explicitly, but like I said, it definitely informs my worldview. So, I'm sure that it shows up in different ways, but I can't give you an explicit example. I don't think that it's explicitly affected my work or anything. I haven't done anything that I thought,

like, "Okay. This is me injecting me being Latin into this." I've never thought about it in those terms, I guess you could say.

Melissa:

So similarly, have you been at least encouraged to share—Like, that story that you just shared with me now about growing up in Kendall, and a lot of it being a community of Latin people, but also like, black people as well. Have you been encouraged to share those stories?

Austin:

Yeah, actually, in the same class. We talked about that. Actually, I got to talk about it. I talked to everybody about it and we all had a conversation. We went back and forth about it and it was cool. It was great because it was different. I don't think that in my classes I know anybody who really shares that experience with me. Not to say, like, other people aren't Latin. Most people in my classes are Latin and stuff, but I guess where I grew up is very different. You know, I kind of grew up in the rougher part of town and I was exposed to different things. We don't really talk so much about it, but my background is just like that.

I feel like sometimes I have a hard time identifying with other people in that sense, because I grew up being around gangs, drugs, right? There's a lot of violence where I'm from. I don't know if maybe that's just my fault because I don't ask. That could just be my fault and I don't really know. But when I expressed this point of view it's not like

anybody rushed and said, "Oh, I know exactly what you're talking about." But people kind of understood it conceptually. They said, "Oh, that's interesting." They said, "That's a different perspective." People were kind of responding to it in a way where it's like, "Well, I never thought about that." They were more shocked by that. There was not that sense of identification, but I have a lot of friends who lived through that.

A lot of my childhood friends if I talked to them about that—And I did. I talked to other friends of mine who weren't in the program. And they said, "That's interesting. That's really interesting." I have all sorts of friends that I was able to talk to this about: I have my Latin friends and my black friends. And we had a whole talk about this. It was, "Oh, man, that's interesting." We were chopping it up, as you might say. So, it was encouraged and it was great. It was actually a really interesting conversation because it was a great moment to really—The words are escaping me.

It was a nice experience, I would say. And it was cool to be able to talk about that with other people and to share those different worldviews and for people to be, like, "Oh, that's interesting. Tell me more." It just goes to show you the amount of enclaves and all the intersectionality that's just weaved into our community here in Miami. Miami is a crazy place. Miami is just so many different people, so many different neighborhoods. So many people have different stories. Just saying, "Oh, you and I are Latin." That's just so one dimensional. It's just one dimension to it. There's so many different experiences to that. So, yeah. There was encouragement and it was fun. I liked it.

Melissa:

And you're in the literature track. Alright, so considering literature in general, what do you think these stories—Specifically the stories that you're telling right now about your experiences. What do you think they add to the field?

Austin:

More broadly speaking? Just a different perspective. In the long term? I'm not really sure. Like, on a bigger level? I don't really know. I guess it's just a different perspective. But I guess that's just what life is about, you know? Just get as many different perspectives as you can and to find something in those perspectives could make you connect people to one another. It's information, right? It's a different worldview. People are so obsessed with compartmentalizing everything and putting everything into a box and saying, "We're so obsessed with defining terms and all these things." And it's like, defining what it means to be Latin. What does it mean? Identity. We're always talking about identity.

It's so nauseating for me, because for me, I have this love-hate relationship with identity. What is identity? Like, what does that really mean? It's impossible to really put it in a box. And I always think it's—and I don't mean to sound disparaging or disrespectful at all to anybody. I don't mean to offend anybody, but when people are so hung up on who they are, what it means, their identity, I find it kind of amusing. I just don't understand that at all, like, philosophically speaking. For me, I've never felt a sense of home anywhere that I

go. I don't identify with any particular culture. Not to say that I don't love my country or I don't have a sense of patriotism for my country and a love for the culture in Colombia.

It's not to say that my love for Colombia or my love for America is any different than my love for France or my love for Germany or Brazil or anywhere else. For me, it's almost, like, I feel like I'm a tourist everywhere that I go. I don't feel like I have roots anywhere. For me, I'm just walking through a museum all the time. It's just different. I just want to learn as much about everything as possible and I don't want to get hung up on anything. I don't think life is about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself. I think what George Bernard Shaw said, it really resonates with me. So, it's just a different perspective. It's a different way to look at things. You know, don't be so hung up on parameters and definitions. I think people just need to loosen up a little bit. You know, open their minds and their hearts up to different stories.

Melissa:

I think that's a pretty nice sentiment. Alright, so do you think that you're given enough opportunities within your program to share your knowledge and experience as a Latino person?

Austin:

I don't know. I haven't really given it enough thought. I think that they're there. I think that the opportunities are given. I don't think that I've taken advantage of them. But I think that the opportunities have been there. I don't think that I've made the most of it and

that's more my problem than anything else. But also, I'm not really sure if this might be the forum for me, which is maybe something that I'm discovering now at this point in my life, at this point in my studies. I'm not sure yet if this is the proper environment for me to do—I don't know if this is right. But that's a different question. That's a personal thing that I'm going through. I think that the program has encouraged it and they've invited it. And I think the issue is that I haven't taken advantage of it. That's more of my problem.

Melissa :

And before wrapping up, is there anything you want to talk about that we didn't get to?

Austin:

Did you want to talk about anything else? [*laughter*]

Melissa:

I'm asking you.

Austin:

I think that covers it for the most part. I hope you know it was very frank. I just hope that none of this comes off offensive to anybody later on. I was very honest with what I said. I just hope for the record none of what I said here seems like to—I don't want to offend anybody. I'm just very blunt. But whatever I said, I said with love. And that's pretty much it. I think we covered a whole lot. Whoever's listening to this, don't dig this up later and then take a little piece of whatever I said and then add it to a compilation of other things

that I said and make me out to look like I'm an asshole. Just know that I'm keeping this for posterity. So, in the event that that happens, you don't come out here and you target me later.

Melissa:

All right.

Austin:

That'll be in there, right?

Melissa:

No, yeah. It will. [*laughs*] All right. Well, thank you, Austin, for sitting down with me and talking.

Austin:

Okay.

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