



## Caught in-between: AfroLatino Males in Higher Education

**Claudia García-Louis, Ph.D.**

Visiting Assistant Professor, University of Texas San Antonio



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For decades, researchers have been reporting on the lack of educational success of men of color in higher education. Many fixated on the lack of success rather than attempting to understand how to adequately serve their unique needs. In response to the lack of asset based, solution driven research, many researchers adopted the issue as their educational platform (see for example Harper & Harris III, 2010; Sáenz, Ponjuán, & López Figueroa, 2016). In recent years a surge of asset based research on men of color in higher education has surfaced, where researchers identify best practices to support their educational pathways. However, their educational experiences have traditionally been assessed through a homogenous racial and ethnic approach. This methodology places serious limitations on the visibility of non-*mestizo* Latino males – overlooking their vast intra-group diversity. *Latinidad* by default is *mestizaje* and anyone who falls beyond those rigid parameters is overlooked. Little academic research in higher education focuses on the experiences of AfroLatinxs (García-Louis, 2016) – much less AfroLatino males. Research indicates that Latino and African American males lag their female counterparts in educational attainment across the P-20 pipeline (Bensimon & Dowd, 2009; Reynolds, 2010; Saenz & Ponjuán, 2011, 2011; Strayhorn, 2010). However, it is uncertain if AfroLatinos – the synthesis of the two largest minority groups in the United States – demonstrate the same trends.

In response to the lack of research on the experiences of AfroLatino males in higher education, Dr. Claudia García-Louis conducted a qualitative phenomenological study (Creswell, 2009) to highlight their experiences navigating a college campus. The study referenced in this brief highlights the lived experiences of six self-identified undergraduate AfroLatino males attending a small, urban, commuter campus in the northeastern United States. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with the participants (Patton, 2002). The guiding research questions for the study were: (1) How do AfroLatino males view their themselves in relation to Latina/os and African-Americans on campus? (2) How do AfroLatino males mold their racial, ethnic, and cultural identity?

### Findings

#### “We Exist”

Participants consistently identified feeling overlooked and undervalued by fair-skinned peers, faculty, and staff. In fact, four out of the six participants utilized the phrase “we exist” when asked what they wished others knew about their experiences on campus. They mentioned feeling overlooked by fair-skinned Latina/os but also by their African-American peers. Language was identified as the primary reason for tension with African American peers. As soon as AfroLatino males spoke Spanish, they were automatically cast as “other” and no longer considered an insider. While they were not directly rejected, they reported experiencing differential treatment. Consequently, they developed a strategy to only speak Spanish when spoken to and English was set as the default language. Participants also identified the lack of self-identified AfroLatinxs on campus. They mentioned “knowing” most were Dominican or Puerto Rican but seldom did students disclose AfroLatinidad as their identity. “To be honest, we just get tired of having to explain what we are, and why we look the way we do, and why we speak Spanish, its exhausting” explained Angelo. The act of self-identifying as AfroLatino places them in a precarious situation given the lack of peoples’ awareness of Latino heterogeneity. Rigo put it simply, “it depends how I feel and how much I want to explain... but most of the time I don’t want to explain myself.” Thus, they endure under the guise of a socially constructed identity placed upon them by the beholder.

#### (In)visibility in Plain Sight

AfroLatino males in the study described feeling invisible on campus. Despite the campus being located in a very diverse community – considered the enclave of Dominicans and Puerto Ricans – course offerings did not represent such diversity. A participant mentioned taking a course through the Latin American, Latino, and Puerto Rican Studies department in an effort to learn about his AfroLatinidad, he was shocked to discover they only covered AfroLatinxs in a half page. The paradox being the lack of recognition within a department that specializes in Latinos. Campus activities offered through student services did celebrate diverse cultures but non on campus were dedicated to AfroLatinxs. Two participants mentioned being recruited by African American student organizations but both refused their offer given hesitancy in claiming a history that was not theirs. “Being an [Afro]Latino on campus it’s almost like you can’t really call yourself Black because African-Americans have their own history that is separate... and you have to understand there is a separation and... you can’t claim something that is not necessarily yours. It’s like saying yes we are all Black. Yeah, the Diaspora aspect is there but not the history.” Damian’s quote captures the complexity of their identity. They are navigating socially ascribed labels based on their phenotype that do not adequately capture their experiences, identities, histories, or stories. Yet, when campus administrators and faculty see them on campus they are automatically thrust into socially constructed groupings – robbing them of their own narrative.

## Building Resistance

Consistent with previous studies on men of color in higher education (Saenz & Ponjuán, 2011; Strayhorn, 2010; Wood & Harris III, 2015), AfroLatino males encounter academic and social obstacles along their college pathway. Yet, they understand the need to persist towards their goals. Rafael captured the essence of their experience, “As an AfroLatino I really want to make something of myself I don’t want to fall prey to the vices of the city even though they’re all around me. I don’t want to fall prey to the expectations that my high school teachers had of me, that you know that I am just going to be another dropout or be another problem in society.” AfroLatino men have to build resistance in campus through deciding which “battle” they will take on. They expressed feeling overwhelmed and frustrated with not only having to learn to navigate campus culture but also their ethnic identity. Nonetheless, they unanimously agreed that their goal of obtaining a college degree was not going to be swayed by any obstacle. Participants reported failing was not an option, the City does not offer a safety net. Consequently, despite feeling marginalized, overlooked, and (in)visible on campus, they carry on towards graduation.

## Conclusion

As the Latinx population continues to grow, it will become imperative researchers adopt a heterogeneous approach at assessing the experiences of Latinx students. The primary goals of this study were to illuminate the importance of a heterogeneous methodology and to highlight the stories of AfroLatino males in higher education. Findings suggest AfroLatino males are forced to traverse socially constructed categories, that in effect, thrust them into (in)visibility through the social investment of African American and Latinx nomenclature. Based on the findings, AfroLatino males feel overlooked on campus. Despite campus being located in a very diverse city and neighborhood, not one participant could identify a single program, service, club, activity, or class that was dedicated to AfroLatinxs. Moreover, in addition to navigating campus culture and academics, they were also forced to make daily decisions about whether to disclose their ethnic, cultural, and/or racial identity. College administrators must make note of these findings; while campus does offer Latin American studies, not a single class is dedicated to *AfroLatinidad*; the surrounding campus community is comprised of Latinxs with rich racial diversity – many of whom have African lineage – but it is not reflected in any campus offerings. Finally, AfroLatino males find themselves constantly negotiating in-group acceptance and/or belonging. The primary factors in the negotiation process were phenotype, which is out of their control, and language. If they fail to find community on campus their persistence could be jeopardized. It is imperative more research be conducted on the experiences of AfroLatino males in higher education, only then will we know how they navigate their college pathways and how to adequately support their needs.

There are a number of actions an institution could implement in order to support AfroLatino males on their campus. For example, expanding the definition of Latinxs to include self-identification categories could capture valuable data. Gaining a more comprehensive portrait of intra-group Latinx diversity would not only help institutions identify sub-student populations but also help alleviate the oversight of AfroLatino males. Fostering awareness activities such as university sponsored speaker’s series that provide students, faculty, staff, and administrators the opportunity to learn about Latinx heterogeneity and the nuances associated with such a diverse group could raise awareness of *Afropresencia* on campus. Institutions can match the needs of AfroLatinx students with relevant issues uncovered by researchers and strategically implement initiatives to fill gaps. Finally, programs and initiatives designed for male students of color tend to use federally designated race and ethnic categories; this study challenges such initiatives to critically assess how such practices could lead to the oversight of AfroLatino males. Male students of color initiatives need to move away from anachronistic categories in order to fully live out their mission to serve all young men of color – including AfroLatinos.

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### About the Author:

**Claudia García-Louis, Ph.D.**, is a visiting Assistant Professor in the College of Education at the University of Texas San Antonio. This research brief based on select findings of her dissertation titled “Invisible no More: AfroLatina/o Undergraduate Student’s Sense of belonging and Persistence at a Small Urban Northeastern College.” For more information, you can contact Dr. García-Louis by email at: [claudia.garcia-louis@utsa.edu](mailto:claudia.garcia-louis@utsa.edu).

