

ACTIVISM THROUGH ART IN AN AFRO-CUBAN COMMUNITY:
CENTERING VOICES AT THE INTERSECTIONS

by

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DEDICATION

“There is no better subject for Black artists than Black people.”
Maulana Karenga

This dissertation is dedicated first and foremost to the Most High, Almighty God and to the tribe of warriors who inspired and encouraged me through prayers and messages of uplift as I sojourned through this process. It is because of them, with my mother Grace’s prayerful encouragement at the helm, alongside my father and my stepfather’s championing reminders of my resilience and grit, that I persevered. It is also because of my mentoring warriors- Dr. Christopher Busey and Dr. Sherri Benn whose belief in my passion and capabilities never once wavered. They reminded me that my pursuit and subsequent completion of this feat was greater than the conferment of a degree, for it would one day represent what they represented for me, the possibility of having a seat at the table to potentially affect change. Finally, this is dedicated to my beloved elders who transitioned to become my ancestors along the way, each of whom contributed and continue to contribute in spirit so very much to this work and what I aim to accomplish through it. Ubuntu: I am because you are.

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ABSTRACT

This research explores how Afro-Latinx individuals in Cuba understand and attempt to reconcile the intersections of their identities to combat experiences of racism. Furthermore, this research contends that moving beyond identity politics and towards the liberatory processes of coalition-building with collective consciousness through art activism, art activists can work together to promote change within their respective communities.

I. INTRODUCTION

“...when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing.

Stop saying I’m Jamaican or I’m Ghananian. America doesn’t care.”

-Chimimanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americannah*, 2013

Como Sangre, Blackness *Flows*... Throughout the Diaspora

Perceptions around racial and national identity have been a rather quixotic sentiment that I have revisited often, but even more now, as a consequence of the political and racial climate in the United States after a highly inflammatory 2016 Presidential campaign and subsequently controversial election. Ideologies were questioned and identities attacked. Racial difference and immigration status have now become a charge that one can make against another with the gravest of consequences, and as a result, finding safety in community and more so, building coalitions within those communities have become a quest for immediate survival in the face of persecution and subjugation. Whether one is or is not, does not currently consume much of the discourse around identity. Rather, it is what one is perceived or not perceived to be that lends itself to the possibility of an alternative reality, as Mead (1964) suggests. This perception is typically based on salience, and as such, often negates the multiple aspects of one’s identity. For example, Adichie’s word choice of “Black” as the socially constructed racial identity is pointed, highlighting its singleness in category. McCall (2005) explains that even some scholars “provisionally adopt existing analytical categories to document relationships of inequality among

social groups and change configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimensions” (p. 1773). Perhaps categories traditionally make for a simpler way to manage complexity, but they can overlook multi-dimensionality.

To be clear, I am not arguing for or against the categorization of a social construction of racial identity that encompasses more or less of one over the other. However, I will apply intersectionality as a theoretical perspective that explicitly recognizes and articulates the central sociocultural impact of Black identity and its historical implications, alongside other identities in the lived realities of Blacks in diasporic spaces. Intersectionality permits me to do that because intersectionality recognizes that identity is multidimensional, as is the oppression experienced as a consequence of those identities (Crenshaw, 1993) . Intersectionality recognizes that categories of difference (sometimes also described as axes of identity), including though not limited to ethnicity, race, gender, religion/creed, generation, geographic location, sexuality, age, ability/disability, and class, intersect to shape the experiences of individuals. These identities are interdependent, and therefore, cannot be mutually exclusive (Bowleg, 2008). However, even intersectionality as a theory has found its critics, as Delgado (2011) explains with the following conundrum: “One problem with intersectionality is what I call the so-what question. Once you point out that a category contains subcategories, what follows?” (p. 1263). In response, my research contends that moving beyond identity politics and towards the liberatory processes of coalition-building with collective consciousness through art activism, “the ways in which political representations depict the political world may promote change just as much as they may reinforce prevailing power relations” (Severs et al., 2016, p.

347). Why art as a potential site? The following explanation by Carastathis (2013) supports that art activism is a potential site for coalescing with the Afro-Latinx community because “identity groups are coalitions by virtue of their internal heterogeneity and the tacit or explicit creative acts through which they are organized and represented as unified” (p. 945).

Therein lies the crux of analysis for my study because as a researcher I also acknowledge that “social life is considered too irreducibly complex- overflowing with multiple and fluid determinations of both subjects and structures- to make fixed categories anything but simplifying social fictions that produces inequalities in the process of producing differences” (McCall, 2005, p.1773). This is particularly pertinent to adult education because adults potentially develop a firmer understanding of their identity as not singular, but complex and multidimensional. Oftentimes, those complexities are overlooked or remain only superficially explored because they are not salient aspects of the identity with which they most closely align or are perceived to most closely align. In short, difference is not necessarily perceived as a deficit, but overlooking differences and the multi-dimensionality of individuals within a group can ignore the complexities of their identity, as well as the factions and loyalties that it can create (Rothman, 2014).

Yet, the categorizing of an individual does not automate an assignment of a singularly understood inequality. Kimberle Williams Crenshaw (1993) suggests that “the problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite-that it frequently conflates or ignores intra group difference” (p. 1242). Furthermore, “identity politics is often contrasted with coalitional poli-

tics in that the former is viewed as a kind of separatism based on sameness while the latter depends on alliances built across differences” (Carastathis, p. 2013, p. 941). It is these points that Crenshaw and Carastathis describe that help to underscore the importance of my second research question regarding how individuals within the Afro-Latinx community build coalitions centered around art activism with respect to their identity intersections. Arguably, race, like many other identities, is a social construct with sociopolitical implications. However, when one identity is touted as paramount to another in social discourse, it can diminish the impact of the experiences of a group, deligitamizing their experiences and negating their reality. This has the potential to produce either dissonance or consonance within intra- and inter-group membership, which Rothman (2014) describes here:

Differences among members of groups, in which internal diversity of groups is or becomes salient, can help to complexify a sense of internal unity within such groups. Indeed, ‘unified’ groups can begin to see themselves as intergroups themselves when members’ loyalties are divided or questioned. This can be threatening, but also liberating. It can lead to walls and fears of treachery, or a sense of doorways and connectivity to other groups and their members. (p. 59)

So, in considering the intracategorical and intercategorical approaches to intersectionality, what if we were to then presume that identity-based groups are “in fact coalitions” by sheer categorical composition. “Intersectionality, by itself, means little. Politically, it can serve as a necessary first step toward organizing on behalf of a new group, such as Latinos or black women” (Delgado, 2011, p. 1267). It is then the prospect of coalitional organizing that becomes the focus. Carastathis (2013) purports the following:

If identity categories are coalitions- constituted by internal differences as much as by commonalities- then this changes how we think about the political task of coalitional organizing...The experiences of their members- including those people exiled, unrecognized, tokenized, or denied visibility within a group- are discontinuous, differentiated, sometimes even in conflict with one another. That is not to say that members of a social group have nothing in common. Nor is it to say that groups dissolve under the intersectional lens into individuals whose experiences are entirely idiosyncratic. (p. 945)

Therefore, then in order to coalesce, these social groups must find what Patricia Hill-Collins (2003) calls a point of “heterogeneous communality” (p. 221).

So this dissertation is built on the idea that location can exist where art meets activism for “artists”, specifically, agit prop. “Artists are communicators who, through various media, express thought and feelings about their inner world and their perceptions of the outer world.” (Lewis, 1990, p. 172). Thus, artists are storytellers and documentarians of *Zeitgeist*- social, cultural, and political.

In contemporary Cuba, which is the site of my study, this intersectional coalition-building is already occurring in some Afro-Cuban communities. According to Devyn Spence Benson (2016), several “antiracist organizations have emerged to fight inequality in light of Cuba’s new economic challenges” (p. 27). One of the most prominent is an organization whose members, in addition to being Black women, are diverse and intersectional across sexual orientation, age, and profession, the *Afrocubanas Project*. In fact, the *Afrocubanas Project* welcomes membership from individuals of all races, sexual orientation, gender, and political affiliation as long as they emphasize that the organization was

created by and for women who are “afrodescendiente” or Afro-descended (Benson, 2016). This changing landscape is critical to explore in my study because groups such as The Afrocubanas Project are “creating an intersected revolutionary agenda that advocates for black Cuban women’s racial and sexual rights. The organization emphasizes collectivity, uncovers hidden historical narratives, and provides paths for later generations to follow” (p. 27).

Though, this is one example of intersectional activism in Cuba, there is a growing movement of other activists, who are seeking to center the voices of Afro-Cubans and bring their narratives to the forefront through coalition-building and social action, which can require creative methods of engagement.

Because of its political history and landscape, activism in the way of overt disruption, disobedience and even public critique in Cuba can have consequences. This is worth researching because not all activism is overt, but that doesn’t necessarily diminish the intent to impact change through the activism. Art is a reasonable location for social action because it can be disseminated quite easily, distributed widely, and reproduced often economically. Thus, art activism is a unique medium that can potentially allow individuals to be critical without assuming the same risks. This is because it allows one to implicate policy and systems without explicitly implicating oneself.

I Arrived Here by Traveling a Plethora of Caminos

“No artist can sit in an ivory Tower, discussing the problems of the day, and come up with a solution on a piece of paper. The artist has to be down on the ground; he has to hear the sounds of the people, the cries of the people, the sufferings of the people, the laughter of the people- the dark side and the bright side our lives.”- Emory Douglas

I included the aforementioned quote because it encompasses the very considerations that brought me to this place as an artist, as an activist, and a researcher in the academy. In short, it was the culmination of each of my identities, those aforementioned identities and the ones I will now briefly describe, as well as the chronicles of their formation that brought me to this research. I will now explain why this study is important to me and relevant at this time.

As a Black woman of West Indian heritage, born, raised, and currently living in the United States of America and having lived as an expat in and traveled across various Spanish speaking countries and having intimately communed with the Latinx community, Adichie's statement resonated with me. It reminded me of the dissonance I experienced when my national or racial identity precluded one or the other. These dimensions of my identity, however recognized, often impacted my social interactions, largely because assumptions were made about certain aspects of my identity. Sometimes I corrected the assumptions and at other times, usually dependent upon the brevity of the exchange, I simply didn't wish to assume the task. The assumptions were not always negative, but they weren't always correct either. And even when they were, they somehow remained incomplete, reminding me of my difference in an unsuspecting way- fracturing my sense of community within some spaces, but not wholly eliminating my desire for one. So, for me, this statement, even in its terseness, recognizes the complexities of social identity beyond one as salient as race, while acknowledging that the very complexities tethered to one's identity can somehow be sequestered, ignored, or altogether erased.

It is argued that shame and pride are the social emotions that arise from viewing oneself from the perspective of another (Scheff, 1990). If shame is a potentially debilitating consequence of being authored on, then, conversely, pride could be an emancipatory response to self-authoring. As articulated by the narrator, there can be a sense of frustration around being relegated to a single category that ignores the nuances of such complexity and in doing so, subsequently, ignores the multi-dimensions of the human experience. My dissonance and frustration catalyzed my need to give voice to my experiences while inserting and asserting myself; so, I searched for a community with whom I could find collective identity. As Vega et al. (2012) points out, “The transnational and global communities that the movement of Afro-Latinas and their families are experiencing reflect the need for understanding, for redefining and restructuring definitions and practices that address present conditions” (p. vii). Because *my* present condition at that time reinforced my need for understanding and redefining in a way that aligned with who I was and how I felt in that broader social space, I actively sought community.

Initially, I asserted myself in performance art- dance, spoken word poetry, photography, and writing. This eventually led to my invitation to convene with a very small group of other Blacks whose heritage and national identities were as vast and unique as is the African Diaspora, but there I found community. We were artists, writers, educators, fashion designers, photographers, and journalists. Yet, all of our work was somehow related to the sociopolitical Black experience. It transcended language, for we didn’t all share the same mother-tongue or levels of proficiency to linguistically communicate with fluidity. Yet, the fluidity was present in the exchange. It was present at the intersection.

For me, in particular, as the sole African-American artist, I was still a member of communal “participants in a cultural revolution. Driven by needs that are both aesthetic and social, these artists are in search of cultural identity, self-discovery, and understanding” (Lewis, 1990, p. 3). Sometimes a shared experience within the group was uniquely our own; but more often than not, we could nod in universal agreement of having shared similar racialized experiences. We were all racially Black, though in varying shades and of differing heritage and expressed a shared sentiment around feeling “othered” outside of the communal space.

This sense of emergent community with a sense of shared collective experience is undoubtedly not exclusive to my experience abroad all those years ago. Rather, it is one that I propose happens in countless spaces where community is defined by common experiences, even within the United States of America. I grew up with a Puerto Rican Godmother who loved Hector Lavoe as much as Luther Vandross and a Dominican hair dresser who understood the kinks of my coarse curls better than most. I also witnessed my mother’s best friend, whose Afro-Cuban Spanish always demanded double takes when she spoke her native tongue in public. So, this community of “both-and” in its Afro-Latinx blend has been a part of my personal experience for as long as I could remember, largely because we saw ourselves as part of a larger singular community with degrees of shared experiences and more notably, shared struggle. This is probably best explained in the following:

Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Panamanians, Dominicans and other cultural groups from Latin America and the Caribbean are changing the meaning of the term African American within the United States. This confluence of Afro-Latinas/os and other

African descendants and Africans from the continent has created an international population of the African Diaspora within the United States. These cultural encounters have developed and deepened an informal interlocking dialogue among communities of African descent. This conversation was further solidified during the United Nation's World Conference Against Racism and Discrimination in 2001. (Vega et al., 2012, p. ix-x)

Nevertheless, this “both-and” communal notion of racial identity among Blacks and members of the Latinx community seemed less common outside of my immediate reality, both in the United States and abroad, and felt replaced with an “either-or” sense of communal identity. It wasn't natural for me, making me feel even more grateful to find a community of a heterogeneous, but communal “WE.” We shared, we vented, we questioned, we challenged, we counseled, we created, we laughed, and we supported and affirmed each other's work. We inspired and were inspired by each other's work. Additionally, the work transcended language, because the art we created “spoke” where our linguistic differences left deficits. Ultimately, we listened to one another's stories and allowed those exchanges to inform our art- however personal or public. We coalesced. Our work, our art, our activist art, was a product of us- the collective and the individual. Beyond our created community, our saliency in the form of race, was the collective factor in our outgroup dynamic. As author Samella Lewis (1990) notes this collective space served a unique purpose central to our shared identity of Blackness, because there, we/they were “not dominated by the accepted European aesthetic standards, but instead are responding to their {our} own life styles by creating art from the depths of their {our}own needs, actions, and reactions. They [We] are accepting and using their [our]

own philosophies as the basis of their [our] artistic expression” (p. 3). We built coalition with one another, and that was born of a need to be visible, validated, and activated in shared community. It was born at the intersections of our identities as explained in the following:

Intersectionality thus can be a kind of translational politics. When members of an ingroup are also members of an out group- particularly if that outgroup is discriminated against or reviled by the in-group- they can bridge between them in ways that sets the stage for the possibility of future agreement and joint action.

(Rothman, 2014, p. 59)

Indeed, our isolation fomented action that fostered community that produced art that furthered the sense of community among our differences.

The post 2016 election fallout in the United States has left an indelible mark on the national and international sociopolitical climate. Specifically, what we are witnessing in the United States is how, with the exception of white, cisgendered, able-bodied, heterosexual males, the current administration is legitimizing attacks on almost everyone with a marginalized identity, be it race, gender, sexual orientation/ identity, reproductive rights, disability, immigration, and even religion through the thinnest of veils. Whether it be one marginalized identity or the embodiment of multiple marginalized identities at the intersection of who we are, many are feeling a heightened vulnerability as a result of the attacks through both rhetoric and proposed policies. Thus, if we don’t recognize the intersectional identities that link us to one another, even if it is simply through the empathic connections that are a consequence of shared oppression, the progress will be far more

difficult to achieve. With respect to the U.S. historical context, movements have typically occurred in silos -- promoting the needs and subsequent liberation of one group, leaving others in the margins by not explicitly recognizing their intersectional identity connections to one or more simultaneous movement. In her book, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*, Angela Davis (2016) writes, “So, that the question of how to bring movements together is also a question of the kind of language one uses and the consciousness one tries to impart. I think it’s important to insist on the intersectionality of movements” (p. 21). Dr. Davis furthers her effort to help us to better understand the progression of how we perceive intersectional action and impact by expressing that its impact goes beyond the social constructs of identity and physicality, and she urges us to understand it as a transnational phenomenon. Angela Davis (2016) explains that, “initially intersectionality was about bodies and experiences. But now, how do we talk about bringing various social justice struggles together across national borders” (p. 19).

Problem Statement and Theoretical Perspective

So, I wondered if this same sentiment, as expressed by the protagonist in Adichie’s novel and mirrored largely by my own personal experiences, was true in other places for other Black people. What becomes of their nuances? Are they lost, ignored, sequestered, erased? If so, can they somehow be recovered, recognized, and even celebrated? And if the nuances are recovered, what processes cultivate their emergence and activation? Therefore, the problem that I wished to explore is the marginalization of members of the Afro-Latinx community through their contemporary reality. More specifically, I wished to understand their experiences beyond the discussion of racial marginalization brought about by a lack of recognition or visibility.

Indeed, the question of Afro-Latinx community visibility or lack thereof and its subsequent consequences have been addressed empirically in research before. However, a great deal of the literature is situated primarily in the post-colonial racial experience. As such, even in scholarly discussion around Afro-Latinx identity and experience, the understanding of race as related to the Black experience has typically been discussed in juxtaposition to whiteness or its categorical proximity to whiteness. Though I continue to engage with the literature, my findings thus far in previous research don't address how we understand the Afro-Latinx experience beyond this frame. More critically, it fails to give attention to the ways in which this population is creatively and strategically asserting agentic voice while living in oppressive spaces. This is an interdisciplinary problem that forces both practitioners and scholars to give pause in the way that they understand and interpret racial categorization. This desire to assign and frame individuals and their experiences using a strictly black-white binary has proven problematic, even being a point of contention among some scholars. In fact, according to Richard Delgado, a critical race theorist, some scholars believe that the only way to truly examine experiences of racial marginalization is to situate racial communities on either side of the black-white binary, particularly when using Critical Race Theory. Delgado (2011), though never articulating his own position, explains the differing points of this contention in the following:

Recently, Latino scholars have been arguing against what they call the reigning black-white binary paradigm of race in which a nonblack person, to achieve legal redress, must analogize his or her predicament of one cognizable under black-coined civil-rights law. Some of them have been insisting that their group does not consist of blacks with slightly lighter skins—black wannabes—but mestizos, a

new intersectional category composed of individuals with both European and Indian ancestors and a host of legal problems of its own...[While,] A number of African American legal scholars have challenged Latinos' use of the term *mestizo*. It strikes them as an evasion of blackness. Many Latinos have black blood, these scholars point out, stemming from the importation of African slaves early in Mexico's history. So, insisting that they are *mestizos*, part European, part Indian, as many Latinos do, is to deny their black heritage. These Latinos should accept their places in the black-white binary paradigm and decide which side of the line they want to be on—white or black. (p. 1267)

This, then brings us to the question of when one is not strictly either/ or in the way that they understand their identity, but views themselves as both/and, what theory can be employed to criticize their marginalization without insisting that they abandon or betray an aspect of their identity? Identifying a critical theory that could be inclusive of this racial element, while also being applicable in global contexts beyond the African-American or Latinx in the United States of America experience, was the most challenging part of this process for me as a researcher. Though critical to the understanding of how identity through race historically and socio-politically developed in various communities/ countries, we don't yet understand how the reconciliation of intersectional identity, racial and otherwise, catalyze intragroup coalition-building through activism. Additionally, because Critical Race Theory is legal scholarship, it presents a conundrum when being the sole frame for examining the sociopolitical complexities of some societies, such as Cuba, where racism was deemed as unlawful and unconstitutional after the Cuban Revolution (Blue, 2007).

The tenets of CRT address race, racism, and power. The theme of differential racialization is central to my framework, particularly because it can be applied to identities beyond the African-American experience. Differential racialization is "the idea that each race has its own origins and ever evolving history" and is closely related to "the notion of intersectionality and anti-essentialism" (Delgado and Stefansic, 2012, p. 4) in that it is possible for the origins and histories of multiple identities that intersect within an individual to also simultaneously evolve within their communities. Therefore, CRT and specifically, intersectionality are critical to understanding the intersectional subgroups that are also impacted by marginalization, particularly, outside of the United States of America. Angela Davis (2016) articulates the combined praxis and activation of intersectionality in her own transnational work with the following reflection:

Of course intersectionality-or efforts to think, analyze, organize as we recognize the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality-has evolved a great deal over the last decades. I see my work as reflecting not an individual analysis, but rather a sense within movements and collectives that it was not possible to separate issues of race from issue of class and issues of gender. (p. 18)

Thus, intersectionality looks at power relations within social interactions and the political representations of disadvantage and privilege; it is a theory that is used to include the experiences of sub-groups who have been previously overlooked (Severs, Celis, Erzeel, 2016). Yet, once identified as a member of a sub-group who experiences multiple inequalities as part of their reality, one does not have to be relegated to the confines of powerlessness in that social interactive dynamic. It is intersectional theorists who "draw attention to the productive aspects of power, namely the ways in which the exertion of

power also produces possibilities for resistance” (Severs et al., 2016, p. 347).

Cararstathis (2013) and Crenshaw (1991) argue that identity remains a beneficial basis for political organizing, as long as identity categories are conceptualized as coalitions. Thus, we cannot confront the complexities of identity and oppression without recognizing its historical relationship to struggle and activation within communities. Davis (2016) underscores this point in saying “behind this concept of intersectionality is a rich history of struggle. A history of conversations among activists within movement formations, and with and among academics as well...I think it’s important to prevent the term ‘intersectionality’ from erasing essential histories of activism” (p. 19).

This history is not only extensive, but it is also transnational and global in its operation. Thus, many activists are recognizing struggle as multifaceted and operationalizing their liberation work through their cross connections of identities and shared oppressive experiences. The movements that are the result of the aforementioned are not uniquely individual or even communal. The identity overlaps create great potential for intersecting liberation movements. Davis continues that “we have to extricate ourselves from narrow identitarian thinking if we want to encourage progressive people to embrace these struggles as their own” (Davis, 2016, p. 27). Larry Neal (1969) furthers this in his reflections around the Black Arts Movement in the United States, which can be linked to the social movement and Black liberation efforts occurring in Cuba and other “Third World” countries by his assertion that these movements seek to redefine art and culture on their own terms by combining art and politics through highly conscious means. Neal continues, “we see our struggle in the context of the global confrontations occurring in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. We identify with all of the righteous forces in those

places which are struggling for human dignity” (p. 54). *This* is what I, a Black woman activist in both communities, and thus, already intersectional in my identity, inquiringly think is important.

I am engaging in diasporic research where the term Black is intentionally used to be more racially inclusive beyond nation and the Black experience is not exclusively limited to that of African-Americans or the Black experience in the United States of America. Certainly, parallels will be drawn. The byproduct of the African diaspora is that of some shared histories and experiences as a colonized and systemically oppressed people. Geneva in Derrick Bell’s *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* (1992) says something that resonated deeply in the way that it speaks to my research: “Americans achieve a measure of social stability through their unspoken pact to keep blacks on the bottom—an aspect of social functioning that more than any other has retained its viability and its value to general stability from the very beginning of the American experience down to the present day” (p. 152).

How is this relevant to my diasporic research? It’s essential to helping the reader understand what brought me to this place and ultimately, my overarching research question. That is, if there is bonding among oppressors, actual and potential as Bell’s chapter claims, through their desire to perpetuate and consequently benefit from racism, then can the inverse be true. Can the aim of the liberation of the oppressed, more specifically, the liberation of Black people throughout the diaspora, result from a shared bond among the oppressed as a consequence of their systemic oppression across nations?

Because of the undeniable need to situate these critical precepts around race in the global context, I had to move beyond both CRT and LatCrit to give this work a “home.”

That home for this work revealed itself in Africana Critical Theory, and the reasons around which, I'll explicate further in Chapter III. Nevertheless, I will explain here the central reason for situating my research in Africana Critical Theory. Because of the post-colonial history in Latin America and Cuba in particular, applying a theory that could account for the historical relationship between race and post-colonialism was critical to understanding how its contemporary contexts and subtexts are situated and enacted. Thus, I seek to complement the application of intersectionality as a theoretical perspective with Africana critical theory, a "critical liberation theory... that not only critiqued capitalism, but also colonialism, racism, sexism" (Rabaka, 2009, p. 93). Still, it is intention that my approach to this work and the epistemological frame applied contain composites of Critical Race Theory. After all, it must be honored as a leg upon which this research stands.

The central pillar of my research methodology is storytelling, which is one of the tenets of CRT. CRT not only celebrates the power of storytelling but CRT makes storytelling valid as a liberatory practice to amplify the voices of the oppressed in a way that gives them agency. Thus, CRT is both valuable in recognizing its cultural significance in this context, as well as legitimizing it as scholarship. This was essential to the research that I conducted as a means to honor my participants' stories without the invasiveness of another assuming and potentially colonizing voice. I did not wish to be an interloper, even in the name of narrative research, but rather an interlocutor. Ultimately, it is their voice that is the essence of each of their stories and lived experiences and not diluting that was as important to me as is the act of bringing forth their stories as a liberatory practice of research.

My Positionality Cannot Be Denied and It Dare Not Beg Pardon

I cannot divorce my lived experience from my research and to claim that possibility would be either denial or outright dishonesty on my part. This research is about identity. It is about the complex realities of Black folks within the diaspora and those working to amplify their voices in strategically clever and creative ways in an effort to influence positive change in their communities. To activate the people. I am a Black woman, and though, in the United States of America, still a member of the African diasporic community. I am an outspoken fighter of oppression and challenger of institutions in a multitude of spaces for a variety of causes. As such, many assign me the moniker “activist,” and though, I don’t object, I don’t wear it as a badge of honor, either. Thus, I will embed my positionality in that of Black Feminist Thought (BFT) because Patricia Hill-Collins (1991) asserts that:

Through their words and actions, political activists have also contributed to the Black women’s intellectual tradition. Producing intellectual work is generally not attributed to Black women artists and political activists. Such women are typically thought of as nonintellectual and nonscholarly, classifications that create a false dichotomy between scholarship and activism, between thinking and doing.

(p. 15)

In true BFT fashion, my scholarship is influenced by my reality and my lived reality is the basis of my intellectual inquiry about that reality. I’m stating this to be clear. It is an outright admission, as it is simply an inherent part of me, a part of my story and thus, a part of my autoethnographic make-up as a researcher in this work. Thus, the stories that I am sharing are as much theirs as they are mine. I asked my participants to be transparent

and vulnerable in their engagement with me, and I owe them and you, the reader the same respect. Though scholarly, this work is not purely objective, and it is not intended to be. Admittedly, this research has been decades in the making for me. As one who has travelled to almost 40 countries, I engage each new space with the same desire. Though open to new encounters, I am always curious to know the following: Where are those who look like me? What constitutes their realities in their world, and how are they thriving, if not only surviving in their world? My research, though not considered and certainly not recognized as scholarship at the inception of this journey all those years ago, was and remains deeply engaged. I sought to identify and understand the Black diasporic community, an extension of my community, in other contexts. It was critical before I had the language to identify it as such. Though informal then, it was my desire to connect with others through the exchange of stories that began to inform my understanding of individuals beyond the American context and gave me an appreciation for the varied global contexts against which to apply a critical lens of understanding phenomena. Informal perhaps, but always personal.

In closing, “examining the ideas and actions of these excluded groups, reveals a world in which behavior is a statement of philosophy and in which a vibrant, both/and, scholar/activist tradition remains intact” (Collins, 1991, 15-16). Prior to my exposure to scholarship that recognized the significance of this relationship and even the integrity in professing it, I would have likely devalued the connection between my personal identity and experiences with this work out of fear that the academy would not consider it valid scholarship. That is the consequence of an intellectually colonized mind- disciplined as such from years of training. Fortunately, I’m in repair, and though I recognize that this

doesn't absolve my research from further scrutiny, I now know better and don't beg pardon for my merited truth. My goal is to honor the truths of others with the same sensitivity and resolve.

Study Rationale

This study intends to present the perspective of Afro-Cubans currently residing in Cuba regarding their lived experiences with racism, however overt or covert. Literature does exist about the racialized experiences of Afro-Cubans, but it is typically included in a broad stroke analysis of Blacks in Latin America and largely focused on the pre- and post-colonial eras of development. Though there are undeniable parallels, the curious history of Cuba before and after the Revolution of 1959 make the trajectory of the Afro-Cuban experiences incredibly nuanced. So much in fact, that it is impossible to apply one universal truth to Cubans, much less Afro-Cubans. Additionally, a great deal of the literature that I could access on the topic was written by white Cubans no longer living in Cuba, which alone had sociopolitical implications. As such, it tends to hold a perceptible political element that could be discerned as potentially biased. Furthermore, this research seeks to move beyond the argument of visibility and representation for Afro-Cubans in Cuba. Specifically, this research is addressing how agency is being applied in the current sociopolitical climate of Cuba with the regard for the potential constraints of activism that could be perceived as critical of the state. Underground Hip-hop was the most documented subversive form of activism, but what other art forms are being used, and if they must be strategic in their display, what is the messaging that lies beneath? I wanted to know how and where this was occurring, and what did these activists hope to accomplish?

Fidel Castro passed away in the midst of my research, leaving an even greater desire to address the state of affairs for Afro-Cubans with a changing of the guard after almost sixty years of Castro's regime. The exiled mostly white Cubans living in Miami had a very clear idea of their criticisms of Castro's Cuba and a hope for a new Cuba. But what changes did Afro-Cubans wish to see brought about, if any at all? What critiques did Afro-Cubans wish to offer about their lived experience on the island after the revolution of 1959? Benson (2016) elucidates the absence of the presented Afro-Cuban perspective during such a critical time of transition with the following:

The voices of Afro-Cubans remained mostly silenced as others argued over how Castro approached Blackness, racism, and colonialism. Many white Cuban exiles failed to see in the 1960s or today why Cubans of African descent might have supported the revolution. And even well-meaning observers of global affairs often paid more attention to Cuba's successes in the anti-colonial struggles in continental Africa than the contradictory legacy of antiracism on the island. In light of deepening racial inequalities resulting from Cuba's recent economic openings, this silence about Afro-Cubans' lived experiences with the revolution is even more disturbing. (p. 49)

Again, the Afro-Cuban voice as an articulator of their own experiences and political thought is lesser known. Certainly, this did not mean that they didn't have a critical perspective to offer, which is why I wished to ask these questions and examine their positions about their own experiences directly and more intently.

Additionally, because of the decades long embargo between Cuba and The United States, I also recognized that the literature that I could access was from institutions or individuals who represented institutions that could either permit outsiders access or from outsiders who could gain access. I had to recognize the politics of access in that way and the implications it held for the information that it created, as well as the way that information could be interpreted. I wanted to capture and document the experiences of and knowledge gained from those still in the trenches, without institutional representation or association. I wanted to access and learn from the architects of the current grass roots activity, and I wanted to it as an African-American activist also dedicated to the full liberation of Black people everywhere.

Purpose Statement

Therefore, the purpose of this research was to find out how art activists in one Afro-Latinx community, an intersectional sub-group of Afro-Cubans, understand their intersectional identity in connection with coalition-building through activism. I wished to explore how these individuals reconcile their identities in the form of coalitions to activate social action.

Research Questions

In order to find this out, I addressed the following questions:

1. How do Afro-Cubans think about their intersectional identity?
2. What are the historical roots of activism for Afro-Cubans in Cuba?
3. How are Afro-Cubans building coalitions with respect to the current sociopolitical climate?

“There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle, because we do not live single-issue lives.” –Audre Lorde

Intersectionality will provide my theoretical perspective for this study. However, intersectionality has some shortcomings as an applied theory in this research, because it is not a theory that is fully inclusive of what I’m problematizing in this study. Though critical of discrimination and domination at the intersections of identity, it is not particularly inclusive of its critique surrounding the political and economic aspects of racial colonialism- even in its contemporary form. Nevertheless, it was the most closely aligned with the notion “that focuses on awareness on people and experiences- hence, social forces and dynamics that, in monocular vision, are overlooked. Intersectionality fills out the Venn diagrams at points of overlap where convergences has been neglected” (MacKinnon, 2013, p. 1020). Furthermore, the philosophical framework of Critical Race Theory will inform intersectionality as the central theory of reference. Nevertheless, I will explicate why multiculturalism and LatCrit Theory, though used in literature that speaks to the experience of members of the Latinx community, cannot fully support this critical research.

The theory and frameworks applied to this research are all rooted in critical theory, which has “almost inherent emphasis on linking theory with praxis” (Rabaka, 2009, p.7). Yet, at the core of each of them is identity politics. Thus, identifying the best methodology for my research was critical, because “different methodologies produce different kinds of substantive knowledge” (McCall, 2005, p. 1774). It was crucial to utilize a methodology that did not perpetuate oppressive methods or a “vocabulary of neutrality, objectivity, and scientific detachment {that} could easily function as a tool of oppression

and domination” (Bochner & Riggs, 2014, p. 10). Rather, this type of research demanded a methodology that could honor the applied theory of intersectionality, as well as its applied theoretical frameworks of Critical Race Theory and even Black radical thought, all of which have an essential core of social justice and ultimately, emancipation for individuals whose stories are the lesser told. Black radical thought is critical to include as an influential theoretical framework for this study specifically, because:

By analyzing and criticizing black radical thought, and the politico-economic and socio-cultural situations to which it responds, its theories and praxes can be accessed and assessed for their contribution to: (1) contemporary African Studies and critical social theory; (2) grassroots mass movements calling for radical/ revolutionary social transformation, from the Harlem Renaissance, Negritude, Civil Rights and Black Power movements, to the brewing of anti-war and peace movements at the dawn of the twenty-first century and (3) future moral and multicultural social thought and practices. (Rabaka, 2009, p. 9-10)

Therefore, the overall goals of the method were integral to informing my choice, and because “the goals of much of narrative inquiry are to keep conversation going (about matters crucial to living well); to activate subjectivity, feeling, and identification in readers or listeners; to raise consciousness; to promote empathy and social justice; and to encourage activism” (Bochner & Riggs, 2014, p. 12).

Methodology: Stirring the Pot

My research methodology is Critical Race Theory’s counter-storytelling tenet applied as a method, informed by narrative inquiry. Though, seemingly, amalgamous in na-

ture, it is a methodology no less valid and informed, as it is a commonly used methodology. CRT as a theoretical practice emphasizes the use of storytelling and narrative as critical features of its methodology. Counterstorytelling adds another critical dimension to the narrative exchange by professing the intent to acknowledge the experiences of those with the least power and privilege in a society. Cook & Dixson (2012) explain the four aims of Counterstorytelling, which include:

(1) psychic preservation by not silencing the experiences of the oppressed and thus exposing neglected evidence (counterstorytelling); (2) challenging a normative reality through an exchange that overcomes ethnocentrism and the unconscious conviction of viewing the world one way; (3) listening to the voices of people of color as the basis for understanding how race and racism function; and (4) purposefully attempting to disrupt liberal ideology (Bell, 1995; Bernal 2002; Delgado and Stefancic 200; Lawrence 1992). (p. 1243)

Through this methodology, I aim to accomplish three things: I wish to honor the storytellers (my participants), respect the stories being told (what I document as data), and finally, re-tell their stories through my scholarship while consciously rejecting a colonialist or voyeuristic approach (critical research).

Personal narratives and stories, other people's stories, and composite narratives are the three most common forms of counterstorytelling used by CRT scholars (Solarzano & Yosso, 2002). In order to answer my research questions and make meaning of what I experience, my research will include two forms of counterstorytelling: personal narratives and the stories of others. The stories of my participants will be interwoven with my own organic and informed reflections, constituting a literary approach to explaining my

data. This CRT approach encourages a decolonization of knowledge as it permits “scholars to make their scholarship accessible to the broader community, not just to those in academia” (p. Cook & Dixson, 2012, p. 1252). Additionally, this approach to writing qualitative data rejects the notion that scholarship must be presented as austere, scientifically objective, and void of emotion. For me, as a holder of two marginalized identities, liberatory research, like my work, is both personal and emotional. It is undoubtedly why I seek to uncover stories from a historically colonized people who assume a risk by engaging in work that critiques their oppressive social experiences and the systems that perpetuate it, placing them in politically vulnerable positions. Furthermore, Cubans still residing in Cuba who chose to share their counter narratives with an American researcher are also deliberately engaging in a political act of defiance against institutional power that challenges a widely exported and therefore, dominant political view. CRT’s “counterstory serves to relate theory and the experiences of the oppressed in such a way as to challenge the dominant and totalizing narrative of white supremacy” (Cook & Dixson, 2012, p.1243).

My participants are people of color, and I am a scholar of color choosing to centralize lesser heard stories about marginalization and oppression within a certain community. To be clear, when using terms like “lesser heard” or “uncover” to describe my process of acquiring stories, I am not suggesting that the stories are few in number, isolated, or uncommon within a collective. CRT would suggest that those stories are not lesser known because they are hidden or mystifying. Rather, they are suppressed because institutions and academies have been complicit in perpetuating the maintenance of a singular

truth, which has historically been that of the hegemony. In fact, “CRT challenges the notion that the individual experiences that people have with racism and discrimination cannot represent the collective experiences that people of color have with racism and discrimination” (Cook & Dixson, 2012, p. 1243). This is why CRT and its critiques around race, power, and privilege can be applied to aspects of the collective Black lived experience with racism throughout the African diaspora. More than its critical applications, CRT endeavors to uncover multiple truths from the subjugated and silenced to challenge and dispel dominant myths. This allows CRT to be both a critical and liberating application to scholarship. Consequently, I refuse to use a methodology that could, even if unintentionally, perpetuate a singular, dominant narrative- further obscuring both my participants and their realities. As a researcher, “it is important to both seek to understand the nuances and meaning within a story while honoring the knowledge of the community” (Cook & Dixson, 2012, p. 1244). Beyond honoring the meaning as knowledge, I hoped to employ a method that also validated it as knowledge. Because CRT focuses on amplifying the voices of the marginalized through the stories that they themselves tell, it disrupts the notion that the experiences of dominant groups are the only realities that matter or deserve to be used in the way we inform our understanding of the world.

Narrative inquiry complements counterstorytelling as a methodology because it “seeks to humanize the human sciences, placing people, meaning and personal identity at the center, inviting the development of reflexive, relational, and interpretive methodologies and drawing attention not only on the actual but also the possible and the good” (Bochner & Riggs, 2014, p. 1). By disrupting a widely held, singular view of reality through the intentional inclusion of the stories and experiences of those still battling

against racial injustices, it is possible to contest normative assumptions that would promote a liberal ideology of colorblindness. The colorblind ideology is not a concept specific only to contemporary American society, as CRT might insinuate. In some Latin American countries, like Cuba, the notion of racelessness was used alongside the exaltation of a singular national identity to obscure racial injustice and promote the ideal of a united, progressive society.

Intersectionality and CRT present a natural overlap for researchers who employ them, because “race, and how it is also mediated by gender and socioeconomic status, provide the important context that locates the storyteller” (Cook & Dixon, 2012, p. 1243). The various aspects of one’s identity and how those identities intersect to inform one’s context is relative to their understanding and ultimately, their worldview. It is that worldview (the historical and political) and context (sociocultural) that work together to shape a narrative. Therefore, the two should be analyzed with respect to their symbiotic relationship within a narrative. It is how meaning is made. More specifically, Riessman (2005) highlights the benefit of narrative inquiry in the following:

Narratives are useful in research precisely because storytellers interpret the past rather than reproduce it as it was. The ‘truths’ of narrative accounts are not their faithful representations of a past world, but in the shifting connections they forge among past, present, and future. They offer storytellers a way to re-imagine lives as narratives do for nations, organizations, ethnic/racial and other groups forming collective identities (p. 6).

My methods of choice are not ones that rely exclusively on a singular way of arriving at the story, but for what I aim to accomplish and honor through my research, it is one that

wishes to turn “our attention away from our most visible practices, to that which isn’t protocolled, transcribed, described, or presented; and yet is in the narrative, or an intrinsic part of it, and which plays an extremely relevant part in its interpretation” (Formenti & West, 2016, p. 16). Although I did not spend extended amounts of time with my participants, I did have intentional interaction with them over intervals of time, learning more about them, their experiences, personalities, and the nuances of that which isn’t explicitly shared, collecting the verbal and nonverbal artifacts of each exchange. Thus, my narrative inquiry required that my data assume some thematic elements that considered the type of engagement the research facilitated. For this study, that would be intersectional analysis where:

The emphasis is on the dialogic process between teller and listener. Narratives of experience are occasioned in particular settings...where storyteller and questioner jointly participate in conversation. Attention to thematic content and narrative structure are not abandoned in the interactional approach, but interest shifts to storytelling as a process of co-construction, where teller and listener create meaning collaboratively. Stories of personal experience, organized around the life world of the teller, may be inserted into question and answer exchanges. (Riessman, 2005, p. 4)

This is a critical part of biographical narrative. And in recognizing the multifacets of the storyteller and teller (researcher) relationship, it is also critical that the researcher recognize the various aspects of documenting and cross-examining the biographical experience and how it impacts the way the story is brought to life. This occurs when the reporting teller can appreciate the underlying and unsaid, which includes:

...voice, bodily expression, relationships, silences, signs, and unconscious processes and so on- there is a possibility to illuminate and interrogate the perspectives underlying our methods and writings, and to deepen our understanding of our work as researchers. Ways of doing are not dis-connected from the theoretical and epistemological framework of biographical research, neither from our identities. (Formenti & West, 2016, p. 16)

To admit these influences as part of the unique process is not to nullify or invalidate it. After all, the acknowledgement that this is a necessary and significant part of the methodology that should be professed, even when it's not yet accepted by the academy as orthodox, thus, uncovers the applied method as critical in nature, as well.

CRT Paves the Way for Intersectionality: Identity at a Cross Roads

In terms of intersectionality, when people recognize the multi-dimensionality of their own group's members and accept that they can have multiple loyalties, that they can be both in group and out group members at once, they may also begin to see how the constituent parts of the other group could also be multi-dimensional (and contribute to complexifying their views of the other). Intersectionality can thus be a "translational politics" (Rothman, 2014).

This is important to highlight when considering the possibility of existing in a both/and reality vs. an either/or reality, which could contribute to a feeling of incongruence within identity politics. Intersectionality aims to define definitive aspects of identity with regard to individuals' experiences with inequality because of rigid top-down social and political order, but it also attempts to do so from the perspective of the bottom-up

(MacKinnon, 2013), thus making the narratives that capture those experiences even more vital to my research.

It is important to note that “critical theories are not simply a synthesis of radical politics and social theory, but also a combination of cultural criticism and historical theory” (Rabaka, 2009, p. 15). Critical Race Theory was initially developed as a way to postulate the way institutional structures and conventions promote the systematic and systemic oppression of African-Americans. Crenshaw et al. (1995) explain that “It was their racial Otherness that came to justify the subordinated status of Blacks” (p. 278). In effect, Critical Race Theory, which could be understood as “anti-racist praxis-promoting theory critical ways in which white supremacy impacts institutions and individuals, has its origins in the works of several civil rights lawyers in the early 1980s” (Rabaka, 2009, p. 13). Critical Race Theory is inextricably linked to Critical Legal Studies (CLS) because it asserts that law is neither racially neutral nor apolitical (Delgado, 1995). Nevertheless, it acknowledges the culpability of institutions in the very operationalization and preservation of systemic racism.

Systemic racism as a consequence of Cuba’s post-colonial history and socioeconomic hierarchy is arguably responsible for the anti-discrimination social movements taking place there as Afro-Cuban activists desire to highlight the disparities of their lived realities. This is largely a consequence of the Cuban government’s repeated failure to acknowledge its culpability as an institution, which is supported in Farber’s (2011) critique where he purports that:

[the Cuban government]should start by dealing with racism as a system of power and social-structural relations. One racially defined group—Cuban blacks – has

been historically deprived of power and access to resources as the result of being the object of discriminatory conduct by primarily the white upper and upper-middle classes. (p. 178)

This claim supports that the racial condition and contemporary circumstance of Afro-Cubans in Cuba, make for a justified context unto which Critical Race Theory can and should be applied. Though the political position of CRT is one that speaks to the effects of institutionalized racism on the lived experience of African-Americans in the United States, some tenets of the theory can certainly be extended to the lived experience of individuals with Afro identities whose heritage is a part of the African diaspora, however far removed. For that reason, this phenomenon isn't limited to a particular place or space. Rather, "critical theorists believe that one must contextualize it within its historical context, testing and teasing-out tensions between the phenomenon and the cultural, social, political, economic, scientific, aesthetic and religious, among other, institutions and struggles of its epoch" (Rabaka, 2009, p. 15).

Data is provided in the form of informal and formal interviews, storytelling, the documentation of art and various art forms, and personal narratives. This work aimed to present the findings from that research and provide a comparative analysis of my autoethnographical experiences and the narrative accounts captured in the data. By using CRT as a premise, this analysis juxtaposed the social and political ideologies behind what it means to be Black and a member of the Latinx community, which can contain contrasting and incongruent notions of identity.

Applications of Critical Race Theory affirm stories as valid research, because they affirm subjects themselves as authorities who “name their own reality through storytelling in an effort to promote psychic preservation” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 14). Storytelling is a critical tenet of Critical Race Theory as it values the lived realities of people of color by integrating their experiential knowledge. Hence, there is value in the narrative inquiry study where the researcher can produce a cultural portrait that “focuses on the stories that people tell about themselves either in mundane, everyday interactions- *small stories*- or in retrospective accounts ranging from episodic stories about epiphanies or personal troubles to full-blown life histories- *big stories*” (Bochner & Riggs, 2014, p. 13).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Intersectionality is not synonymous with multiculturalism. Using the term intersectionality when specifically addressing the intersections of race, nation, and culture among members of the Afro-Latinx community, is a critical assertion even in semantic. By using intersectionality as an epistemological frame to understand the Afro-Latinx experience, I am applying a political consciousness that recognizes Blackness and Latinidad as two intersecting identities that can be embodied in a collective. Multiculturalism negates this critical application because “the literature on multiculturalism assumes that immigrant ethnic groups, national minorities, indigenous peoples, and racial groups are all distinct categories that do not overlap” (Hooker, 2014, p. 189). Though not monolithic as a concept, I argue that multiculturalism fails to explicitly acknowledge Black identity and the consequential social experiences and political views that such an outright association to Blackness would acknowledge. However, intersectionality does just that. Intersectionality insists on a recognizing Blackness and the complex sociopolitical implications associated with Blackness, in relation to other embodied social constructs that one can simultaneously possess. However, multiculturalism remains stagnant around its rigid need to place individuals in categories that are connected to their “entitled” liberties. Of course, such an application is challenging to apply, but it also projects notions of privilege associated with rights. As a result, “theorists of multiculturalism have also struggled with the problem of how to classify Latino/as, as they do not fit neatly into the standard typologies used to establish the kinds of rights to which different minority groups are entitled” (Hooker, 2014, p. 189). Cubans who left the country after the Revolution of 1959

believed themselves to be exiles and not immigrants (Hooker, 2014). This is a very relevant example of why limited, exclusionary categories under the assumptions of multiculturalism's three categories are highly problematic.

Thus, the differences between multiculturalism and intersectionality are clear. Intersectionality honors the lived reality of one person's ability to embody multiple identities, meaning that they are not simply one or another. Hence, a person can be multiple things, simultaneously. Whereas, multiculturalism insists on singular categories of either ethnic groups, national minorities, or immigrants. The other significant difference is that intersectionality explicitly recognizes the relationship between race, gender, class, and oppression. So, power and privilege are not understood to operate independently of race, class, and gender but as a dependent factor. Multiculturalism doesn't explicitly recognize that relationship, making it difficult to confront, challenge and activate against institutions that perpetuate oppressive structures of power and privilege.

I argue that conscious recognition around intersectional race identity is the bridge that can close the gap between group consciousness and social action. I will use political action and social action interchangeably.

Ideologies of whitening and miscegenation, *mestizaje*, became the paradigms intended to create an illusion of inclusion and to prevent race-based consciousness among people of African descent. In addition, these ideologies were expected to erase any attempt to recognize or redeem the contributions of the African Diaspora to Latin American nations. I believe this process alienated Latin American societies from recognizing and celebrating their African heritage. In addition, they

did hurt black Latin Americans' communal self-image and self-esteem, leading many to self-rejection and shame. (Vega, 2012, p. 160-161)

Hooker (2014) elucidates this point in recognizing that there are omissions of racial hierarchies that invalidate black and indigenous contributions to mestizaje in Latin America, making such claims an assertion of racial power as it further marginalizes or altogether nullifies the "other." Yet, even some scholars of Latin American political thought proclaim simultaneous associations of privilege and emancipatory potential through mestizaje and genealogical constructions of race (Hooker, 2014).

The following section of this literature review will discuss perceptions of race and racism from the perspective of Afro Cubans in Cuba through the art of storytelling using both autoethnographical and narrative inquiry approaches to qualitative research. This effort will further Patricia Hill-Collins' (2000) claim that "intersectional paradigms make two important contributions to understanding the connections between knowledge and empowerment. For one, they stimulate new interpretations of African-American women's experiences" (p. 227). Though it is not particularly used in this work as an epistemological frame, it is important to recognize that there is some theoretical overlap between Black Feminist Thought and Intersectionality. After all, the theory of intersectionality materialized from black feminist thought, highlighting the inequality suffered by African-American women due to race, gender, and class, which had had been evaded in traditional domains (Lopez & Garcia, 2014). Though this research is not essentialist in its application of intersectionality, it does firmly recognize the following as a precursor:

These contributions sparked the widespread development of intersectionality studies, which are concerned with how the inter-dependence of social inequalities

can lead to extremely complex inequality production processes. Social inequalities arising from class, race, sexual orientation, age, disability status, or gender differences affect each other dynamically over time and in various ‘institutional domains’ such as economy, politics, or civil society.

(Lopez & Garcia, 2014, p. 14)

Moreover, it need be recognized as a seminal composite of intersectionality that has influenced liberatory practices among Black transnational artists, specifically women, for quite some time, who believed, “above all else, our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is necessary not as an adjunct to somebody else’s but because of our need as human persons for autonomy.” (Morris & Hockley, 2017, p. 178). This excerpt was lifted from A Black Feminist Statement from The Combahee River Collective, a Boston-based black lesbian feminist organization whose inception was in January 1974. The Combahee River Collective held company among a wave of several Black feminist organizations that were active within this movement across the United States in the 1970s. Combahee contributed significantly to the history and theory of Black feminism in their official statement published in April 1977 which reads:

The most general statement of our politics...would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As black

women we see black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that women of color face. (p. 176)

So, within this community of Black women artists who were intentional in their application of feminist politics in both their artistic creations and art spaces, their politics around liberation were inclusive of women of color- beyond the exclusive African-American experience. Thus, using the term Black as a diasporically inclusive category, has transnational implications, particularly in accordance with experiences of oppression. Though nuanced because of the unique histories of various places, the struggle for Black liberation is not exclusive to African-Americans or men. Blacks across the diaspora, especially women- and in the case of activists in The Combahee River Collective- have been forming communities wherein which they utilize various mediums to both articulate and fight their unique struggles against oppression on several fronts. Therefore, recognizing and celebrating the place of “Afro-Latinas in contemporary global society also means accepting the social, economic and political dislocation of these communities, and honoring the freedom fighters, change-makers and everyday people who fuel the Afro-Latina/o struggle for holistic development. (Vega et al., 2012, p. viii).

In short, intersectionality recognizes the relationship between race identity and social condition as inextricably linked. This is demonstrated with instances of anti-racism and discrimination in Cuba. With intersectionality as the principal theory, the epistemological framework applied to this research is a combination of critical theory and Critical Race Theory that will be used to understand the Afro-Cuban racialized experience in Cuba. As previously stated, LatCrit Theory was born of Critical Race Theory, and as such, one would imagine that it would find a natural home in its critical application to the

Latinx experiences analyzed throughout this work. However, upon further reading and analysis, it was not always a seamless fit for this critical research. This was largely because of the lopsided constructions of Latinidad where mestizaje is valorized and the struggles of Black and indigenous Latinos are rendered invisible. Hooker (2014) contends:

Latino political theorists in the USA who adopt benevolent accounts of mestizaje stand in sharp contrast to the strong criticisms of such narratives by increasingly vocal contemporary indigenous and black movements in Latin America, which tend to argue that theories of harmonious mestizaje have served to legitimize racial hierarchy and discrimination in the region. (p. 197)

Critical race theory (CRT) challenges the dominant worldview of race, class, and gender by elucidating historical and cultural contexts as a means to deconstruct the racialized content of experiences as it relates to policies, theories, and practices that are designed to systemically subordinate and marginalize certain racial/ ethnic groups. Thus, in challenging such discourses, exists the potential to emancipate and empower members of those marginalized groups. This point is exemplified further from Vega et al. (2012):

Contesting illusory notions of multi-racial utopia in which European, indigenous and African descendants live harmoniously without addressing the effects of colonialism, imperialism and enslavement, Afro-Latinidad not only demands recognition for the historical presence and contributions of African descendants since the end of the transatlantic slave trade, but also heralds a shift with regard to how Latin American identity is constructed today. (p. viii)

This contestation has been the undertaking of a growing number of activists in the Latinx community across the African Diaspora in Latin America and beyond. As Africana critical theory would explain, Blackness is a politicized identity because of the colonial history and slave trade in Cuba and throughout the diaspora. However, this study will focus on the Afro-Cuban experience. Furthermore, this analysis on the Afro-Latinx art activist experience will include the ways in which Afro Cubans use storytelling as a means to share personal narratives in order to combat further marginalization in Cuba as a means of protest/ empowerment. Though, this is not specific only to the Afro-Latinx experience in Cuba. It is occurring in many countries throughout Latin America and Latino communities, as stated by Perrault (2012) in *Women Warriors of the Afro-Latina Diaspora*:

In Venezuela, as in the rest of Latin America and Latino communities, being black is seen through the lens of a colonial, racialized past that is loaded with prejudice and exclusion of blackness and for the most part of indigenous people as well. According to Harvard professor, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., it is estimated that of all the Africans who made it to the Americas, six percent came to North America while the remaining 94 percent went to Central and South America and the Caribbean. The historical evidence shows that even places such as Mexico had a very large proportion of Africans during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Bennett, 2003). Throughout, colonial Latin America Africans and their descendants and cultures were placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy. (p. 160)

Just as identity contains a multitude of interdependent complexities, race as a standing identity is a very complex topic. Though it may be socially constructed in different ways that are relative to a particular society's historicization of race and the subsequent reciprocating events surrounding race, it remains both personally subjective and institutionally cultural. As a result, context is paramount for understanding how the aforementioned aspects work in tandem to inform racial identity. Moreover, race has social, political, and even economic implications and those implications are being felt across the Afro-Latinx communities who have been marginalized, disenfranchised, or have had the "Afro" aspects of their identity rendered invisible. This is outlined in the following:

From North America to the Southern Cone, the concept of Afro-latinidad in the Americas continues to stir deep emotional responses while inspiring local, national and international movements for racial justice and equality. Challenging both Eurocentric constructions of Latin American identity and narrow U.S.-centered constructions of "black" identity in the Diaspora, Afro-Latinas/os are demanding their place in history as purveyors of resistance and as the progeny of a deep-rooted legacy. Afro-Latinas are indisputably at the heart and the helm of this struggle. (Vega et al., 2012, p. viii)

Yet, it is inextricably linked with one's identity. For some, that identity is salient; it is one of their most pervasive characteristics. However, when individuals have more than one identity or multiple racial identities, the intersection of those identities can create even greater complexities that spur from the way institutions, communal engagement,

and semiotics have shaped and defined those racial identities. Specifically, it can culminate to influence the way in which individuals define themselves and engage discussions around race.

Race and the complexities around it can also influence perception. Such perceptions can affect how members of society perceive individuals from racially marginalized communities, as well as influence how individuals from the hegemonic culture engage members of those marginalized communities. In an interview excerpt from Morris & Hockley's *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85* (2017) a collective group of women artists came together to discuss and better understand themselves "in terms of their lives, their art and their politics..." (p. 201). The aim was to articulate their primary reasons for coming together in community as "Third World Women" to challenge their invisibility and the 'politics of being other' in spaces where their concerns were not addressed. Artist Cecelia Vicuna references this experience and the subsequent dissonance she felt through the frame of her Latinx cultural history in her native Chile:

Cecilia Vicuna: That's what I meant about Latin America. People are very ready to discuss class struggle because class struggle is a term that comes from European culture that everybody shares, so this is OK. But to go beyond that conception or even discuss the implications-like racism-its awkward. The subject of the Indians in Chile was usually treated as a problem of class struggle, not a cultural or religious difference. We have to question to what extent we've been conditioned by all this miseducation we've received. I worried about the narrowness of the experiences that were submitted. Most of the articles in this issue are individualized, separated experiences—"I felt this, you felt that." But we also have to put

together our own experiences of racism with what's going on in the world, to reach a more general concept of global racism. It's the American situation. If this collective were in Latin America, we would have arrived at a totally different conclusion because we are marginal. We're always aware of the global situation because we have to be." (Morris & Hockley, p. 201).

Thus, the residuals of post-colonialism impact how class is understood and experienced in a sociopolitical way. Yet, discussions regarding racism as an intersectional struggle and the implications that that contains remains "awkward," leaving the history and contemporary experiences of racism in Latin America to be disregarded as uniquely individual and void of their firm recognition as a valid issue in the global world. Vicuna further extends this point when explaining that systemic racism is simply not discussed as a global situation in Latin America, yet, The United States of America provided a context for this dynamic:

Cecilia Vicuna: Here you had the Civil Rights Movements, you are always aware of the years of struggle between Black and white. But in Latin America, particularly in Chile where I come from, racism is simply not discussed. So, I had never had the opportunity to think about racism in relation to my own experience. It was a fantastic thing to think in those terms with Black and white women. My experience in this capital of the world is that whatever art my Latin friends do, its ignored by the mainstream. It does not exist, or its "ethnic." Which is why I got out the issue of ethnocentrism. And I realized nobody in this collective shared this thing with me. I was disappointed that everybody said this issue is about racism and nobody was willing to go to a more general, a more cultural and ideological

issue. Nobody was willing to go from the emotional level of personal experiences about racism to the more philosophical level.... So I adapted!” (Morris & Hockley, 2017, p. 200).

So, in the same vein as Vicuna’s revelation, when racism is not understood to be a reality that is broader than individualized, isolated experiences and owned as an ideological precept applied and perpetuated en masse by institutions and systems, it then becomes easier to educate or rather, mis-educate those who are affected by it-whether they be victims or perpetrators, themselves.

I wish to reiterate that this choice of silence around racial discrimination is rather pervasive across Latin America and the Caribbean. Particularly, Cuba is framed as a racial democracy with an all-encompassing national identity which is a commonly exported view whose validity rest on the anti-racist sentiment and policy of The Revolution. Essentially meaning, that because racism was denounced through policy, it could in fact, no longer exist in reality. Thus, even in post-revolutionary Cuba, it was initially this idea of a colorblind society where race could, in effect, be absorbed by national identity, that was the response to concerns around racial discrimination. Blacks even after the Revolutionary victory in Cuba sought to appeal to Fidel Castro to address racial matters in the country more directly and intentionally. In fact, Farber (2011) reminds us that an Afro-Cuba lawyer and provisional supervisor of the National Federation of Black Societies by the name of Juan René Betancourt attempted to appeal to Castro in magazine publication writing that:

“it is impossible that anyone should believe, seriously and in good faith, that by ceasing to refer “blacks” and “whites” the people will forget their existence, and

racial discrimination will thus be liquidated by this miraculous method.’ He also warned against a repetition of what happened in 1920 – the exclusion of blacks, including insurgent leaders, from the affairs of the new republic” (p. 169).

In short, just after the revolutionary victory, the Cuban revolutionary government sought to indoctrinate the Cuban people with a message of national identity and subsequent unity. However, this education- though perhaps, well-intentioned- meant maintaining silence around an institutional failure, that impacted an overwhelming amount of its very citizens. Again, reducing their lived experiences as entire racial community to a uniquely individual one. Additionally, when individuals are “mis-educated,” and are conditioned to accept a particular but biased frame as the skewed universal reality, particularly as it relates to their personal identity and experience, it can influence how members of marginalized communities even interact with and engage one another. This can be considerably problematic when individuals from marginalized communities internalize oppression. The term racism in this work encompasses sociopolitical, economic, and cultural structures, beliefs, and actions that systematize and perpetuate the unequal distribution of power, privileges, and resources, between a dominant culture (typically white) and people of color (Hilliard, 1992). However, the perpetrators of discriminatory practices as a symptom of racism, can also include individuals who are by definition, people of color or marginalized in some way, and consequently, oppressed themselves.

Historiography of Race in Cuba

I intentionally use the term historiography as a way to critique the way Cuba’s history has been traditionally documented and exported by Cuba and exiled Cubans/ Cuban families living in the United States of America. It is not absent of a particular kind of

political thought that neutralizes the experiences of all Cubans as one in the same, and thus, have a similar if not identical sociocultural and political experience. It is typically an edited narrative in which the subjugated knowledge of Afro-Cubans is excluded from or minimized in that prolific narrative. Therefore, I maintain that to uncover and depict a more inclusive understanding of reality in Cuba for Afro-Cubans, we must start first with the historical past that brought us to the current existence of Black Cubans in Cuba.

As previously explained, CRT and African Critical Theory will be combined as an applied theory in this study. This will allow me to address the systemic marginalization of Blacks beyond the U.S. context. Africana Critical Theory speaks to the widespread diaspora and the post-colonial experience in a way that CRT does not, and for this study and population the inclusion of those elements was critical. So, to honor and situate my approach in CRT and Africana Critical Theory, I will begin with a symbolic and well-known metaphor among diasporic communities that comes from Africa, which is *Sankofa*. *Sankofa* is a concept portrayed by a symbol of a bird with its neck craned back- its beak grasping an egg perched on its body- as its legs proceed forward. It is from the Akan people of Ghana and reminds us that to progress into the future, whose fragility and possibility is represented by the egg, we must go back to collect the knowledge and experiences of the past to continue to move forward. In short, the learned lessons and reclaimed knowledge of our past, should inform and enrich our future. It is only fitting that this understanding be applied to the current argument surrounding race relations in Cuba. Though not purely chronological, I will seek to provide some historical context around race and racism in Cuba so that it informs our understanding of the trajectory of the Black experience politically, socially, economically, and now, contemporarily.

Three hundred fifty years of slavery and the widespread institutional racism that followed its abolition in 1886 turned blacks into the most important of the oppressed groups in Cuba, before and after the revolutionary victory of 1959. Nevertheless, due to the peculiarities of Cuban history, the oppression of black Cubans, before and after the revolution, has been, until very recently an oppression ‘that dares not speak its name. (Farber, 2011, p. 158)

Generally, should they adopt the historically American social construct around race designation by applying the historical “one drop” rule of African heritage, the majority of Cubans can be considered people of color. However, this is not the way that race and its ties to Blackness and African descendants or afrodescendente is understood in Cuba. Rather, it is the opposite, as explained here:

Membership in the subordinate racial groups was never defined in Cuba as based on so-called hypo-descent – better known as the ‘one drop of black blood rule’ – that defined blackness in the United States. In Cuba, physical appearance continues to be the key factor determining racial affiliation. Unclear or ambiguous cases of racial identification have usually been “resolved” based on markers of social standing, with higher class membership identified with a higher level of whiteness. (Farber, 2011, p. 159)

Yet, according to the personal narratives shared, apart from white racial identity in Cuba, people of color can include more than the nationally documented mulatto and Afro Cuban designations on their comparable census reporting. Simply, race cannot be simplified into binaries of only Black and White when speaking to the Afro Cuban racial-

ized experience, as there is also the racial category of mixed-race Cubans who are considered “mulatos” (Benson, 2016, p. 24). Thus, it is important to note the nuances of race and racism in Cuba as a result of its pre-and post-colonial history, because “such differences are historically and geographically contextual, which requires careful attention to the particularity of contextual experience and recognition that meanings associated with such differences vary across time and place” (Ramsay, 2013, p. 455).

Though the history of race in Cuba certainly informs the topic, this work will not focus on the historicization of race in Cuba. Nor will this work present a comparative component to racism in Cuba experienced by Blacks vs. racism experienced by Blacks in the United States. Farber (2011) makes the distinction clear with this explanation:

Racial oppression in Cuba has been different from and less vicious than in the United States. However, contrary to the self-indulgent notion widespread among Cuban whites in south Florida and on the island that postcolonial Cuba has been free of racism, Cuban racism exist and has been cruel and oppressive (p. 158).

However, that history is arguably the foundation for the racial climate in present day Cuba, as well as, the sociopolitical guiding reference for racial identity among Cubans, particularly mulattos and Afro Cubans.

Since the Spanish colonial migration to Cuba was predominantly composed of single men instead of families, as was the case in the North America, there was a much greater degree of miscegenation on the island. This did not necessarily involve official marriages between whites and blacks (these were actually forbidden from the mid-1860s until the early 1880s) and certainly nothing approximating an

equality of conditions between Spanish men and their black sexual partners. Miscegenation led to the emergence of mulattos (mulatos) as an intermediate racial category that became part of a system of classification shared by whites and blacks alike. However, although acknowledged as an intermediate group, mulattos have been regarded as much closer to blacks than to whites. (Farber, 2011, p. 159)

In Prerevolutionary Cuba, institutionalized racism was a form of systemic oppression in the form of segregation, meaning discrimination was a pervasive reality for Afro-Cubans, but within the less assessable of social practices. In fact, “in the 1950s, right before the victory of the revolution, racial segregation existed in Cuba but, unlike the system of ‘Jim Crow’ in the southern United States or South African apartheid, was not sanctioned by law. Public parks in several provincial cities (but not in the Havana metropolitan area) had separate areas for whites and nonwhites” (Farber, 2011, p. 163).

In post-independence Cuba, all Afro-Cubans were victims of discrimination, but there was no rigid separation of the races and no mandatory segregation. This allowed for substantial racial mixing and a growing mulato population and not only between white and Blacks. The prerevolutionary Cuba of the 1950s had many of the characteristics an ethnic and racial mosaic, with whites, blacks, mulattos, and a large number of immigrants, particularly Spanish, Chinese, Jamaicans, and Haitians, with much smaller numbers of Arabs (mostly Lebanese Christians) and Polish and Turkish Jews (Farber, 2011, p. 164). Even still, there was no equity or a celebrated sense of multiculturalism because it was the predominant whiteness in culture that was implicitly associated with

what is Cuban. So, with the exception of contributions to Cuban music (which is an aspect of Black culture that is commonly commodified and imitated in many societies that nevertheless discriminated against Blacks), “the African component of Cuban nationality was not appreciated” and in the case of African religion, even regarded as “uncivilized savagery at worst” (Farber, 2011, p. 164). This lack of appreciation for African culture and Blackness is perhaps a euphemism that should more accurately be exchanged for the more explicit, which is the stark preference for whiteness, which translated into racist notions “concerning the ‘improvement’ of the race through increased ‘whitening of offspring’ and though the acquisition of ‘better’ hair and other physical features” (Farber, 2011, p. 159). This was not only a widespread belief held by many whites, but also a significant number of blacks and mulattos (Farber, 2011).

Yet, the national identity of who is Cuban was shared across color lines, for “whites did not consider blacks and mulattos any less Cuban than they were, even though they looked down upon and discriminated against them. Similarly, black and mulatto Cubans looked at the whites born on the island as being no less politically and culturally Cuban than they were, even though they may have resented and hated the racial discrimination to which they were being subjected (Farber, 2011, p. 164-65). It was a curious landscape with a pervasive racialized dichotomy, while maintaining sentiments of a homogeneous cultural and political nationality.

Nevertheless, as in colonial Cuba, many social clubs, places of entertainment, hotels, private schools, and barbershops, for example excluded blacks. Blacks were also barred de facto from certain trades and professional positions, which were occupied white Cubans who “monopolized private-sector white-collar employment and other forms of

‘nonmanual’ labor, including sales positions in the most expensive Havana departments stores...” (Farber, 2011, p. 163), and were overrepresented in the lesser-paid and lower-status jobs. (Helg, 2000). It is critical, nevertheless, to highlight the ways in which some individuals were able to move beyond the confines of their racial constitution, perceived or otherwise. Race, gender, and class are all unique intersectional identity components that interconnect to determine a person’s social, political, and economical experience in Cuba, like many other Latin-American countries within the African diaspora. Nevertheless, this intersectional experience was realized along the racially polarizing hierarchy that contained Black identity, culture, and aesthetic at the bottom and European/ Anglo identity, aesthetic, and culture at the top. Mulattos found themselves somewhere in the middle with both the access that Blacks was denied, and some of the benefits that whites were awarded. This upward mobility was typically accomplished by rejecting aspects of Blackness. Saunders (2009) points out:

In Cuba, as in Brazil and other Latin-American and Caribbean contexts, class can symbolically change one’s race. Affluent black Cubans who are considered to be ‘cultured’ or of a ‘higher cultural level’ (meaning that they reject Afro-Cuban culture and embrace European culture and fashion as a cultural ideal), are often included in white and mulato social space. (p.177)

Cuba and the Curious Case of Colorblindness

Colorblindness is perhaps, the euphemistic response to the denial of racism, but that makes it no less culpable in the dissemination of racial discrimination. Dulitzky (2005) explains the persistent denial of racism across Latin American countries from a subjectively inclusive communal perspective in the following by arguing:

We delve into the different forms of denying the existence of racial discrimination in Latin America. The crux of our argument is that the people of our region are prone to conceal, twist, and cover up the fact that racism and racial discrimination exists in our part of the world. This phenomenon of denial stands in the way of acknowledgement of the problem and, consequently, hampers effective measures that could be taken to eliminate and prevent racial discrimination. (p. 39)

Much of the literature recognizes that racial discrimination exists, but it also insists through a variety of adjectives that it is an issue that is not openly recognized as a widespread problem. There are a number of factors that contribute to this gross negligence and a lack of recognized visibility for Blacks in many Latin American countries is cited as one of the most common. However, one collective connection across most, if not all Latin American countries, is the imprudent satisfaction that so many have by comparing the racial climate in their respective countries with that of the United States of America and somehow feeling redeemed by believing the racial situation in the United States as much worse. Dulitzky (2005) underscores this by personally admitting that “moral superiority vis-à-vis the United States of America is quite widespread throughout our region. Rarely does a conversation on this issue among Latin Americans take place without mentioning the serious incidences of racism and racial discrimination that exists in the land of our neighbors to the north” (p. 39). In fact, this was a part of my initial observations in the preliminary stages of data collection. Many Cubans associated acts of racism with violence and instances of racial discrimination as precursoryly dictated by law. Curiously, when engaging in dialogue about race with Black Cubans as a Black American, they extended sympathy to me for living in what they perceived to be a far more extreme

existence than their own. The routine murders of unarmed Black men and women (e.g. Rekia Boyd, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Yvette Smith, twelve-year-old Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, and Philando Castile to name a few) by police, many of the executions having been captured on film, and still resulting in no indictment for the offending police officers, was an indicator for Afro-Cubans that racism was not only an unjust social challenge or unethical experience, but a seemingly systematically approved epidemic. An epidemic that protected the seemingly state-sanctioned murders of a racial group- Blacks in America- without consequence.

As a Black American, I can't objectively protest or confirm the notion that racism is better or worse in one country or the other, but I can subjectively condemn systemic racism whenever or wherever it occurs. I will also confidently argue that it is difficult to realize a discriminatory experience as a racialized one, if you aren't able to identify community that affirms that racialized experience as real. The language must exist and the conversations must be happening, even if its within intra-communal spaces. This is difficult to do when one's nationality is recognized as preemptive to their racial identity; it immediately reduces one as primary and the other secondary. The primary consideration in Cuba was and remains- national pride around a shared national identity, and if that is in place, then universal equality is an expected byproduct. The discourse in Cuba has historically echoed this same sentiment to downplay existing of racial tensions.

This tension between the open acknowledgment of Cuban racial diversity and the convenience of avoiding, ignoring, or silencing it is far from new in Cuban national discourse and imagery. Cubans have been trying to find unity and

common ground for at least a century and have frequently perceived race as an obstacle to reaching this goal (De La Fuente, 2003, p. 43).

In Cuba, to acknowledge race was not only viewed as antagonistic to the pursuit of a unified national identity, but it was an indictment against the promises that the “new” post-colonial Cuba hoped to deliver. De la Fuente (1998) credits the historical development of this national discourse to José Martí, “Cuba's greatest ideologue and the architect of the fusion of anticolonial forces under a common, pro-independence banner” (p. 43). De la Fuente (2003) goes on to explain this in the following where he points out that, ‘the Negro who proclaims his racial character ... authorizes and brings forth the white racist.... Two racists would be equally guilty, the white racist and the Negro” (1992: 205-207) (p. 44). This view is hugely problematic for a number reasons, but most centrally, because it ascribes blame to the oppressed and then, underscores that blame with the accusation of a degree of culpability equal to that of the oppressor. It extracts power, political positionality, and privilege from the racial discussion surround inequities in Cuba for Blacks. Specifically, Martí argues that for simply highlighting their race and making known their circumstances of oppressive racism, Blacks were thought to have incited a deserved retribution and in fact, in doing so, would be considered racists, themselves. Thus, in order to further national unity, race should ideally remain undiscussed. As it were, during this time in Cuba, the “conscious and selective silence about race and the racial composition of the independence forces was the first strategy for neutralizing the alleged incompatibility: among true Cubans there were neither blacks nor whites, just Cubans (De la Fuente, 2003, p.44).

In order to problematize racism in a society, one must first recognize race and then, confront the subsequent oppression and marginalization that power juxtaposes against it. “The principal political leader of the third and final way of independence, which began in 1895, was José Martí (1853-95), a progressive thinker and writer. However, Martí, whose vast influence on Cuban politics – including race – is felt to this day, held to a firm ‘color-blind’ perspective on the racial question” (Farber, 2011, p. 160).

Martí “strongly opposed racial discrimination and articulated an integrationist political program in which there were no black or white Cubans, just Cubans. This ‘color-blindness’ led him to put on the same plane what he regarded as white and black racism” (Farber, 2011, p. 160). Though well-intentioned, I imagine, this sounds eerily like the “many, many sides” to blame argument of a far more polarizing politician, American President Donald Trump, who allegedly intended to condemn racism after the death of an anti-white supremacist protester at a white supremacy event in Charlottesville, Virginia on August 12, 2017, while somehow also implicating the victims of racism as culpable in their unjust treatment. with the following taken from the newspaper, The Guardian: the 45th President said: “We’re closely following the terrible events unfolding in Charlottesville, Virginia. We condemn in the strongest possible terms this egregious display of hatred, bigotry and violence on many sides, on many sides.” Trump added that this had been “going on for a long time in our country. Not [Donald Trump](#), not Barack Obama. A long, long time.” Trump added: “What is vital now is a swift restoration of law and order.”

Though far less euphemistic in the way that he postulates the idea of racial unity, nationhood, and the need for “law and order,” Trump’s message draws from the similar

notion in Martí's decided position of shared blame around racism for the good of the nation. National unity is paramount, even at the expense of racial justice. In Cuba, this race erasure was ideally intended to eradicate the ideology behind white supremacy and the privileges associated with it, while unifying a post-colonial racially divided nation. Nevertheless, what it also consequently did, was eliminate the vigilant institutional barometers that could actually monitor and measure when and how race discrimination was occurring by firstly validating its very existence. "As he put it, in the article 'My Race' published in the exile newspaper *Patria* on April 16, 1893, white racist supremacists have no more right to complain about blacks who extol the character of their race than black 'racist' have a right to complain about white racist" (Farber, 2011, p. 160). Blacks who insisted on the recognition of their racial identity as a result of being historically marginalized, gave a heightened degree of recognition or voice around their race, or highlighted racialized experiences, were thought to be betraying their nation. Therefore, Afro-Cubans were made to surrender their race as an identity marker while also entombing discussion around the discriminatory experiences that came along with that salient identity.

According to De la Fuente (2003), "National unity was to be achieved at the expense of racial identities, and therefore the colonial discourse that stressed the incompatibility of race and nation was to some extent respected, albeit reconstructed and given a whole new inclusionary meaning. Afro-Cubans would have to choose between being black and thus serving the colonialist purpose of portraying the nation as racially irreconcilable or being members of an allegedly raceless nationalist force. No opportunity seemed to be open for blacks to be Afro and Cuban at the same time. Any possibility for

blacks to voice their specific grievances and discontent was explicitly rejected as un-Cuban and unpatriotic (p. 44-45).

Race prejudice and racial discrimination were deemed eradicated by Fidel Castro in the Second Declaration of Havana (Blue, 2007). Yet, it is important to recognize that there was a historical blueprint for the downplay of racism, or more accurately, the altogether erasure of race recognition because it was seen as the culprit in racism by Cuba's beloved José Martí. In fact, "Martí was an early advocate for the racial silence that would so strongly characterize subsequent Cuban history. A year earlier. In 1892, he had urged Cubans to stop talking about race: 'This constant allusion to man's color should cease'" (Farber, 2011, p. 160). It was a lasting legacy that further amplified ideology that was meant to identify and bond all Cubans through their shared national identity. According to this political thought, the capitalist elite who had fled to Miami had taken with them their sexist and racist ideology. Such a claim was intended to eliminate the institutional authority used to the advantage of whites and the disadvantage of people of color. In short, such a policy was ideally meant to profess that the Cuban government would not support racism, discrimination, and prejudicial actions or policies against Afro Cubans.

However, according to Benson (2016), "Cuba's 1959 campaign against discrimination, which officially ended in 1961 was a program full of contradictions, consisting both of real social change and national myth-making about a government's, even a revolutionary government's, ability to eliminate racism in only three years" (p. 24). Again, here lies the misplaced idea that by eradicating the symptoms of racism without directly

addressing the role that both history and institutions played in perpetuating racism, a nation could simply recalibrate and unify with only the rhetoric of a new vision to propel it forward.

Racism must be recognized as a form of oppression that acknowledges the power relations around race that are both historically and socioculturally embedded. Thus, though, on the books as historical record, this research posits that social, cultural, and even political oppression has not and could not be totally eliminated from contemporary society. It must be noted that in order to address and condemn racial disparities and inequities, often, data related to the challenges identified must be exposed. The transgressions and the victims of those transgressions must be visible. A quantitative scale on which to base the effects of racism in Cuba is challenging to identify, because there are even stark disparities in the reporting of racial demographics on the island. The United States CIA World Fact Book claims that Cuba's racial breakdown is roughly 64% white, 26.6% mestizo, and 9.3% black, though it is argued that the visible depictions of racial demographics showcase a population of Afro-Cubans closer to 70% (Moore, 2010). Another key consideration to the quantitative breakdown of racial groups in Cuba is also a consequence of the self-selecting mulatto/ mestizo population (though the two are not technically interchangeable). "Esteban Domínguez, a black professor at the University of Havana, has pointed out that many people who are not white resist adopting a black or mulatto identity, an attitude that generates deception and hypocrisy and 'distorts census figures.' Thus, the number of blacks and mulattos in Cuba must be much higher than the one registered by the official censuses" (Farber, 2011, p. 176). Specifically, the mulatto population in Cuba grew as a consequence of the Spanish men who migrated to Cuba and

had offspring with their Black sexual partners. According to the literature, racial affiliation in Cuba is largely determined by physical appearance (Farber, 2011). Therefore, the racial ambiguity of light skinned mulattos often permitted them to pass for white, and thus, they identified as white. Such inconsistencies are dubious at best, but could also be perceived as duplicitous in terms of broad scale efforts to mobilize and galvanize a population that has been historically and systemically oppressed.

Racism Against Afro-Cubans – A Hushed Subjugation

Institutional racism is a residual effect of slavery in Cuba, as is the case in most, if not all nations who benefited from the post-colonial gains that slavery provided. In fact, several countries in the Caribbean that also reaped the benefits of the free labor of slaves to build their economies did not willingly relent power and equality. The benefactors, even when racially disproportionate in numbers, (whites) were quick to recognize the threat that equality for Blacks could mean, including a restructured social, political, and economic hierarchy. Bergad (2007) underscores this sociopolitical and economic domination in the following:

Cuban-born elites had a significant degree of both economic and political power on the island. They were among the most important sugar planters, held appointed political positions at the municipal council level of local government, were regularly awarded noble titles by generations of Spanish monarchs, and created social, political, and economic institutions that represented them on the island. (p. 19)

Though over a century before in Haiti, for example, such political gains and rights for Blacks were catalyzed by revolutionary means. The fear that the same fallout could

reach the shores of Cuba resonated among white Cubans and even influenced trepidation and delayed action around seeking independence from Spain. This fear revolved around the possible reality of a loss of power and white supremacy in Cuba's white ruling classes and governing bodies. This was especially because of the extensive and fast-growing African slave population in Cuba, which was critical to the sugar economy and subsequently responsible for the wealth of white Cubans (Bergad, 2007). It didn't help white anxieties that neighboring French West Indian colony Haiti, who shared a similar economic history with Cuba, had seen a slave revolt on their shores. Farber (2011) explains this in the following:

Their relative prosperity and the fear of a repetition of the Haitian Revolution, which took place at the end of the eighteenth century (*otro Santo Domingo*, 'another Santo Domingo'), made white native *criollos* (creoles) delay the armed struggle against Spain well into the second half of the nineteenth century. (p. 159)

Such a revolt would've dramatically shifted the promise that Cuba held. After all, "Cuba was poised to become the Caribbean's premier sugar colony when the Haitian slave revolt exploded in 1791" (Bergad, 2007, p. 17). Incidentally, this fear drove white Cubans to action in an effort to force the hand of a white dominated island with a visible increase in numbers by means of strategic white immigration to the island. The fact that this was an actual state-supported initiative moves white domination on the island from ideology to action, furthering the notion that "blacks and blackness were attacked through a program of state-encouraged immigration that sought to dilute them in a torrent of white blood" (De la Fuente, 1998, p. 47). This was not without firm influence from the United

States, who believed that Cuba's only path to progress and modernity was through an influx of white immigrants to increase the white population on the island. In fact, this was formally requested by the U.S. Military Governor in 1901 (De la Fuente, 1998). The whitening of Cuba was not a newly realized ideological goal. It had historically existed across centuries as described Farber (2011) describes here:

Fear of being numerically overcome by blacks also made the colonial authorities resort to every means at their disposal to keep the island as white as possible. In 1815, they established a Junta de Población Blanca (Council for White Population) charged with increasing white immigration. (p. 159)

Arguably, Cuba vacillated between notions of patriotism that promoted equality and racelessness, but the idea of racelessness was actually an effort to deracialize Afro-Cubans, specifically, and not white Cubans. This is important to highlight because it was Black Cubans who were consistently at risk of being eliminated from elements of social and political citizenship. Nevertheless, the desire to gain independence from Spain outweighed the immediate fear of Black dominance on the island and the third war of independence was a success largely because of the overwhelming number Black bodies who fought in the war. Ironically, Farber (2011) argues:

The contributions of black Cubans, who were about two-thirds of those fighting in the third war of independence, were ignored by the American occupation authorities as well as by the Cuban republic that followed it. Racial discrimination by white Americans and white Cubans continued unabated and provoked the formation of a black independent political party, the Partido Independiente de Color – PIC – in 1908. (p. 160-61)

This PIC was formed after the interference of the United States Government of Occupation from 1898-1902 that restricted suffrage for Blacks in Cuba (De la Fuente, 1998). Having their notable contributions ignored by both Cubans and Americans as racism was permitted to continue without political interruption was another example of how the subjugation of Blacks bled throughout the Diaspora. It was not restricted to or contained by the invisible borders of separate nations. Ironically, racism against Blacks was something that both the United States of America and Cuba, had in common. In fact, the United States has clearly continued to assert its own racialized agenda in Cuba over the years. Therefore, the formation of the PIC was a political response to the social aversion that Blacks were experiencing. In short, it's very creation served as a fierce objection to policies and treatment that perpetuated racial discrimination. Therefore, it was political organizing that was thought to threaten the utopian hope of national harmony first through race omission and then, racial integration. Integration was thought to erase racial disparity in social, political and economic landscapes, when in fact, it only served to camouflage the thinly veiled disparities they hoped would be eliminated. The greatest disconnect was that the social and political mobilization and organizing among Afro-Cubans, somehow encouraged tensions that would ultimately lead to a race uprising, when in fact, "the PIC also demanded black representation in the diplomatic services, the army, and the various branches of the government, but it did not argue for racial separation, and it endorsed the ideal of a racially integrated Cuban nation" (Farber, 2011, p. 161). Nevertheless, this fear was a heightened response to the race uprising that occurred in Haiti, which

is pointedly explained in C.L.R. James' *The Black Jacobins*. James (1963) clearly identifies the awakening among the formerly enslaved and oppressed Blacks under Toussaint L'Ouverture's leadership in the following:

At bottom the popular movement had acquired an immense self-confidence. The former slaves had defeated white colonists, Spaniards and British, and now they were free. They were aware of French Parliament, for it concerned them closely. Black men who had been slaves were deputies in the French Parliament, black men who had been slaves negotiated with the French and foreign governments. Black men who had been slaves filled the highest positions in the colony. There was Toussaint, the former slave, incredibly grand and powerful and incomparably the greatest man in Santo Domingo. There was no need to be ashamed of being black. The revolution had awakened them, had given them the possibility of achievement, confidence and pride. The psychological weakness, that feeling of inferiority with which the imperialists poison colonial peoples everywhere, these were gone. (p. 244).

I include C.L.R. James' *Black Jacobins* as a contextual reference for a few reasons. One is the obvious parallel I wish to draw between the Haitian Revolution in Haiti and Cuba's fear of a subsequent racial uprising in Cuba. However, it is what James, himself, does with the text that begs for deeper analysis. According to Bogue (2003), *The Black Jacobins* "became a framing text in Caribbean radical social theory...It is no accident that in the book's second edition {1963, one year after the colonies in the English Caribbean began to achieve their political independence}, James affixed an appendix titled 'From Toussaint L'Ouverture to Fidel Castro,' in a postcolonial effort to interpret the history of

the Caribbean on its own terms” (p. 80). By making that pointed amendment, James is recognizing the complex relationship between the post-independence period of a former colony and the challenges of the anticolonial leadership. Both L’Ouverture in Haiti and later on Castro, are renowned revolutionaries in the Caribbean, but their legacies cannot be interpreted the same way and through the same lens.

To be clear, it was the fear of Black Nationalism that was the perceived threat to Cuban national identity. Whether that fear was real or not, was not a consideration that informed policy. Therefore, members of PIC were considered racists because they were thought to prioritize their racial identity over their national identity. So, “in response to the creation of the PIC, the Cuban Congress approved in 1910 the ‘Morúa law’ banning political parties organized along racial criteria. The law was named after Martín Morúa Delgado, a black senator who argued that a black political organization would encourage the formation of exclusively white organizations and thus create a conflict with devastating consequences for the nation” (Farber, 2011, p. 161). In short, Black pride influenced Black empowerment that spurred Black political organizing, which was thought to result in Black Nationalism. Thus, it was this trajectory of thought that was seen in stark opposition to integration. It was viewed as a divisive means to drive a destructive wedge among the Cuban people and the sociopolitical goals that they hoped to achieve as a united front. Tragically, the refusal to permit Black political organizing resulted in what is described as “race war”- a stain on the history of race relations in Cuba. According to Farber (2011), when “the PIC took up arms as a protest against the ‘Morúa law,’ {and} the ‘race war’ of 1912 followed. This was not really a ‘race war’ but a massacre of black Cubans” (p. 161). The massacre of Black Cubans in response to their protests against

Morúa law escalated fears among whites that retaliation was imminent. This placed Afro-Cubans in a stagnant conundrum, because Black Cubans understood that political influence was tied to their representation in certain spaces. Thus, the key to access was for them to become more than socially visible and tolerated. Rather, true integration meant full inclusion as effective members of the nation- stakeholders who could influence and even change policy. Unfortunately, attempts at organizing-real or imagined-quickly resulted in suspicion and charges that Blacks were preparing to avenge the killings of 1912 and initiate a new racial war (Farber, 2011). Accordingly, political organizing among Blacks was perceived as an ominous threat to white supremacy, even though the Communist party did attempt to include Black representation among their ranks. Still, in the Black community as a whole, “hundreds of local branches of the black self-help social clubs (*sociedades de color*) constituted by far the principal form of black self-organization” (Farber, 2011, p. 162).

The Black Experience Prior to the Cuban Revolution

In order to understand the current social movement that seeks to address the need for anti-race discrimination in post-revolutionary contemporary Cuba, one must consider if and how the treatment of Afro-Cubans evolved pre and post-revolution. One may argue that a great deal of progress was made in revising social discrimination practices that permitted systemic racism to impact the socioeconomic access that Blacks had to resources in Cuba. This discrimination included access to housing and jobs for Blacks. For example, Farber explains (2011):

White landlords often refused to rent houses and apartments to blacks, and many hotels did not allow blacks to register as guests. Blacks were also unwelcome at

the most popular nightclubs. A big public scandal erupted when the American/French star Joséphine Baker was barred from the famous Hotel Nacional in the early fifties and suffered a similar fate at the equally famous Tropicana nightclub. Racially exclusive private social clubs monopolized access to the most desirable beaches in the capital. (p. 163)

Though I stayed in *casas particulares* (almost exclusively white privately owned homes that provide bed and breakfast lodging to guests) during my extended stays in Cuba, it is worth noting that in an effort to engage in my own very personal form of protest, I, a Black woman, chose to frequent and eat regularly at the Hotel Nacional in La Havana. My recurrent presence and patronage alone in a space that was a way for me physically confront the racist legacy that was left behind. It was hollow victory, however, because over the course of two weeks, I only spotted three other Black faces that I could assume were guests. The only others were Afro-Cubans in invisible positions of service as door holders or hidden away below the ground floor in the snack parlor as short order cooks. Currently, one area of pride for Cuba is its high literacy rate and the very intentional efforts to create an almost completely literate and educated society, which it has arguably achieved. This bragging right was the result of the literacy campaign imposed by Castro's Revolution. However, it did not begin that way. Prior to the revolution, the way in which racism covertly impacted education was in the representation of whom had access to what was considered elite education. Though public schools were racially integrated at all levels, "the very important private schools, whether secular or religious, were overwhelmingly if not exclusively white" (Farber, 2011, p. 163). This is arguably a question

of access and class, both of which are centrally influenced by racial membership. However, it was one of the last reforms of the 26th of July Movement that nationalized private education after the 1960s. This allowed Afro-Cubans access that could also influence their ability to socially mobilize in class and economic standing.

Black Cubans after the Revolutionary Victory

The Revolution brought with it hope for real change in Cuba for Afro-Cubans. That was a degree of promise that the new leadership would deliver on a new Cuba with full inclusion of its Afro-Cuban population in a way that the nation had never done. Rather than continue with the passive approach of silence and inaction on racial discrimination, some political groups, most notably the Communists, “proclaimed the need for an official policy against discrimination and for concrete measures to make sure the blacks had access to all jobs – including those in the armed forces and all government institutions, including the diplomatic service” (Farber, 2011, p. 168). To respond to this pressure, Castro delivered a speech that centered on race in March of 1959 where he actually criticized racism, named two forms of discrimination against Afro-Cubans involving cultural center access and more importantly job discrimination. So, Castro publicly stated that the revolution had to end the racial discrimination affecting employment opportunities for Afro-Cubans (Farber, 2011).

Fidel Castro was clearly in conflict with his own revolutionary philosophy regarding the Cuban race conundrum, and oftentimes, presented a rather schizophrenic discourse on the matter. For example, “he contended that a law against discrimination was unnecessary, and instead he proposed a campaign condemning public manifestation of

racism” (Farber, 2011, p. 169). Whether naive or strategically planned, Castro was reluctant to impose mandates around race and relied on the acquiescence of the Cuban people, particularly the white Cubans, for a social, political, and cultural shift around racism. Historically, this has never been a reliable practice, as those with power and control are resistant to relenting their power and supremacy for the greater good of equality, equity, and access. Farber (2011) describes Castro’s incongruence as, on one hand, proclaiming universal equality and insisting that racial discrimination was:

Socially and morally wrong, particularly in the area of employment, and strongly criticized those who called themselves Christian, educated, or revolutionary while being racist. At the same time, he tried to reassure white Cubans that private and personal spaces would be respected and that change in these areas would be gradual, accomplished through the color-blind education of new generations of Cubans (p. 170).

Clearly, Castro felt a need to conciliate the anxieties that whites had about losing their social privileges and power, by absolving whites of their active responsibility to be socially inclusive. Even more, they were expected to abhor racism in public spheres, but not expected to be inconvenienced by social inclusion with Blacks in their private spaces. For example, “Castro announced that access to all beaches would be desegregated, including the very desirable resort areas such as Varadero. However...Private buildings, restaurants, and other facilities by the sea would remain available only to members” (Farber, 2011, p. 169). The members were white Cubans, of course. Thus, Castro would assert something denouncing racism and then concede to appease white Cubans. This was often done with codified language that was only thinly veiled as equalizing the discriminatory

practices it said it would eliminate. For instance, “Castro assured the members of private clubs that their “privacy” would be respected. The same gradual approach was followed regarding segregated public parks in various provincial cities. Instead of facing racist practices head on, the authorities rebuilt those parks and eliminated the layouts that had served racial segregation in the past” (Farber, 2011, p. 169).

Respectability politics were seen as a way to placate racial tensions between Afro-Cubans and whites by Castro, yet the burden of yielding was regularly placed on Blacks at their own expense. So much, in fact, that Castro, “continued to oppose the adoption of laws against racial discrimination and asked blacks to be more ‘respectful’ than ever before and not to ‘give excuses’ to those opposed to the revolution’s battles for racial integration” (Farber, 2011, p. 170). In truth, explicitly denouncing racism had grave consequences for Castro among whites. When he attempted to do so during a speech on March 22, 1959, that could be considered mildly aggressive toward racism and discriminatory practices, the backlash was so fierce that it was labeled as “Negrophobia” by René Depestre, a black Haitian writer who resided in Cuba. it was a major policy statement forthrightly opposing racism and as such a fundamental departure from the norm of racial silence.” (Farber, 2011, p. 169).

Silence around condemning racism on the public front for revolutionary leaders, did not deter or diminish the systemically racist social practices from occurring and consequently having a dramatic impact on Afro-Cubans. The failures of the Revolution in racial equality advancement was also clear in housing. “Throughout the revolutionary period, Afro-Cubans suffered far more than whites from poor housing conditions. This situation be-

came more acute during the Special Period” when they found themselves more segregated, living in the margins (Farber, 2011, p. 177). This remains true even today, with a disproportionate amount of Blacks represented in environments with housing comparable to the ghettos in the United States of America.

In order to truly understand the context of race in Cuba, we must consider this historical trajectory. After the Revolution of 1959 and the Special Period- one can note that with the exception of housing, which brought no advances to Afro-Cubans, the marginal progress that each of those periods seemed to bring brought Afro-Cubans, racism in Cuba was still an issue that could not be publically challenged. Zurbano (2013) emphasizes this with the following:

In the last twenty years black Cubans have suffered a reversal or paralysis of the great social mobility that propelled them from 1959 to 1989. Paradoxically, during the same period, books and official discourse declared the end of racism in Cuba. To deny the racial utopia was tantamount to committing a counterrevolutionary act, so denouncing racism has been extremely difficult, but, through a certain cultural and political activism, there has been public acknowledgement of the problem and racism has officially been recognized. I think that to abandon the anti-racist struggle, especially against what I call neo-racism (less overt forms of racial exclusion), would be politically disingenuous with nefarious future consequences (p. 71-72).

The Intersectional Triple Dagger: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Cuba

As a possessor of two or more marginalized identities, one assumes a higher risk of sociopolitical marginalization. This is certainly true of the intersectional experience of

Black lesbians in Cuba who have been pushed further into the margins. Again, intersectionality looks most pointedly at race and gender with Black and Female identities as the most marginalized. Afro-Cuban lesbians are at the very center of that identity crux, which is a problem I wish to highlight. This is largely due to the aforementioned raceless ideology that is pervasive in Cuban nationality discourse and the way that race categories are designed. Saunders (2009) explains this with specific relation to the Black lesbian visibility challenge in Cuba with the following:

Cuba's black lesbians face an intense form of social isolation resulting from Cuba's institutional discourse of national racelessness; the idealization of "la Mulata," which in Cuba's three-tier racial system supports an ideology of racelessness or racial inclusion that makes it difficult for black women to develop an anti-racist discourse that addresses their experiences in the post-revolutionary nation; the informal state prohibition on like-minded people (namely lesbians) to independently organize, socialize, or work for social change; and the precarious situation in which black women find themselves after Cuba's 1990s economic crisis... these reasons limit the ability of black women, including black lesbians, to live as autonomous, financially independent subjects. (p. 170)

Highlighting this struggle as their lived experience in their art was the very mission of Las Krudas, a transnationally popular lesbian hip-hop group committed to using their art, specifically hip-hop, the most underground and transgressive method of disruption, to bring forth a message of visibility and heightened consciousness.

African-American and Afro-Cuban Parallels

It is important to emphasize that this work is not intended to impose an African-American perspective on the Black experience of Afro-Cubans. Certainly, there is some overlap in the history through the slave trade and contemporary parallels can be made among the shared experiences as a consequence of the architecture of racial politics in each country. With regard to race and race relations, one of the likenesses shared by both the United States and Cuba is the aversion of the state to recognize that there is a pervasive anti-Black sentiment that operates beyond the individual and personal, and yet functions as a routinely systemic part of the society. In the case of the United States, this is best exemplified in its failure to address systemic issues that place a disproportionate amount of Blacks in incarceration and on death row through hypercriminalization as a consequence of race. The same can be said of Black youth in Cuba, who “are far more likely, as in the United States to be subjected to police harassment and arrest” (Farber, 2011, p. 177-78). Nevertheless, in the U.S., in addition to the commonplace audio and videorecorded, unprovoked state sanctioned execution of Black men and women citizens by responding law enforcement, without one conviction, the growing white-supremacist demonstrations and rhetoric being used now more than ever in recent years to align certain groups in the population with clear political allyship, and countless other examples. The U.S. responds simply by not responding. Unlike Cuba, who’s approach though far less violent, is equally disconcerting, which is to believe that capitalism is to blame and with time, the historical residuals of racism which continued to mount well-into Special Period and nineties, will somehow passively fall away with time- much like the adage of not poking a sleeping bear. Nonetheless, evidence remains that like the U.S., for many

years blacks and mulattos in Cuba “have been disproportionately represented in the prison population, which, as of 2008, was the fifth highest in the world on a per capita basis” (Farber, 2011, p. 174). Castro did formally denounce racism as part of the revolutionary discourse, while exalting national identity, but as previously mentioned, “racial prejudice continued to exist after revolutionary victory... not because it was, as the revolutionary leaders maintained, a remnant or leftover from the capitalist past. Instead, prejudices fed on the continuing reality of black powerlessness, disadvantage, and subordination in many areas of life” (Farber, 2011, p. 179).

In the public domain, this rhetoric is laden with pacifying apologies that focus on the race reforms that the revolution brought forth, while simultaneously scolding those who which to highlight racism on the island as anti-nationalist agitators. Farber (2011) furthers this point with the following explanation:

When confronted with the many expressions of racism in postrevolutionary Cuba, spokespersons and apologists for the regime have historically claimed that these are leftovers or remnants of the capitalist past that will fade with the passage of time. This type of explanation tends to emphasize the role of individual prejudice and minimize the role of ongoing institutional discrimination on the island. (p. 178)

It also allows institutions and macrosystems to evade responsibility by removing all liability for propagating these practices, however furtive they may be. However, there are some key differences, which Farber (2011) articulates here:

A critical aspect of any possible development on the racial front in Cuba is black consciousness and the direction in which it may be evolving. Historically, the significantly lower degree of physical racial segregation and the greater commonality of conditions between white and black Cuban workers, peasants, and the poor helped to produce a different type of racial consciousness from that in the United States. (p. 182-83)

Much of the global world placed a great deal of responsibility and hope on the election of the first Black President in the United States as a central example of how race relations in the United States had progressed at the most influential level- by electing a biracial, though Black identifying man as the manager of the largest macrosystem in the world. Many, especially liberals, wanted desperately to believe that the United States had become a post-racial society and Obama's election was indicative of that progress. Ironically, the post-racial rhetoric of the Obama election mirrored the deracialization, raceless rhetoric of post-Revolutionary Cuba. The United States, even with the progress made during the Obama administration, continues to attempt to influence the narrative of race relations in Cuba. A contemporary example is the controversy surrounding Cuban writer and activist, Roberto Zurbano's Op-Ed in the New York Times. There were a lot of Cubans took issue with the title, which betrayed the raceless unity of the country by implying inequality in the title. Many attacked Zurbano as having an anti-Cuban agenda and used a widely circulated American newspaper to spout propaganda against the progress of the Revolution. Jones (2013) describes criticism from this perspective in the following:

True to the traditional flurry of news, opinions, comments and inferences involving every issue related to the fifty-year-old political, economical and social confrontation between the United States and Cuba, a new yet flurry of invective analysis, extrapolations and conclusions followed Roberto Zurbano's essay in *The New York Times* on March 23, 2013.

The most vocal opponents of this article focused their attention solely on its inflammatory title, "For Blacks in Cuba, the Revolution Hasn't Begun," which was quite likely chosen by *The New York Times*' editorial board.

Others opted not to focus on the facts, objectivity or the urgent need of the Cuban government to take a hard look at the arguments, shortcomings or failures described in the essay, from which criteria, proposals and solutions could be extracted (p. 73).

Nevertheless, the controversy around Zurbano's article did not only reside on that one side of the argument. The article also resonated with critics of the Cuban government, many of whom were Cubans currently living in the United States, specifically in Florida where their families had immigrated during or soon thereafter, the unrest of the Revolution of 1959 under the leadership of Fidel Castro. Jones (2013) describes them as, "passionate, staunch detractors of Cuba (who) preferred to turn this article into an anti-Cuba denunciation and an instigation of racial divisions bent on undermining the government" (p. 73).

Nevertheless, I feel that these distinctions and similarities can be best honored and most authentically described through the art of storytelling. Storytelling can help eliminate the broad brushstroke in the sole, objective application of theory. By storytelling,

counter narratives are interrupted and preconceived notions can no longer be the sole basis for perception. After all, these stories are from individuals who are actively living their reality and telling their own stories, “because the human condition is largely a narrative condition. Storytelling is the means by which we represent our experiences to ourselves to others...” (Bochner & Riggs, 2014, p. 4). Thus, through their stories, they become immediately visible in a social, cultural, and political way. This form of data collection embodies the tenets of critical theory that suggests “critical and liberating dialogue, which presupposes action, must be carried on with the oppressed at whatever the stage of their struggle for liberation. The content of that dialogue can and should vary in accordance with historical conditions at the level at which the oppressed perceive reality” (Freire, 2000, p.65). Storytelling permits that dialogical exchange, and is thus, a liberating act in itself.

My interest in the Afro Cuban experience is not one of isolation. In recent years, there seems to be a paradigm shift among African-Americans and how they perceive race relations between Afro Cubans and white Cubans. In the past, African Americans have closely aligned themselves with Fidel Castro’s politics against the capitalist, modern colonialist ideology and discourse that is often associated with the United States as a Western superpower. It is believed that “traditionally, African Americans have sided with the Castro regime and unilaterally condemned the United States, which, in the past, explicitly sought to topple the Cuban government” (Moore, 2010, p. 458), but for the first time, sixty high profile African-Americans have gone on record to condemn the racial climate in Cuba. This is “the first time that U.S. blacks, historically supportive of the Castro government, criticized the island's civil rights record and supported Afro-Cuban dissidents”

(Moore, 2010, p. 458). In fact, this recent attitudinal and political shift, as voiced by some very prominent African-Americans, is believed to be the result of growing frustrations among African-Americans of what is perceived to be Fidel's continued oppressive inaction to support equity and access to a very visible population of Blacks in Cuba and subsequently, sequester the civil rights movement in Cuba. In fact, during the latter part of the twentieth century, highlighting experiences of racial discrimination or perceptions of racism was viewed as being nationally divisive. The African American political scientist Mark Q. Sawyer illuminates this point by describing a snubbing incident that took place in 1967 (Farber, 2011). When some significant Black Cubans were not invited to the World Culturally Congress in Havana, a group of them approached the revolutionary authorities to raise issues of concern surrounding Afro-Cubans. "Cuban minister José Llanusa Gobels responded by calling these black leaders 'seditious' and stated that the revolution would not allow activities that would divide the people along racial lines" (Farber, 2011, p. 180). This type of response is problematic for two reasons that I'll explain here. One of which is because when individuals made an effort to reveal experiences of racial discrimination or incidents of racism in Cuba, they were considered unpatriotic or accused of being anti-Cuban, which had grave consequences with the state. The second reason was because in doing so, it sought to criminalize the very victims of racial circumstance, which deterred further reporting and ultimately suppressed the prospect of change toward the full inclusion and liberation for Black Cubans.

Furthermore, not all outside inquiry and influence from Black activists and African-Americans in the United States were welcomed by Cuban politicians, particularly because Cuba, like many Latin American countries with regard to race relations, fancied

themselves more progressive and felt that their Blacks were satiated by their national identify as a primary consideration. So, in 1971, when the Black Power Movement activated in Cuba after drawing “inspiration and sustenance from the work and activities of Frantz Fanon and the Black Power movement in the United States...The government handled this group with a mixture of co-optation—rewarding some with government positions—and repression, jailing some and exiling others” (Farber, 2011, p. 180).

Additionally, Moore (2010) credits:

Changing demographics in America and the election of a black U.S. president seem to have spurred African-American curiosity about the fate of Afro-Latinos south of the border. Through that process, many U.S. blacks have realized that Castro, once admired for thumbing his nose at America, is now an 82-year-old dictator struggling to prolong five decades of absolute power through terror and policies that deepen racial inequalities in Cuba. (p. 459)

Whether or not race and how race identity impact experiences globally, within the African diaspora, we have seen a resurgence in interest and action that is being attributed to the election of a Black U.S. President, I cannot argue. However, I will posit, that perhaps, that interest and action was always there- more covert and possibly more tribally explored within the intracommunal spaces of shared identity. Nevertheless, it is the ability to document it and distribute those experiences in a transnational way through technology and art that have perhaps made that social action more visible to others- intercommunally.

Pan-African Art, Identity and Social Movements

“The arts...feed the spirit...feed the soul...educate in areas that books don’t”-Betye Saar

People of conscience and waking consciousness are not disparate across borders- however those borders present or manifest. Whether it is with race, sexual orientation, gender identity, national identity, or the vast spectrum of social economic status, borders can feel real- rigid yet pervasive, concrete yet expansive.

Though socially constructed and even structurally imposed, I believe there to be a desire to connect across those borders- a desire to better understand oneself vis-à-vis the racial and ethnic origins and intersecting histories that make individuals who they are whilst existing within a broader community.

Exploring this research question with individuals throughout the Afro-Latinx African Diaspora insists that my literature must recognize that the term Latinx, which I use intentionally to be inclusive of all gender expression and more encompassing of language, including Spanish, Portuguese and various indigenous languages spoken in these communities. Specifically, even above language, I aim to be racially inclusive to identify the common struggle throughout the diaspora as it relates to race, while recognizing the historical complexities at play when inserting Blackness into Latinx identity in the United States, Caribbean, and Latin America. Saunders (2016) addresses this conundrum with the following explanation:

Discourses concerning racialization in the U.S. context affect who gets classified as Latinx and who represents ‘international’ or ‘global’ voices. That is, an important debate occurring within U.S. Latinx studies is how the internal racial hierarchies within U.S. American communities are also rendered invisible by larger

U.S. American discourses concerning Latinidad, and how Latinxs conceptualize Latinidad. Scholars such as Rivera (2003) and Negrón-Muntaner (2008) have argued, Blacktinxs and/or the visible corporeality of Blackness among Latinxs causes anxiety in a context where Blackness and Latinxness are understood as separate racial categories. This is compounded by the anti-Black racism that is also foundational to social structures in Hispano-Lusophone countries where upon the arrival in the U.S., immigrants from Hispano-Lusophone countries are classified and read as Latinx, unless they look ‘Black.’ The result is a light-skinned bias in terms of who speaks, a light-skinned bias that results in the invisibility of Black Latinxs, and the continuation of anti-Black racism within Latinx communities. (p. 187)

In short, it is important to note that even within the all-embracing community of People of Color, and specifically Black and Latinx communities, the two are can still be considered mutually exclusive with unique and even competing experiences, which can lend to internalized oppression with the oppressed becoming the oppressor in some instances. This limited approach, which I criticize, can negatively influence how racialized experiences are understood by inserting varying markers of racial discrimination and racism into social experiences. Colorism is an example of this and it is addressed in what Saunders previously described as “light-skinned bias.” In doing this, even community members can be culpable of proliferating intra-racism within their respective communities, largely because of how they have been socialized to understand the privileges that accompany that which is antithetical to Blackness. Therefore, I posit that an intersectional approach applied to understanding the marginalization and disenfranchisement of Afro-

Cubans and the way in which they socially activate within their communities to impact change, can be used in broader, global contexts to effectively discontinue to the notion that progress and prosperity can only be achieved through the deracialization and erasure of Blackness.

In addition to race and the ways in which it is categorized, I had to also consider language and its relation to geographical space within the African Diaspora. As such, the literature review was not exclusive to countries whose official language is Spanish. Brazil has a demographic constitution of Afro-Brazilians who identify as Black. One of the challenges of activism through traditional political engagement as a means to affect social change, is the way in which it can be perceived or erroneously re-messed. For example, in Brazil, “Afro-Brazilian activists and other supporters of affirmative action are facing the charge that affirmative action is an unwanted political import that will upset Brazil’s harmonious race relations” (Paschel & Sawyer, 2008, p. 204). In the case of Brazil, the accusation that affirmative action as a policy is a foreign import, seeks to diminish one’s allegiance to their national identity, which can create dissonance for activists involved and ultimately, create a divisive culture within community and country, at large. It aims to employ notions of either/ or and us vs. them, which means that those who are the racial and national intersection may feel fractured, as a result. However, in Perry’s (2016) analysis of Black women’s activism in Brazil, she notes the following:

Black Brazilian agency, particularly women’s very own understandings of race and articulations of anti-racism politics. The complex racial politics of identification are linked to gender and class consciousness and identification as blacks, women, and poor people...Black women who live in the very real material world

of the intersections of gendered, racial, and class inequalities hardly debate the need for radical social change in Brazil, nor are they passively waiting for that change to take place. (Perry, 2016, p. 106)

Though Perry (2016) also asserts that “scholars of feminist and black movements, and social movement in general, still need to pay attention to neighborhood activism throughout Brazilian cities,” this proposition can certainly be applied to other communities that engender Afro-Latinx activism.

Afro-Latinx, Afro-Brazilian, Afro-Cuban, African-American, etc., all share concurrent applications of Blackness per the African Diaspora, but the hyphenated, subsequent identifier attributes a sense of tribal belonging to a certain ethnic or national community. Identity is uniquely individual, involving an intrapersonal understanding of self, while simultaneously communal, involving an interpersonal expression of self within a group or among others. Beyond the exploration of self-identity, which can be both an emotionally taxing and a strangely romantic process, there is also the connection of shared struggles and pain that tether us to one another. It, too, leaves an indelible footprint across generations and borders that can persist with a longing for stronger understanding of how those elsewhere who are "othered " and living in the margins, refute that designation through social action and transformative processes, both of which can emancipate in body or spirit. This sense of transnational community as it relates to the pan-African experience is the result of an emergence of both shared identity and group consciousness. Gurin et al. (1980) distinguishes this manifestation by defining each of those two terms in this unique experience as, “identification refers to the awareness of having ideas, feelings, and interests similar to others who share the same stratum characteristics.

Consciousness refers to a set of political beliefs and action orientations arising out of this awareness of similarity” (p. 30).

Yet, currently within Cuba, I purport that the growing Black consciousness among Afro-Cuban artists who choose to use their art as a political mechanism that can critique the social condition of Blacks in Cuba with the hopes to catalyze change, are able to do so because they feel a sense of shared experience and community within the stratum (of other Blacks in Cuba), making it a collective effort to highlight the critical as a collective experience. Critical thought is at the crux of this exchange, particularly critical “ethnic consciousness” (Lewis, 1990), and more specifically, Black consciousness, which has shaped movements around art and artistic expression. Though still somewhat suppressed, “artistic exhibitions, such as the 1997 *Queloides I* exposition, and books and documentaries have also contributed to the creation of a more open climate concerning the discussion of racial questions. (Farber, 2011, p. 181), and this is an arguable correlation to the growing consciousness among Afro-Cuban art activists.

Art and the ways in which we engage it can serve as a conduit for transcending those borders and foment the very connections that can incite change, however personal or uniquely individual within a broader, collective space. Reed (2005) explains the power of transcendence within self *and* the collective as part of a broader social movement in the following:

The word transcendence is usually used to describe something beyond mere politics. But in the movement, transcendence of self was also discovery of self.

Gaining a sense of ‘somebodiness’ that was so crucially a part of the movement’s

work often came paradoxically when the self was given up to a larger whole, a collective spirit. (p. 33)

Again, by recognizing that an individual's process of self-discovery can affirm one's identity within a collective body, Reed purports that movements can thus, catalyze that transcendental exchange. With a nod to the critical, Nato Thompson (2015) notes "we often do not feel the effects of the culture industry because we are also its sacred product. While we are free to critique the conditions of cultural capitalism, we must nonetheless sleep, work, play, and dream in the mystifying world it has built" (p. 4). Nevertheless, this research does not reside in the polemic; it does not seek to solely criticize capitalism or the power that the hegemony holds in our social constructions around identity. Rather, it moves beyond that in an effort to highlight the transgressive nature of art when those who create or experience it with their own subjectivities, are activated, animated, and empowered.

Specifically, it will explore how racial/ethnic, gender, and sexual identifications of the individual on the most personal level can give voice to difference and heterogeneity within the collective (Mesch, 2013, p. 2). It is this collective identity that has the power to spur collective action, "even as it also brings personal transformation" (Reed, 2005, p. 33). This is key when addressing the liberation of those living in the margins. Thus, this work will acknowledge the tenets of critical theory that suggests "critical and liberating dialogue, which presupposes action, must be carried on with the oppressed at whatever the stage of their struggle for liberation.

The content of that dialogue can and should vary in accordance with historical conditions at the level at which the oppressed perceive reality” (Freire, 2000, p. 65). Reality is tethered to ideology. “The visual art and philosophy that grew around the US civil-rights movement arguably also connected with the main ideology behind independence in Africa, namely pan-Africanism and the notion of Negritude” (Mesch, 2015, p. 54). Art, because it is political in nature, permits that dialogical exchange, whether intrapersonally or interpersonally, and thus, through critical reflection, dialectical and reflexive thinking, can be an intentionally liberating act that transcends borders to make global connections and form community. Community of which “became a common designation, a notion that understands solidarity as the proximity of other individuals- either in sharing a particular (personal) identity, or in terms of co-existing in actual physical spaces or urban centers” (Mesch, 2013, p. 7). Thus, I posit that Afro-Cuban art activists are an identity-based political collective committed to social action for liberation.

The Art and Identity Connection

Engaging art in whatever form or medium has the ability to incite critical reflection within us that can be the catalyst for emancipatory transformation, even when we ourselves are not the subjects. Harper (2002) explains this possibility by illustrating, “images may connect an individual to experiences or eras even if the images do not reflect the research subjects’ actual lives” (p. 13). In this way, art has the ability to foster consciousness in the most personal, metaphysical way, simply through the connection of experience, however distant or removed from immediate experience that connection may be to the artwork itself. Greene (1995) emphasizes this point in the following:

Participatory involvement with the many forms of art does enable us, at the very least, to see more in our experience, to hear more on normally unheard frequencies, to become conscious of what daily routines, habits, and conventions have obscured. (p. 379)

With regard to the participants whose stories I capture and art activism I document, my analysis must be appropriately contextualized alongside the “collective identity construction processes, through intersectionality and collection action frames, in order to illustrate the ways that race, gender, and sexuality are engaged...” (Okechukwu, 2014, p. 74). In short, through these stories shared by participants, I endeavor to reconcile identity politics with intersectionality to understand how coalition politics manifest and are subsequently expressed in art activism. I can suppose as a result of what the literature has contributed to my analysis thus far, that the complexity of multiple identity has triggered a growing consciousness around intersectional thinking and praxis that undergirds their approach to social transformation (Perry, 2016).

The relational can be transformational and that is not always clearly understood as logical or linear in the way it produces an effect. Art activism is exploring the possibility of critical consciousness between the affect (the emotive, sentient response) and the effect. Within that critically conscious space, what subsequent action (effect) will occur as a result of the engagement is sometimes planned and controlled and at other times, it is organic, uncensored, and seemingly irrational. In fact, “the arts often provide a safe haven for projects that escape basic notions of common sense- that are, by design, irrational, confusing, opaque, non-literal, open-ended, poetic, and absurd. This embrace of the obscure is often liberating for the artists themselves,” (Thompson, 2015, p. 40). And

what of the liberation process for the viewers who engage art? How can ambiguity aid in the liberation process for the viewer? Art has power in its ambiguity because it allows for personal meaning production. The policing parameters and limiting criteria for what is socially and politically deemed as high-art and how to experience it can be discarded. Thompson (2015) explains the benefit of ambiguity for the viewer in the following: “In an ambiguous cultural intervention, the inability for a viewer to pin down a work’s intentions is the very thing that makes the dynamic significant. As we become increasingly aware of the coercive power of language, open-ended forms of meaning production become all the more rare and interesting” (p.48).

Ambiguity in art allows for the rejection of coercive powers that propagate oppressive ideologies while allowing the collective identity and collective action of a movement to transcend potentially divisive and subsequently oppressive structures (e.g. socioeconomic status, educational levels, and class) within a broader group. This was the case in the role of song in the Civil Rights Movement. Reed (2005) expresses this as evident by reminding us that:

Situations varied so much from state to state, county to county, and between rural and urban black communities, not to mention the varied class, gender, sexual, and educational backgrounds that further complicated organizing. A single approach to ideology and struggle would most certainly have failed to create the solidarity necessary to succeed. Given this situation, songs were uniquely suited as organizing tools. As we saw, sometimes people would just come for the music, and then find themselves drawn into the fray before they knew it. Movement ideas could

be conveyed to the illiterate and to the literate who were deeply rooted in an oral tradition. (p. 37)

Thus, the art itself is not only central to collective action, but becomes the overarching site.

Nevertheless, community and how it develops is key to collective action; yet, it begins with a sense of how self-identity is defined. Race was central to that understanding around identity, which Mesch (2013) explains here:

Race or ethnicity became central to the way individuals thought about their identity. Of course, ethnic identity was frequently tied to modern-era migrations, or to the diasporas generated by colonialism, the largest of which was the forced migration of millions of Africans to the New World and North America as part of the slave trade. The ethnic consciousness encouraged by the civil rights movement, along with the practice of segregation- of concentrating and limiting certain ethnic populations to specific areas and neighborhoods of urban centers- heightened the African American population's understandings of one's place within a new shared-ethnicity collective. (p. 7)

Mesch outlines the historical impact of the Slave trade throughout the Diaspora on the way in which individuals of African heritage developed a sense of shared identity. Though, Mesch credits the Civil Rights Movement as key in this development of identity consciousness, it is most important to recognize that the influence of the Civil Rights Movement in the development of identity consciousness was not limited to the United States of America. After all, "the African Diaspora, a product of the slave trade and consequence of colonialist expansion during the early modern period, can especially be

tracked across the countries of the so-called ‘new world’ of the Americas and the Caribbean” (Mesch, 2015, p. 54).

As colonialism was widespread throughout the Americas and beyond, “it is often said that a new form of political engagement based on personal identity grew from the atmosphere of post-colonialism and protest” (Mesch, 2013, p. 7). Specifically, the idea of nationhood became fragmented after the wide rejection of colonialism in the 1960s resulting in a change in the way in which identity was based- more on personal traits and less on social and economic class (Mesch, 2013, p. 7). Thus, within the space of movements, “this call for engagement was also an appeal for solidarity that could be established by means of shared aspects of personal identity. For the first time, political engagement came to be understood... {as} ‘the personal is the political’” (Mesch, 2013, p. 7).

Reed (2005) furthers this claim to extend the idea that “the political and the cultural can be collapsed into one by movements in moments of active struggle” (p. 67). Moreover, Reed (2005) contends black power as an art form in and of itself. In fact, he interprets the “drama” of the Black Panther party as theater with a message that “is two-fold: first, that the cultural form called drama can be a vital political tool; second that for the cultural to be truly effective politically, it must remain connected to social movement groups with a clear, explicit agenda for structural economic and political change” (p. 67). So, while art and in this case, the art of drama, can engage dissent or serve as a form of protest/ resistance, the social movement with which it aligns must identify “with the collective identity of the movement evolved through many individuals contributing to its creation” (Reed, 2005, p. 33).

Conceptualizing identity coalitionally allows us to overcome some of the pitfalls of political alliances organized on the premise of homogeneous or essential identities. For one, the integration of all aspects of our individual identities is crucial to achieving the internal congruence missing in one-dimensional political movements. Too often we are asked to subordinate one or more aspects of our identities to that which a single lens analysis privileges as significant. But in doing so, we are excluding a potential coalition with all those who share the repressed or excluded identities— not to mention betraying the possibility of congruency among the differing aspects of ourselves. This is why the term intersectionality is a critical term used to describe both the incongruence and multiplicitous marginalization that one can experience as a result of the confluence of their marginalized identities.

Maxine Greene's (1992) understanding of multiculturalism in society states that, "cultural background surely plays a part in shaping identity, but it does not determine identity. It may well create differences that must be honored or occasion styles and orientations that must be understood. It may give rise to tastes, values, and even prejudices that must be taken into account (p. 256). Intersectionality recognizes the various complexities that work in concert to determine our identity and our subsequent experiences of marginalization in a way that multiculturalism does not. These complexities and the resulting experiences are often tethered to historical, social, and political influences.

The socio-historical contexts that inform identity construction and perception are underscored by how individuals with multiple intersections of racial/ ethnic identities are perceived in the sociopolitical spaces that they occupy. Such was the case in Cuba when "interracial relations were encouraged during the years of colonization starting as far

back as 1503 when Isabel ‘the Catholic’ encouraged miscegenation with a special decree and limited access of white women to the colonies” (Camnitzer, 1994, p.35). Even more than the racial intersectionality, was the oppression of native religious identities that slaves possessed prior to the slave trade. Once slaves arrived in Cuba, they were converted to Christianity (Camnitzer, 1994), forced to abandon that part of their original identity or rather, have it reconstructed for them by their oppressors.

This fragmentation of identity was confounded by further sociological and economic inequalities/ inequities as a result of slavery and exploitative labor. Camnitzer explains that “manual activities were performed primarily by blacks, including for a long time the arts and crafts. Thus, a great deal of the art destroyed by some religious clergy in favor of “divine order and neoclassic aesthetic was made by blacks” (Camnitzer, 1994, p. 37). Moreover, such fragmentation of identity and the systemic oppression experienced as a result of living with the constancy of that marginalization can impart social, emotional dissonance that without reconciliation and positive affirmation could be passed down and continued for generations becoming a part of a society’s notorious legacy. Thus, there is a call to action to interrupt this possibility and artists are answering this call. In fact, “artists are making a forceful statement about the persistence of racism in Cuba, which has resurfaced due to the difficult economic situation there. The artists...challenge us to let go of our assumptions and look at racism head on” (De la Fuente, 2010, p. 6).

A great deal of research resides in the critical, revealing and illuminating the oppressive structures in place for many Afro-Latino/as. Some research and scholarship focuses on whether or not Afro-Latino/as are visible or even recognized as a racial group

within their respective countries. This is a political point of contention because it questions and criticizes the lack of official recognition of both ethnic and racial identities around Blackness and the subsequent racist structural norms that influence racial inequalities or racist institutional practices as a result of that invisibility or more accurately, erasure by white-washing. This caveat is explained by Paschel and Sawyer (2008) in the following:

The empirical reality is that people who come from a range of different ‘racial’ or ethnic groups identify ethno-racially for political, social, and economic reasons. That is, if we think about Blackness as a social and political category rather than as a biological construct, it is capacious enough to include a wide range of people. Even those who may be defined by some as ‘racially mixed’ might choose to identify as ‘Black.’ (p. 198)

Or not.

Conversely,
...countries pursued ideologies of ‘whitening’ and have also emphasized racial mixture or mestizaje rather than recognizing the existence or contribution of black populations. In response to this, the black(s) have had to emphasize their cultural and racial distinctiveness and unique history by advancing the concept of being Afro-Latino...rather than references to colour that are often seen as apolitical and chromatic or allowing national identity to subsume their unique experience of enslavement and racial discrimination. This shift has contributed to growing political mobilization... (Hanchard and Sawyer, 2010, p. 469).

The critical application rests with recognizing that there is a benefactor in these social constructs- those who have historically manipulated power and suppressed and colonized others in order to propagate their norms as an authority.

There is a responsibility in this consciousness; being aware simply isn't enough. Additionally, the critical application allows us to see that there is a need for reform because of this complex and extensive socio-cultural history. Who would say that because we are now aware, we should be intentional about rejecting that discourse and shift thinking so that we can self-author and develop our own unique discourse. In that, there is agency- the power and authority that exists on an individual level but can certainly translate to a social and even more global level. Therefore, by transgressing this critical framework we can move the research to exploring the sites of emancipation and empowerment as Black social movements that are already occurring within those communities in various art forms, and thus, are catalysts for social change. In fact, Mesch (2015) points out that:

In order to render politics visible, or the relations and concerns of social groups at a particular moment, many artists make use of the quick legibility of illusionism or the traditional text-and-image combinations used in propaganda. But this wasn't always the case; by the 1960ss artists had already begun to expand the entire field of mediums beyond those of painting and sculpture- in performance, the ready-made, installation, site-based artworks and film, conceptual art. (p. 9)

Therefore, this research wishes to further an understanding of the individuals living at the intersections of Afro-Latinx identity who use various art forms to address “contemporary social issues affecting these populations and the social movements” that are

developing in response to those challenges (Paschel and Sawyer, 2008, p. 198). The participants' individual contexts will vary in accordance with the compound aspects of their social identity, including gender, sexual orientation, disability, national identity, language, the physical space that they occupy in the world, and socioeconomic status. This could impact participant positionality, and more pointedly, how those unique aspects of identity intersect or overlap in the way that they view themselves and the context of their work.

Moreover, it wishes to examine the experiences of individuals who identify as part of the broader diasporic Afro-Latinx community, even outside of the Latin America and how those experiences influence their activism. Gurin et al. (1980) contends that, “commitment to collective action, aimed at maintaining or changing the present order, is typically viewed as a shift from earlier preferences for acting solely in behalf of self” (p.31) Because the activism that I’m analyzing with Afro-Cuban activist participants focuses on their experiences surrounding systemic oppression related to identity, which are in fact a consequence of systems and institutions, then the efforts to challenge those culpable systems and institutions are likely to be done within communities through a collective effort.

Social institutions and the people who comprise them become are part of the cultural fabric of a society. The arts can serve as storytellers of a time and the commentary that they offer can range from insightful critique, celebrations of a time/ event, or even serve to reinforce a certain set of values. Maxine Greene (1997) says that, “for all the importance of the arts in strengthening social values, the primary connection between art

and social life lies on a semiotic plane (p. 393). In short, art is a symbolic representation of the society and the social experiences of its members.

Art as a critical reflection of one's culture and subsequent extension of the self is an agentic expression that has the potential to influence social change. The marriage of the aforementioned perhaps can occur most seamlessly in various art forms of "agit prop or agitational propaganda, as the very term implies, {which} seeks to deliberately change people's beliefs through well-planned strategies of persuasion, transformations of spectators into (spect) actors, and their subsequent mobilization into agitating communities" (Pal, 2010, p. 48). In the spirit of Pan-Africanism, this is not foreign to the historical trajectory of social movements spurred by African-American artists in the United States. In fact, "African American artists are energetic participants in a cultural revolution. Driven by needs that are both aesthetic and social, these artists are in search of cultural identity, self-discovery, and understanding." (Lewis, 1990, p. 3).

Ultimately, art is a responsive political language. It was James Baldwin, one of the most prolific Black and unapologetically queer literary artists of all time who said, "people evolve a language in order to describe and control their circumstances." Art is that language, and the artist is the interpreter of the sociopolitical circumstance. Though Lewis (1990) references the artist in the explanation below as "African-American," I will assume liberty in applying this claim to the more diasporically inclusive of the Black artist population, as the relationship between artist and social responsibility to the community is further explained in the following:

A primary obligation of African American artists is to understand and use, whenever possible, elements of their cultural heritage. A second obligation is to understand the power of art and the use of that power to inform and to educate. The African American artist should also establish a direct relationship with people at all socioeconomic and educational levels. In this role, the artist is an interpreter, a voice that makes intelligible the deepest, most meaningful aspirations of the people. The artist is a channel through which their resentments, hopes, fears, ambitions, and all other unconscious drives that condition behavior are expressed and become explicit. In this role, the artist is a community resource, valued and supported because he or she forsakes the “ivory tower” and gets to the heart of community life. What kind of art meets the artist’s obligations to the community?

First, these obligations require an art that is functional, an art that require an art that employs the images common to African American lives. Next, this art should reflect a continuum of aesthetic principles derived from Africa, maintained during slavery, and emergent today. The art that the African American artist produced should also be affordable.” (Lewis, 1990, p. 4).

Even when culture is ostensibly redefined, suppressed, or excluded from the visible mainstream, art can be subversive in its ability to have a lasting influence by inciting community engagement and thought-provoking dialogue in any space that it occupies. However temporal, public, or private. In summary, our environments play a key role in the way that we connect with art and ultimately, ourselves. Greene (1995) expounds on how environment and our participation with art, create opportunities for individuals to reconcile their understanding in the following:

It is important to make the point that the events that make up aesthetic experiences are events that occur within and by means of the transactions with our environment that situate us in time and space. Some say that participatory encounters with paintings, dances, stories, and the rest enable us to recapture a lost spontaneity. By breaking through the frames of presuppositions and conventions, we may be enabled to reconnect ourselves with the processes of becoming who we are.

(pgs. 381-382)

This speaks to its power to influence and its ability to educate, usually by criticizing something through intentional but not always obvious messaging or detectable means, which requires artists who wish to be subversive to find ways to use “both the spiritual and material powers of art in such a way that their expressions become a vehicle for the understanding of people. This will be possible only when the arts reflect the true spirit of differences and make explicit the African roots that enrich and strengthen African Americans” or those of African descent throughout the diaspora whose expression and experiences are often sequestered (Lewis, 1990, p. 4).

Because of this power to creatively criticize, influence, educate, and galvanize, art has been historically attacked, the target of political and social controls through attempts to regulate it or exploit the art/ the artist or to promote a unique agenda. It can also be misunderstood within the context of culture and thus pushed into marginal spaces because it is perceived to lack value in the unique time and space of that cultural epoch. This was the case with art that had overt connections to African culture and aesthetic, which went against the Victorian, Eurocentric aesthetic that was valued as authoritarian in the art world for centuries. Artists who expressed themselves beyond those boundaries

and desired to color outside of those lines were deemed as marginal with trivial talent, and their contributions were often unfairly dismissed as trite. So, “during this period, forces for self-expression, both internal and external, had to decide whether to identify with their culture, accepting and exploiting their heritage, or with the international art movement, accepting and exploiting the security of the European artistic tradition.”

(Lewis, 1990, p. 59). This was true to the experience of many Black artists throughout the world. Very few who betrayed the European artistic tradition found success- socially or economically- in mainstream circles.

In Cuba, specifically, Afro-Cuban art, like most African culture and cultural practices, was considered mystical, of the occult, savage, sullied, perverse, and even fearful in the way it was regarded. The one exception to that standard was music. In fact, “the powerful African component of Cuban nationality was not really appreciated except for its contribution to Cuban music. Whites looked down on traditional African religion, considering it with amused derision at best or as uncivilized savagery at worst” (Farber, 2011, p. 164). Therefore, the cultural appreciation of African culture on Cuban music was at best, a result of cultural appropriation. Conceivably, the African influence on Cuban music was also appreciated and not reviled because of its mass appeal and was thus, easily commodifiable.

Nevertheless, art can also become easily commodified, reconstructed and mass-produced for mass consumption, diluted and clichéd. The artist in that sense is undeniably an educator and purveyor of what is to be socially documented and simultaneously questioned. Lewis (1990) argues that, “artists are communicators who, through various

media, express thought and feelings about their inner world and their perceptions of the outer world.” (p. 172).

Note that a central purpose of a such art is the activation of its spectators through the transformational process of engagement. This significant role of the spect (actor) as potentially transformative is underscored in Mezirow’s explanation who outlines that the, “The overall purpose of adult development is to realize one’s agency through increasing expanding awareness and critical reflection” (Mezirow & Associates, 2000, p. 142).

Jack Mezirow posits that social change can take place in a community or public sphere through transformative learning. Transformative learning explains that people can understand themselves in relation to the collective through personal transformational change that happens through the critical reflection of one’s own assumptions. Engaging art in a shared space permits that dialogical exchange, and is thus, a liberating act.

Transformation is the shedding of the former toward a renewed and ideally more progressive self. That is liberating. It is not only an emancipatory act for the individual, but can be an awakening, if you will for others. Brookfield explains Mezirow’s articulation of critical reflection for adult learners in saying that it serves by, “helping adults become aware of oppressive structures and practices, developing tactical awareness of how they might change these, and building the confidence and ability to work for a collective change” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 144). This is not an abstract experience, but one that can be supported as neurological. The prospect of undergoing a transformational exchange as a consequence of engaging art, is one that is underscored by the fact that art does affect the brain in a very unique and curious way. It involves many features of the experience, one

of which most pointedly includes the aspect of storytelling, which allows a person to connect in a psycho-emotive way to the storyteller or rather, with the storyteller. I must emphasize that art allows for stories to be told with or without any verbal exchange. Thus, stories can be experienced through a number of artistic mediums including the visual, movement, and music. In fact, “many scientists believe we map other people’s actions into our own somatosensory system, which conveys sensation through the brain and body and helps us feel the emotions we perceive in others as if they were our own” (Kaufman et al., 2017, September).

This stresses Mezirow’s claim that people can better understand themselves (and potentially others) through the collective. Hence, we return to this notion of collective consciousness. Though, the collective in this case, is the shared engagement between the spectator(s), the art, the artist, and the narrative or message the art/ artist seeks to tell. Therefore, when experiencing art or artistic expression, the actual brain (not only the social and emotional selves) are engaged and subsequently, impacted. Kaufman et al. (2017) posits:

All the elements contribute to a kind of shared consciousness. In effect, your billions of brain cells are interacting with billions of other brain cells, busily making the microscopic connections that yoke together the brains of those present with an almost inescapable force. This happens from the moment we automatically tune ourselves to the audience. Soon we’re watching a story unfold that connects us with the performers, vicariously feeling and making meaning out of the actions on stage, responding to the magnetism of specific visual cues, experiencing heightened emotions as music and movement entwine and even bonding with those

around us. It's just as the artists — choreographers, directors, playwrights, composers, performers — intended. And this magical transformation starts within the architecture of one brain. Yours. (2017, September)

Critical Race Theory, LatCrit and Racial Identity

Certainly, this research does not wish to remain critically stagnant in the discourse that dichotomizes the oppressed and the oppressor, though, certainly, those roles must be explicitly acknowledged. By exploring that relationship, it is possible for the oppressed to understand that their oppressive experiences are not solely based on their decisions, but rather, influenced by those socially constructed, hegemonic norms enacted upon their experiences as a person with a racialized identity. “CRT (Critical Race Theory) and LatCrit explore the ways that so-called race-neutral laws and policies perpetuate racial and/or ethnic and gender subordination” (Bernal, 2002, p.108). Furthermore, CRT and LatCrit challenge the dominant ideological discourses that argue that meritocracy, color-blindness, equal opportunity, and racial equality are the traditional norms (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001).

Nevertheless, in order to transform beyond the stagnation and victimization of systemic oppression, one must understand how that oppression functions systematically and within sociopolitical structures, even at a covert level. Specifically, “LatCrit is a theory that elucidates Latinas/Latinos’ multidimensional identities and can address the intersectionality of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression” (Bernal, 2002, p. 108). Though the research does not intend to remain in a critical framework, the literature recognizes that “critical race and LatCrit theorists acknowledge that educational structures, processes, and discourses operate in contradictory ways with their potential to

oppress and marginalize and their potential to emancipate and empower” (Bernal, 2002, p. 109). Typically, those oppressive structures operate as a result of traditional paradigms that Solórzano and Delgado (2001) claim, seek to camouflage the self-interests of power and privilege that such paradigms are intended to promote and perpetuate for dominant groups.

Other literature seeks to explain the social and political history of how Afro-Latin identities came to be, juxtaposed alongside how the population currently experiences political life within their respective countries/ communities. This is essential and also informs the research by providing a context for the racialized experiences that the participants discuss. There is also a lot of literature on the post-colonial effects of that history and the subsequent ethnic/ racial development of the people. Each of these facets is significant and necessary to inform the comprehensive understanding of the Who (racial identity), What (racialized experiences), and Why of the research.

However, this study seeks to acknowledge and then, move beyond the Who, What, and Why, and focus on the How (how does one who experiences a form of oppression or marginalization as a consequence of their racial identity employ activism and furthermore, how do those individuals coalesce with others sharing both the same and different identities) by demonstrating the potential of art as a legitimate site of activism, whether that be protest or empowerment, for Afro-Latinos living in the margins, particularly at the intersection of that identity. Afro-Latinos are a marginalized community in broader socio-cultural contexts wherein which community building seeks to reconcile personal identity with emancipatory sociopolitical action beyond the space of visible recognition. As such, “‘Community-building’ became an activist goal that sought to

channel personal identifications and/ or neighborhoods into participation in an agenda for social change because of common interest shared by a community on specific social issues (Mesch, 2015, p. 8). The How is perhaps the most evaded element of this quandary in the literature, which is why a great deal of the literary support has had to come from books written about the subject, though not wholly inclusive of every aspect of this research.

Indeed, it is critical to identify who the Afro-Latinx individuals are within communities where their interests are underrepresented or silenced and how that intersection of identity develops the political self for individuals who self-identify that way. It is apparent that the critical and post-colonial are already present in the literature in an effort to begin to address these questions; the common thread is that they focus on the need to recognize the marginalized as visible. However, this can trivialize what it means to be physically “visible” with respect to concurrently being marginalized. For example, in Cuba, the Afro-Cuban is a large demographic, arguably accounting for roughly 93% of the Cuban population. If one is arguably visible, but still experiences the sociopolitical constraints of marginalization, how can they move beyond that debilitating, stagnant space toward acts of emancipation and empowerment through access in communal spaces? Yet, the more central question is how is art being used to catalyze that emancipatory process of animation, activation, and empowerment? After all, when one engages art with whom it resonates, the art and the process of transformative liberation is deeply personal. So, on some level, “art is very often relevant to the struggles of daily life,” (Mesch, 2015, p. 13).

I will now introduce W.E.B. Du Bois into this discussion, because Du Bois engaged in liberatory praxis throughout his entire life- constantly seeking ways to reconcile the political and the intellectual in pan-African settings. In short, as Bogues (2003) notes, Du Bois wished to “vanquish American racial oppression and global anti-black racism” (p. 76). Moreover, he was a staunch advocate of art being used as a political messenger and provocateur with racial liberation as the stated goal. Art was a no less formidable means to merge critical thought with action in a way that could reach larger, diverse audiences. Du Bois (1926) explains his position in the following excerpt from “The Criteria of Negro Art” in *The Crisis*:

Thus, all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent.

Arguably, Du Bois himself could be considered an art activist. It was through the art of journalism that he transported his message of racial liberation to larger audiences in the hopes of impacting social change. So, to answer the aforementioned questions, this narrative study wants to examine how individuals throughout the African diaspora living at the intersection of Afro-Latinx identity use various art forms as activism within their communities as an emancipatory site for transformation within an individual and potentially, social action within groups that experience marginalization, regardless of their quantitative representation.

It is important to note that intersectionality is not strictly limited to race and sex (MacKinnon, 2013). Nevertheless, these are the most germane representations in the seminal literature. Still, my research aims to be more inclusive of other intersectional identities, such as sexual orientation, gender expression, and even ability- transnationally. Therefore, it is important to note that one of the participants is a member of a hip-hop group. Hip-hop, specifically underground/ non-commercial hip-hop, is considered central to the Black movement in Cuba and many Afro-Cuban artists use that particular art form in a subversive way to bring attention to disparities and inequities experienced by Afro-Cubans while promoting Black consciousness. In fact, much of the literature on the use of Afro-Cuban art in social movements centers hip-hop as the primary mode. Although Hip-hop has been the focus of contemporary art activism in Cuba in literature, hip-hop artists are not the only artists attempting to subvert ideology around anti-Blackness while bringing awareness to the Afro-Cuban experience in Cuba. It is important to note that the reach of hip-hop is extensive with an ability to extend to non-elite audiences in ways that scholarship or formal political activism cannot. Actually, “since the early nineties, thousands of ordinary and outstanding personalities in the arts, education and sciences have been denouncing the abject resurgence of racism, marginalization and segregation in Cuba, as well expressing their fears of where this tragedy could lead if urgent corrective measures are not applied before the situation spirals out of control” (Jones, 2013, p. 73). It is because of the presence of the “ordinary and outstanding personalities in the arts” that I want to be intentionally inclusive of other art-forms that have yet to be as fully explored using the same parameters of discursive subversion. That community also includes visual artists, writers, and community organizers.

This is why I wish to underscore that not all art activism is performance or visual art activism. Therefore, I will use the term “art” with a loose interpretation to include various art forms (e.g. visual art, graphic art, performance art, etc.) portrayed through various mediums; literature will also be included in this category. Though not always considered art outside of the humanities (i.e. liberal arts), literature is an art form like others that can influence emotions within readers/ audiences that incentivizes social action, which can spur social movements. Britt and Heise posit (2000) the following:

Movement literature that describes cases of persecution of the oppressed by the oppressor allows a secluded reader to identify with other oppressed individuals and to anticipate a sense of empathic solidarity that might be felt in assemblies. Literature that is effective for this purpose involves clear portrayals of typical actions of the oppressor toward the oppressed, vivid descriptions of emotions- such as fear or anger- felt by the oppressed, and details of common, nonheroic reactions enacted by the oppressed. Thereby, the reader realizes that he or she feels and reacts the same as others in the oppressed group when encountering the oppressor. (p. 262)

Arguably, experiencing art, can be either or both an individual experience or communal experience. The propagandized notion of art as a vehicle for social transformation was also referenced by W.E.B. Du Bois who maintained a “propaganda conception of art...Du Bois treats art as powerful. It is not merely a reflection of society or a super-structural output of society; rather, art is a building block of the social world” (Kidd & Jacobson, 2010, p. 561). When an art form aims to address the disparities, inequalities or

marginalities in social politics through an aesthetic expression and consequently, transform the audience or the artist themselves through its engagement, then the art has assumed a political operation. Specifically, Kidd & Jackson (2010) situate this understanding in Du Bois' propaganda concept, and thus, purport that "propaganda in art is any creative or aesthetic expression that is directed toward racial conflict with the goal of pursuing and preserving the lives and liberties of Blacks..." (p. 560). Note that the explanation of propaganda art for Du Bois is inextricably linked to race and liberty. Though intersectionality extends the parameters of identity beyond race, it is race that is at the core of Du Bois' politics for art as a tool for liberation with socially transformative effect. In such, art was an encouraged platform for activism around racial politics for Blacks even during Du Bois' era as a writer for the NAACP journal *The Crisis* from 1910-1934 in the United States of America (Kidd & Jackson, 2010). The racial liberation was at the crux of Du Bois' social movement, additional social identities (e.g. gender, sexuality, class, etc.) are negatively impacted as a consequence of marginalization, and thus, have catalyzed social movements also targeting those aspects of identity liberation.

Britt and Heise (2000) state that "historically, a number of social movements, like the civil rights movement and the gay rights movement, have arisen specifically to alter social responses to and definitions of stigmatized attributes, replacing shame with pride" (p. 252). Therefore, it also intends to explicate the transformative process of emancipation and empowerment through art activism as catalyzed by the activists and the subsequent social movements that can take place in those public spaces through that intentional engagement. In short, this research, like the provocative art it will elucidate aims to provide "a context for open discussion of the issues of racism, social justice, and democracy-

not only in Cuba but in the United States and in our own neighborhood” (De la Fuente, 2010, p. 6). When these discussions take place, however formal or informal, then we invite the prospect of transnational social change across multiple societies in various spaces in addition to the individual transformation that can take place for those who engage the process or the dialogue.

In conclusion, art can be both the site of and conduit for knowledge in communities. Eisner (2005) posits that art is capable of achieving three critical things:

First, they develop the mind by giving it opportunities to learn to think in special ways. Second, they make communication possible on matters that will not take the impress of logically constructed language. Poetry, after all, was invented to say what prose can never say. Third, the arts are places and spaces where one can enrich one's life. Such outcomes are not educationally trivial. (Eisner, 2005, p. 10)

The benefits of this research are challenging to estimate with hard numbers or quantitative data, but the stories that illustrate the benefits of participants' experiences provide reasonable qualitative evidence that celebrate the value in exploring it further across borders.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

“From the very outset of the trip I was determined not to be ‘taken.’ I had cautioned myself against any undue romantic persuasion and had vowed to set myself up as a completely ‘objective’ observer. I wanted nothing to do with the official type tours, etc...”

-From Leroi Jones’ (later known as Amiri Baraka) Cuba Libre chapter of *Home*, 1961, p. 16)

For the purpose of the study, I observed individuals in three un-manipulated environments where various art forms were engaged in a shared space. I collected first-person accounts from participants to capture and document the lived experiences of Afro-Cuban individuals, while attempting to remain respectful and mindful that the retold story is not a direct translation of the participants. Rather, the research presented is a co-authored interpretation of what my participants shared and how I understood it. As I explain in my preliminary findings and data collection, I informally engaged various Afro-Cubans during impromptu exchanges on the street during my initial visit to Cuba in 2015. These exchanges are referenced because they helped to inform my research questions and provided me on the ground context about the culture and country. However, these casual accounts are not necessarily included as part of the counter stories of my participants in the research data.

I engaged a total of three participants for this study and a total of three spaces in two different cities. Two spaces were in the city of Cienfuegos, Cuba. While in Cienfuegos, I spent time at an art gallery/ artists commune called PocoBonito, which I refer to as one site. The second site in Cienfuegos was the live K’Bola Project, which was a multi-faced art experience that included many mediums- an onsite concert, art installations,

spoken word performances, spontaneous paintings, and live film-making. It took place outdoors, just off of the central plaza in Cienfuegos, but not in the gallery.

The third space was in the city of La Havana, Cuba in an Afro-Cuban art community called Callejón de Hamel. Callejón de Hamel is an open yet somewhat contained environmental space of roughly two blocks, just wider than an alleyway. However, there is nothing dark or ominous about this somewhat hidden space. It is an Afro-Cuban neighborhood ensconced with colorful murals, graffiti, Santería shrines, and repurposed/ recycled materials from which standing sculptures and communal seating were made. The three sites and the three participants culminated to form the bastion of this research study each providing a unique story of place, time, and purpose. In short, the study drew upon the histories and stories of the participants and the broader communities of those who share the culture of the group.

This is a narrative study, qualitative in methodology, that aims to collect accounts from participants to capture and document the lived experiences of those individuals who identify as members of a particular Afro-Latinx community and engage audiences through their art with the intent to activate change or transform spaces. The participants shared their stories in the language of their choosing, but the stories were a mix of some Spanish and mostly, English. I was clear in giving the participants a choice, because it was important for me as researcher not to impose a colonizer frame by insisting that the language for our interviews be exclusively in my mother tongue of English. Because I am fluent in Spanish, I was prepared to engage my participants in Spanish, as well. However, I reviewed the Spanish language within the transcripts with the assistance of a native Spanish speaker, in an effort to capture the nuances that I could have overlooked as

one who is not a native Spanish speaker of said community. Additionally, this research was conducted while attempting to remain respectful and mindful of the reality that the retold story is not a direct translation of the participants, but an interpretation. Rather, even in its most authentic recapitulation, it remains a co-construction by both the interviewer and interviewee (Creswell, 2013). Interviews and field observations are the primary form of data collection in this study. However, the interviews also work in concert with pictures, paintings, sculptures, music, participant observations, live theater, documents, and dialogue that aid in the attempt to capture a more holistic narrative account

Qualitative research is an interpretive art that dutifully attempts to narrate and examine the lived experiences of participants through the interwoven connections of stories, relationships, and dialectical thinking in an effort to understand the meaning attributed to individuals' experiences/lived realities. Furthermore, Formenti & West (2016) suggest that the biographical narrative proposes to:

Explore the possibilities of crossing some of the boundaries of research practice, some of the frontiers dividing country-specific and discipline-specific cultures of research, crossing, too, some of the persistent linguistic barriers that hinder the possibility of intercultural dissemination, dialogue and reciprocal learning. And crossing the boundary between the self of the researcher and the other, into the inter-subjectivity and inter-textuality that is an important part of biographical enquiry. (p. 16)

This is incredibly true of my research and speaks to my process in engaging a transnational, bilingual, and intercultural exchange, which cannot and should not be ignored as a

key influence on how I come to know what I discover as part of the process. This narrative inquiry study acknowledges the critical as a part of the theoretical framework that informs the literature, but aims to transcend the critical through a focus on the emancipatory processes experienced by participants through and because of their engagement with various art forms- as either creator or witness.

Interviewing is a critical aspect of qualitative research because it frames the purpose of the qualitative study. This study does not wish to objectify its participants in any way or interpret their shared stories as accounts of “victimization.” Instead, the study aims to transgress such a debilitating binary of victim and perpetrator and focus on the possibility of empowerment through activism and social movements in public spaces, ergo, public pedagogy. Interviews are the primary form of data collection in this study, as are the notes that I took during the recorded interviews in an effort to capture any observations during the interview process. The central aim of interviewing in qualitative research is not to “quantify or predict the experiences but to obtain the vivid and accurate renderings of the experiences” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 105). Thus, the interviews also work in concert with gallery walks in shared spaces, specifically the organization’s meeting space, that can include pictures, paintings, sculptures, musical performances, field observations, documents, a reflexive journal, and even dialogue that aids in the attempt to capture a more holistic narrative account. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, which means that I developed an interview guide (see Appendix A) in advance. Additionally, I was very intentional about creating opportunities for some unstructured time so the participant can choose to expand their answers or stories if they choose. I also completed a demographic questionnaire on each of the participants (see Appendix B).

This research occurred across three spaces within two different cities. Both are in Cuba- Cienfuegos and La Havana. Cuba was chosen as a site for this case study because “Cuba’s ethnographic and ethnocultural process is a complex product of the interaction of separatist racism and racial intermixing” (Camnitzer, 1994, p. 35). In fact, “Fidel Castro once had referred to Cuba as a Latin-African country” (Camnitzer, 1994, p. 41). Thus, the intersection of racial and ethnic identity and culture confounded with national identity and culture of what it is to be Cuban and specifically, Afro-Cuban have developed alongside a political discourse that has evolved with Cuba’s history. De la Fuente (2010) explains the persistence of covert racism in Cuba using the metaphor of a keloid in the following:

Racism continues to be a deep wound in Cuban society, one that generates countless social and cultural scars. These pathological keloids can no longer be concealed in the erudite privacy of anthropological and medical cabinets. They must be exhibited, painted, sculpted, photographed, carved, and etched. We must expose in broad daylight the revolting texture of these dreadful scars. (p. 10)

To engage this process in a shared space also created a collective culture of shared community wherein which some of the following themes were emergent from the discussion: celebration of natural aesthetic, rejection of hegemonic standards of beauty, ways of seeing self vs. the way one is seen by others, pride and reverence, the community of sisterhood, and resilience. In this space, though abbreviated in time, evolved a moment of liberation, wherein which “the collective identity of the movement evolved through many individuals contributing to its creation” (Reed, 2005, p. 33).

Sample Selection and Participants

Individuals were invited to participate in this research study of how racial identity for members of the Afro-Latinx community affects or influences the individual's personal, social, educational, and political experiences around activism and coalition-building within their communities. The participants are intentionally referred to as Latinx in lieu of Latina or Latino, as in activist communities with particular regard to social justice and inclusive practices, the latter assumes gender designation that in and of itself has a political charge. Thus, the intentional use of a gender inclusive term such as Latinx is a provocative reclamation of inclusive community, even in language. This study helps foster an understanding of how art can be used in a shared space to potentially educate, empower and activate communities. Individuals were selected as possible participants because they identified, presented or read as an Afro-Latinx, Hispanic/ Non-White activists who engage art or forms of artistic expression in communal spaces.

Individuals were identified as potential participants because they are a member of an organization or social affinity group that could potentially contain members who self-identify as either Afro-Latinx or Hispanic/ Non-White. Thus, purposive sampling was used. In order to secure access to potential participants, members were notified in advance of my study and desire to observe and conduct post-interviews. Thus, this information was shared with members within the organizations I identified. I made an official request to attend meetings or events for groups per their preferred schedule, so that participants could determine my observation and subsequent interview schedule. The request explicitly outlined what my intentions were with the observations and interviews. It also explained how the data would be used. This way, the participants were informed of my

role as a researcher, my research intent, and not surprised by my attendance, but expected it. Furthermore, in instances of community groups, each group decided upon the best day for me to visit their space when they were together as a collective, so that my presence didn't negatively disrupt their group dynamics. Only willing participants were observed or interviewed. Each participant received a consent form and was able to choose not to participate at any time during my observations/ interviews.

By conducting an observation, followed up with interview questions based largely on what I observed in those contexts related to their community activism, political activity, and beyond, I was able to provide a report to each group based on what was observed and learned via interviews in that space. This served to benefit the group by helping them to internally assess their roles around the idea of community activism.

For my research in Cuba during the first site visit in July-August of 2015, I visited Afro-Latinx communities in the towns of La Havana, Cienfuegos, Vinales, and Trinidad. It is important to note, that my research in this space developed organically, which is why I have an unconventional timeline regarding my research protocols. Additionally, I was unsure how policies regarding travel to and from Cuba for United States citizens would impact my hopes of future access to participates and data collection in Cuba. Nevertheless, what I was exploring at the time, felt to be what I considered, both timely and burgeoning across global contexts. So, when the unexpected opportunities to further explore these themes, emerged, I enthusiastically engaged. In each of the towns visited over the span of 17 days, I identified potential participants through their social action affiliations, community organizations, or work. This was verified through online research and sources, as well as, direct interpersonal communication and contact with community

members in Cuba who were personally aware of the activism work that the participants did around racial identity in Cuba. Thus, my participant selection was largely informed by the community members with whom the participants directly work. Once prospects were identified, I followed the protocols described above to secure consent. My fieldwork permitted me to collect data in the form of interviews, which were recorded, as well as, photography and video recording. This also includes the unmanipulated documentation of the participants engaging their activist art forms in their natural environments. If “the communicative power of performances, spaces, and environments is designed to evoke significant memories that inform and enrich society as a whole,” then, how could it not also enrich me- the researcher (Lewis, 1990, p. 276).

The participants with whom I worked and observed gave me permission to publically identify them, as they are already public figures in their work. Additionally, honoring their requests to be identified was not an easy decision for me, but it was the most ethical. After all, I did not have the right, even if I perceived it as a precaution, to dictate how my participants would assert their resistance. To do so after they insisted otherwise, would be a colonizing approach, as I would be assuming to know better for them than they know for themselves- removing their agency. This would be a clearly hypocritical act on my part. Still, this is documented in my participant consent forms, which were formalized after preliminary discussion during my first and second site visits to Cuba.

Second Round of Data Collection in Cuba

I had previously conducted a preliminary round of data collection in Cuba during 2015. While in Cuba for my second round of data collection, I conducted fieldwork over a period of ten days split between the towns of La Havana, Cienfuegos, and Trinidad to

conduct follow-up interviews with the previously identified Afro-Latinx art activists participants whom I'd previously interviewed in July/ August 2015. This visit also served to confirm my analysis of the first visit. I later returned to the two cities in order to collect more field data in the natural physical, art activist spaces, which were the Afro-Latinx neighborhood of Callejón de Hamel in La Havana, and a social action/ art gallery warehouse in Cienfuegos, wherein which I observed the participants in their natural environments. In addition to interviews, I documented my observations in those spaces through the use of photographs, video recordings, and diagramming the spaces that I engaged while supplementing the collected photos and video recordings with field notes. I also regularly recorded my own reflections in a reflexive journal.

Interviews were the primary form of data collection for the research in Cuba, along with the notes that were taken during the recorded interviews in an effort to capture any observations during the interview process. The central aim of interviewing in qualitative research is not to “quantify or predict the experiences but to obtain the vivid and accurate renderings of the experiences” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 105). Thus, the interviews worked in concert with gallery walks in shared spaces, specifically the participant's space of work or social action, which included pictures, paintings, sculptures, musical performances, spoken word, field observations, documents, and even dialogue that aided in my attempt to capture a more holistic narrative account. More specifically, I wished to also bear witness to the artistic experience that the artists were bringing to a space. To accomplish this, I went directly to the spaces where those exchanges were taking place- some planned while others organically developed. I traveled the island via bus and community taxi for hours from one town on the island to another with Cuban strangers. I conducted

semi-structured interviews, which means that I developed interview questions in advance. However, I was also very intentional about creating opportunities for some unstructured time so the participants would have the space to expand their answers or stories if they choose. From those moments, it was only natural that additional questions arose.

The audio data were transcribed directly in Spanish and then translated/ interpreted through transcription into English by a Native Spanish speaker. The Native Spanish speaker listened to the audio and then, transcribed it with respect to any idiomatic expressions that needed more context, which I would then provide, when possible. This was done in an effort to ensure authentic transcription and to avoid the potential loss of any cultural idioms or expressions. Afterward, I analyzed each of the transcripts using the guiding themes of my three central research questions. By that, I mean that I read the transcripts and then, sought to tell the story of each participant in a way that maintained the fluidity of a narrative while addressing each of the research questions surrounding themes of identity, activism, and coalition-building in the current sociopolitical climate of Cuba. The photos and video recordings of the various art forms were also analyzed in the same way. However, the way that I interpreted the narrative, varied depending on the art form. For example, art forms that contained words permitted me a more explicit way to interpret the messaging. Nonetheless, art forms that did not use words or used them in a limited manner, meant that I had to read the other aspects of the art form to look for deeper or semiotic meaning. The methods for analyzing the actual art itself occurred by observing aspects of repetition, color, composition, contrasts, texture, cadence, literary devices, musicality, and even audience/ spectator/ viewer response.

In Callejón de Hamel, an environmental (outdoor) space rich with visual art and communal music- played in stereo for those in the space to hear, was itself a participant. It was a place that I visited multiple times to simply spend time with it and directly engage it- sitting on the benches made of halved bathtubs, walking through the arch announcing its name and continuing along the asphalt central pathway, studying the sculptures and graffiti, and quotes on the walls of the space. The stories were vividly visual and abundant.

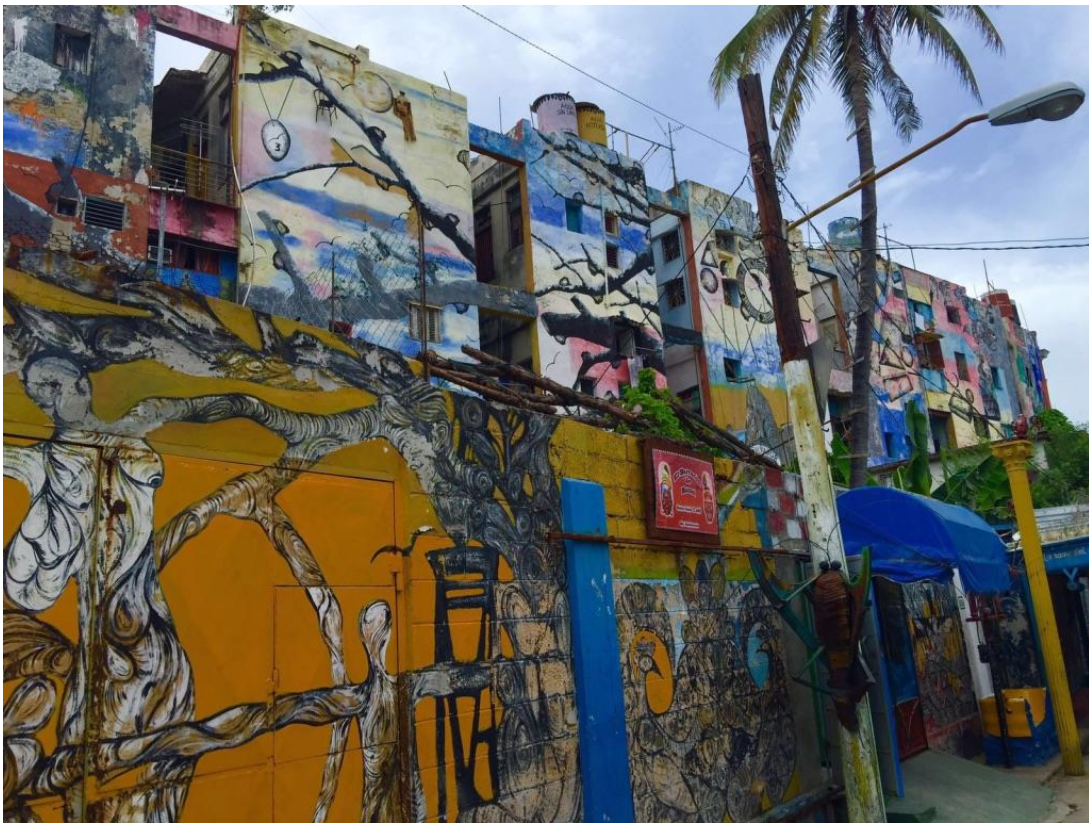


Figure I. Wall of murals in Callejón de Hamel



Figure II. Wall of Afrocentric designs in Callejón de Hamel



Figure III. Wall of Afrocentric design with researcher in Callejón de Hamel



Figure IV. Painting of Black Woman in Callejón de Hamel

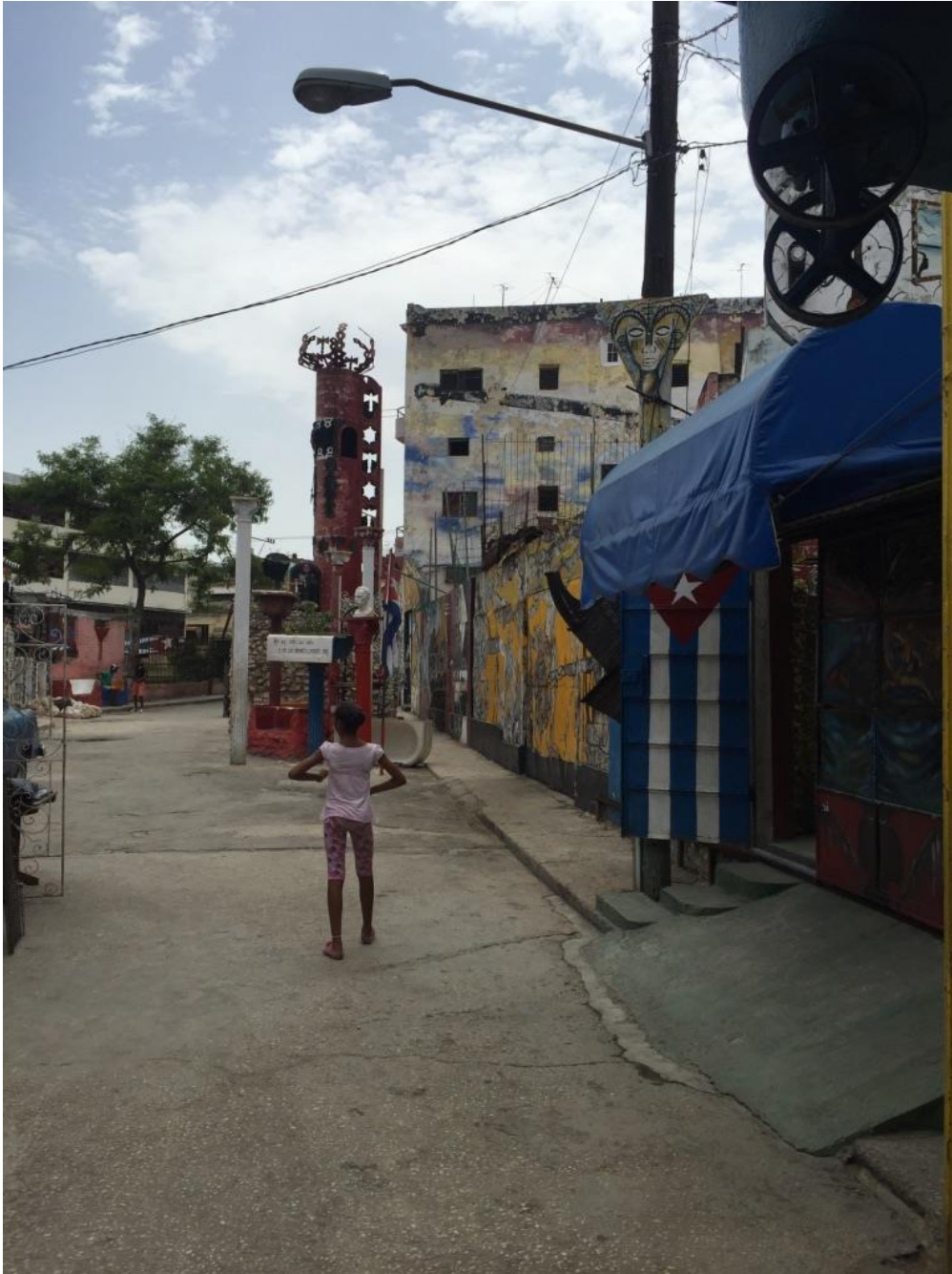


Figure V. A child resident walking through the neighborhood street



Figure VI. Archway to entrance of Callejón de Hamel

Human Subjects Protection

This research has been approved by the Texas State University IRB (see Appendix C). The research in Cuba with the Cuban participants was deemed as exempt by the Texas State University IRB (see Appendix C).

There was minimal risk associated with subject participation in this study through the personal interviews or photo elicitation of art activism. Photo elicitation means that a photo or artwork produced by the subject will be the basis for the discussion; photo-elicitation interviews (PEI) is a concept that introduces a photograph as a means of research data into an interview (Harper, 2006). As a qualitative interview technique, photo-elicitation extends the understanding of lived experiences, the lens in which people view their beliefs, reality, and experiences (Harper, 2002). The photos, videos or artworks produced by the subject was used to aid in a more comprehensive understanding of the participant's story. The photos or artwork was not made public outside of this designated space with regard to my data collection without prior signed consent/ permission from the participant. Apart from my displaying any art or artwork for which I gained permission for the sole purpose of research, should the subjects choose to display said artwork or photos in public spaces, thereafter, that is their choice. The artists and photographers were identified in the gallery walk not by written names, but rather by various colored paint chips alongside their art as the personal identifier in an effort to respect confidentiality.

During the interview process we discussed topics like identity, racism, perceived experiences of oppression, racialized experiences as an Afro-Latinx community member, activism within their community (immediate and broader), art as a form of protest or em-

powerment, coalitions within the community- immediate and beyond, and impetus for social action. These conversations occurred in environments of their choosing where the subjects were able to participate openly and at free-will. I also explained to the participants that if at any point during the process, they felt triggered or uncomfortable, they could disengage and we would end the interview immediately.

Researcher Self-Reflection

As a researcher in this particular work, I, too, had to be cognizant of how my own identity might color my experience as a researcher. In fact, my experience as a Black American researcher and activist places me in a dual role in the researcher space for this study. Though I did not use it as a methodology, I referenced autoethnography as a frame to understand my reflexive research process and the way I created new knowledge about myself for myself during this process. I was an intentionally self-reflective researcher and use in methodology. I admit to being both object and subject within this study as a consequence of my constant self-reflection and recorded the development of my own understanding in a reflexive journal.

Research bridges many things, and for me, this research connected the diasporic heritage of post-colonial displacement in a contemporary space. Though our realities play out in two different countries, there were instances of powerful overlap. Sometimes this was explained and at other times, it was felt as an intimately intuitive shared experience. I was the human research instrument, and thus, I must acknowledge this with transparency. There was a crossover of identities with my perspective and position and I attempted to responsibly manage that with a reflexive piece that allowed me to objectively

analyze data and subjectively examine my own reflections about what I observed, heard, unpacked and felt, by keeping a reflexive journal (Ortlipp, 2008).

I am both object and subject to the stories that I hear and engage with Afro Cubans. As a Black person living in the United States at a time when the racial climate is so volatile and tense that it is affecting the international discourse on race relations and inequities in the United States, I must examine my own worldview and how that can potentially influence bias. Thus, I had to remain conscious of my individual subjective experiences (subject) and cognizant of how those experiences could affect my perceptions (object) and the context of my research by articulating how my positionality might impact my research. Race, gender, and sexuality, like experience, though socially constructed, are subjective, and are depicted through subjective interpretations. Therefore, the story attached to me and my racial experiences are subjective, and equally, the stories attached to the participants and their racial experiences are also subjective. Nevertheless, as a researcher who gains perspective by interviewing others from a culture different than my own, I am an ethnographer, though not an intentionally critical one. Yet, as a researcher who gains perspective from interviewing others who share my racial identity aesthetically, historically, socially, and even politically, I became a part of the very community I am researching, and therefore, I am also an autoethnographer. In fact, when I was on site in Cuba, speaking Spanish, it was assumed by some Cubans that I myself identified as Afro-Latina. Thus, in some spaces, I was “passing” as Afro-Latina because of my salient identity as a Black person and the fluidity that my language proficiency, though not of Cuban dialect, permitted me in a Spanish speaking country. My national identity was rarely perceived as a part of my identity until self-disclosure or until I began speaking in

English, my native language. Autoethnographers look in (at themselves) and out (at the world) connecting the personal to the cultural. Autoethnographic research combines the impulses of self-consciousness with cultural awareness reflecting the larger world against personal lived experiences- oftentimes blurring the lines between them (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

It is also important to state that I am very engaged in activist work and have had membership within activist communities for roughly two decades. It is that work that triggered my interest in this research, which I illuminated in previously detailed explanations. Not only does this have the potential to impact my positionality, which I don't deny that it does to some degree, but more significantly it was this aspect of my identity that gave me trusted access into these spaces. Thus, even with my "out-group" status due to my role as a "foreign" researcher, I was simultaneously benefiting from the in-group dynamics of shared community as a fellow art-activist.

I narrated my encounters with each of my participants to elucidate the way we explored each of the aforementioned research questions and more, through the methodology of counterstorytelling, complemented by narrative inquiry that I previously described.

Data Analysis Simplified: How It Came Together

As I previously explained, I combined Critical Race Theory and Africana Critical Theory as my applied theory. Additionally, I used Intersectionality as my theoretical perspective. I identified three research study participants (all whom I interviewed in Cienfuegos) who identified as art activists and at some point during the selection self-identified as Afro-Cuban. It was critical for me to observe the participants engaging their work and creating or performing their art without interruption or invasive questioning. In those

settings, I was a passive observer. I observed the artist, the process of creation, the art itself, and other people's reaction as they also engaged it. In other settings, they created and talked as they drew, moved, painted, smoked, sang or rapped. Sometimes while working, they would invite me to talk to them; to be present in their process alongside them. Sometimes I sat quietly on the floor documenting and processing what I was watching unfold. As an artist myself, I respected their preferences during the creation sessions because of how personal creating art is for an artist. I took photos. I video-recorded. I audio-recorded. I listened to the participants' stories in both structured and unstructured sessions. I listened and documented their exchanges with one another. When engaging my participants, I listened in an effort to connect. I listened intently when we were engaging one another directly through inquiry, but I also listened to the way that they engaged the space independently of me. As the artists walked around the gallery space or stood outside, I listened. I listened to them rapping and speaking aloud as they wrote rhymes or put their abstract ideas and streams of consciousness to internal rhythm or on canvas. I listened to them as they chanted or sang along while painting, drawing, and building. I stood on the periphery of their free-style rap circles. I listened at these opportune moments, because stories resided there, as well. Ultimately, I listened because I wanted to understand and connect.

Connected experiences promote the acceptance and even appreciation of others' viewpoints and spoken word is a method of understanding cultures, diverse societies, and lived realities, because it allows for the participation of those who were previously silenced and not accepted as truth tellers of their own experiences. Therefore, listening to their spoken expressions of thought through art was a way to connect to the less obvious

but equally important and telling parts of their experiences. Nevertheless, spoken word is an oratory reclamation of one's truth; it is both rebellious and conscientious. Belenky and Stanton (2000) write that "reflective discourse develops best when participants are well informed, free from coercion, listen actively, have equal opportunities to participate, and take a critical stance toward established cultural norms or viewpoints" (p. 71). By moving beyond traditional frameworks and using storytelling as valid data that informs one's understanding of the world around them beyond their subjective experience, one is actively rediscovering and reclaiming their lived reality from a dominant culture that may have marginalized one's experience and negated it as truth (Holiday, 2010). In short, storytelling contributes to effective social change-as a form of agency for non-canonical voices from the margins, voices that have been previously invalidated, disenfranchised, or misrepresented by dominant cultures.

I lounged in the gallery which doubled as the artists' hub. They came and went freely. They'd cook communally and offer me food. We'd go for walks around the neighborhood or sit on random benches when the mood struck. Some of the sessions were one-on-one. At other times, even though there were only two of us speaking, there was an impromptu audience amused to hear a Black girl speaking in lispy Castilian Spanish or to hear a familiar voice speaking in unfamiliar English. I collected narratives off and on over a period of roughly twenty-four days. The interviews took place inside of galleries, sitting on the stoop, during a street festival in the midst of the fervor of the performances, walking streets together at sunrise, and in private homes.

Though there were no formal interviews in my third site, I visited Callejón de Hamel in La Havana roughly four times and spent hours at a time there. That time included

watching the artists work, sitting on the stoop and observing casual exchanges, listening to music, chatting absently, assisting as they busied themselves with organizing the space, standing passively and respectfully in the background while the met and planned their exhibitions and upcoming events.

Callejón de Hamel is like a living and thriving museum. Within the confines of approximately two blocks in the center of La Havana was this artistic gem of a space. In addition to the murals, sculptures, and paintings, it contained quaint galleries, storefronts, and restaurants locally operated by the people who live there. I was told by a neighborhood resident that the art which is largely focused on Afro-Cuban religious figures or contains allusions to deities of Santería, was created by an artist named Salvador Gonzalez. This was later confirmed during a tour of the neighborhood. Free tours are optional for enthusiastic residents in Callejón de Hamel. There are residents who take pride in their role as local docent guides to the history, Afro-Cuban culture, and artwork of the neighborhood, because it allows them an opportunity to share cultural knowledge with those who may pass through the space looking for something in particular, as well as those who happen to stumble upon it. Unfortunately, I was never able to personally meet the visionary artist-creator, though I'd desperately hoped to connect with him for an interview or even an informal chat. However, each time I visited the neighborhood and asked, I was told that he was out of town.

In any case, Callejón de Hamel is a real neighborhood- a physical space- but certainly not an inanimate one. In fact, it is very much alive, full of life, teeming with stories- some verbal as told through signage and quotes contained in the murals on the walls and other stories told through nonverbal means- the position of the art, the subject of the

art, the colors used, and the placement. I walked through the neighborhood at different times to experience it during the morning, in the afternoon, and at night. I listened to the quiet and I listened to the noise. I observed the residents of the space talking to one another, children playing impromptu games of soccer, and listened to the music the residents played, while documenting my reflections in my reflexive journal and snapping photos and video to capture the moods, moments, and stories of the space. What I documented as part of my findings in Callejón de Hamel is reflected in the series of photos below:



Figure VII. Brightly painted repurposed bathtub halves as benches



Figure VIII. Sculpture with repurposed scraps and signage translated from José Martí's poem, *Versos Sencillos* in Spanish as, "I am art among the arts, and I am wilderness among wilderness."



Figure IX. Afrocentric wood sculpture on a restaurant wall in Callejón de Hamel



Figure X. A Santería religion shrine in Callejón de Hamel



Figure XI. Callejón de Hamel resident playing music from his homefront shop with a sign translated from Spanish as, “The Song of the Congo”



Figure XII. A hanging bathtub with wheels in Callejón de Hamel translated as, “The ship of the forgotten.”

Upon my return to the United States, I listened to the interviews and transcribed the audio recordings and reviewed the videos. The interviews that were in Spanish I had transcribed by a native speaker. I didn’t want to risk missing a nuance or allow an idiom to escape my untrained ear. The Cuban dialect is melodically curious and I had to focus, attuning my ear to the words and cadences as I listened. I read my field notes and searched for themes. I scanned artifacts and mementos. I also reviewed all my photos over and over, again. I took several hundred over time. I turned the photos upside down and sideways, analyzing them from various angles, zooming in and back out. The art was the creative center of the stories and as such, it was also a participant in each of their narratives, so it also deserved my attention. It also had a story to tell; a message to relay. I

began coding the transcripts and then poured over them for recurrent themes. It wasn't neat and perfect, but it felt easy.

IV. PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

“O my body, make of me always a man who questions!”

- Frantz Fanon, *Black skin, white masks*.

My initial foray into this research allowed me to gain perspective as a researcher immersed in the Cuban culture in Cuba in July-August 2015. Though now deceased, it is important to note that Fidel Castro was still alive and making limited appearances at the time of my first visit, and the historical United States embargo, though somewhat relaxed, was still in effect. I make these points to shed light on perspective and how the significant changes regarding the aforementioned between then and now, may or may not directly influence how discussions around this issue take place. My data collection and fieldwork included neighborhood walks, community lectures, site visits with local guides, and extended stays with Cuban families in the various communities of La Havana, Trinidad, Cienfuegos, and Viñales. As part of this preliminary research, a diverse group of individuals were casually interviewed including community activists, historians, an anthropologist, a musician, and journalist. Several individuals, almost all of whom self-identified as Afro-Cuban or Black, shared their personal narratives and stories with me. Some shared perspective through casual anecdotes while sitting on a stoop or at a bar and others through deep, critical reflection. To be clear, these individuals were not all formal participants in my study. In the end, I had a total of three research study participants. However, I include my encounters with the collective during my preliminary research, because they each helped provide context regarding racialized experiences in Cuba and informed my understanding of a veiled reality. We spoke openly, freely. I asked questions and they asked me questions. The interviews were reciprocal because there existed the possibility

of a borderless exchange between Black folk- an open dialogue without expectation. Open dialogue creates opportunities for the telling of one's lived experience in the form of stories. We listened intently, we laughed aloud, we probed for deeper understanding, we gesticulated passionately, and articulated our thoughts in Spanglish. But most importantly, we attempted to see some aspect of ourselves in each other's stories. This is how stories can create connections through the shared experience of listening and telling. Again, storytelling is an indispensable precept of Critical Race Theory, because "storytelling is an important form for exploring race and racism in the society" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 87). The interviews and the stories shared through that process revealed more than what the literature presented. Through listening to another speak their lived experience, it is possible to activate and legitimize one's way of knowing. Through unscripted storytelling, the shared experience between both the listener and storyteller was an embodiment of reflexivity. It was an exchange no longer strictly subject to the hegemonic authority in shaping knowledge or the objective reframing. Rather, one can form their own knowledge- a knowledge that can be explored and can elevate understanding by creating empathy through connecting experiences. Belenky & Stanton (2000) posit, that "assessing and reformulating one's basic assumptions about the knowledge-making process permits more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative ways of knowing the world" (p. 72).

I attended makeshift concerts and engaged in impromptu spoken word battles in the street. I was seen as a part of the community while in these spaces- "hermana" and "eSky" (a shortened but endearing variation of my first name). It was through this shared

sense of community and my almost immediate acceptance as one of the community because of my Blackness, that I learned about the activist spaces that are thought to not exist in Cuba due to political rigidity and consequence. I didn't witness marches or protests while there, which is the method of voicing injustice and demanding change that came across my television set weekly, and I, myself, participated on a regularly basis. Yet, the rallying cries for change were audible in different ways- present but less obvious. Saunders (2016) illuminates this in the following:

In the case of Cuba, it is argued that Cuba is (versus has) an undemocratic totalitarian state where freedom of speech is repressed. The insidious part of this narrative is this assumption: in this space – which is an entire country – it is assumed that no one has the ability to think critically or think independently of Fidel Castro, much less organize and critique anything in society in an effort to push for social change. In much of the academic scholarship on Cuba from the 1970s to the present, there is an assumed pause or state imposed silence on feminist activism, much less any activism in Cuba. In the state's near total restriction of what is considered to be 'activism,' such as public protests directed at state policy, the assumption has been that there is no political activism occurring in Cuba, much less feminist or hip-hop feminist activism. This is an example of a perspective where arts-based politicized activism is not seen as political. The activism occurring within Cuba's cultural sphere is not seen, much less considered. (p. 186)

In effect, I was witnessing and experiencing the rumblings of social action in many spaces across the island. It didn't feel as underground as I'd initially envisioned, which was influenced by what I'd perceived as severe consequences for expressions of overt

dissidence in Cuba from the Cuban government. Though the expression was presumably still confined to some degree, I recognized that the intended subversion was in no way diluted and certainly not silenced. Presumably, there were codes that I could not yet or had not yet been invited to unlock. Even still, social action within several communities was palpably present in ways that I wished to further dissect and understand.

One of the preliminary interviews revealed that an Afro-Cuban musician felt that he was repeatedly subject to police harassment because of his racial identity, or more commonly expressed as racial profiling- a systemic form of oppression. This unethical racialized practice of harassment towards Afro-Cubans from law enforcement is systemic and has historical roots across various institutions, as explained in the following:

In Cuba, just as in the United States, discrimination has been primarily carried out through institutional arrangements. These include justice and correctional systems, housing and occupational patterns, and ruling party hierarchies, which, by virtue of being institutionally and systematically entrenched, do not depend on the prejudiced attitudes of individual power holders for their continuation and survival. (Farber, 2011, p. 178-79)

However, this Black man refused to accept the tacit view that he had to accept victimization as a consequence of his racial identity, and decided to formally denounce the police harassment. He carried a copy of his letter of protest and shared the document with me at the time of the interview. According to Moore, such unjust and prejudicial occurrences against Afro Cubans are quite common and writes that:

Victoria Ruiz, U.S. representative of the island wide civil-rights group, Citizens Committee for Racial Integration, says Cuba's black movement -- vigorously suppressed in the 1960s, at the early stage of the revolution -- was resurrected in the 1990s. She complains that young, black Cubans suffer aggressive racial profiling by police. She claims that about 70 percent of Afro-Cubans are believed to be unemployed, a staggering figure by any standard. And 85 percent of Cuba's jail population is estimated to be black, Ruiz reports. (2010, p. 459)

This has personal meaning to me because it relates to my personal experience as a Black person living in a country where racial profiling has affected Blacks at a much more disproportionate rate.

In fact, “racial stereotypes about black criminality abound in Cuba, and the vast majority of Cuban prisoners are black, despite the equalization of class differentiation normally associated with crime” (Blue, 2007, p. 41). In this exchange, I was able to connect with what was being revealed, as I, too, was a victim of racial profiling (though in the United States) and like the musician interviewed, proceeded with a formal complaint as a result of that unjust exchange. Much like the *Terry* stop (*Terry v. Ohio*, 392 U.S. 1), more commonly referred to as Stop and Frisk in New York (Legal Information Institute, 1992), Cuba has a law that permits law enforcement to cast suspicion on individuals as potential criminals before having committed a crime. Such criminalization was largely used disproportionately against Black males in the U.S. and in Cuba, as well. To this point, Farber (2011) writes:

Blacks have been particularly victimized by the article in the penal code criminalizing ‘social dangerousness’ (*peligrosidad social*). According to the 1979 Penal

Code, individuals who demonstrate ‘a special proclivity’ toward committing crimes can be punished with jail terms without even having committed criminal acts and without a formal trial. The concept of ‘social dangerousness’ has most commonly been invoked in cases of chronic drunkenness, vagrancy, drug addiction, and other ‘antisocial’ acts such as openly gay behavior. (p. 174)

Social dangerousness is not a unique concept, particularly when married with lawful persecution. Racial profiling, though perhaps more euphemistic in tone, has an extensive history in the United States, as well, and overwhelmingly affects people of color. This is a blatant example of intersectional oppression. In addition to the saliency of Blackness as predisposed to being suspiciously, socially dangerous, it is also compounded with the intersectional identity of “openly gay behavior.” There is a direct correlation between race and sexuality- an intersectional crossroads wherein which Cuban institutions applied punitive measures as a consequence of either or both identities. Still, the disproportionate representation of Black Cubans who are considered “socially dangerous” and consequently criminalized, is staggering (not unlike the United States), when “...according to cases of ‘social dangerousness’ registered in the city of Havana between May and December of 1986, black and mulattos represented 78 percent of those individuals deemed ‘socially dangerous.’ (Farber, 2011, p.174).

Additionally, even in the spontaneity of simply engaging in that intentional dialogue and sharing our stories, despite our differences in nationality and mother tongue, we were telling counter stories that confronted and challenged a dominant discourse on the perceived realities of racial experiences for Blacks in two different countries. Yet, in

this critical space of storytelling was a shared common experience that resulted in an equally critical conversation of empathic understanding.

Making a formal complaint was a way to enact individual agency against a system that villainized and criminalized us unfairly. To acquiesce would be an admission of invisibility, which both of us decided to counter in the social, political statement of our subsequent actions alone. By challenging a political system that in multiple instances had exercised its systemic oppression by allowing white authority figures, who were inherent representatives of power and privilege over us as minoritized Black individuals who had broken no laws, we became activists. The act to formally denounce any individual of power and privilege when one does not hold that same lateral position of power or privilege is an act of protest.

“Songs of liberation- who can lock them up?” - Paul Robeson

This quote speaks to the way that song was used to mobilize and galvanize during the civil rights movement in the United States of America, but it can also speak to the social movements that are gaining traction in Cuba among a small community of Afro Cubans, particularly artist activists. In fact, the “post-1990s period has seen a resurgence in public conversations about race. Hip-hop musicians, or raperos, combine African-American beats and Cuban rhythms to critique their inability to find hotel jobs despite speaking multiple languages” (Benson, 2016, p. 25). It was not only job scarcity that found itself the topic of hip-hop critiques. In fact, “the hip-hop movement has taken hold among a significant subset of black Cuban youth has become an important means of expressing their feelings of indignation and protest against police abuse” (Farber, 2011, p. 177-78). Though, the fact that this movement has not been highly publicized and is still considered

to be somewhat underground, could very well be because of the political capital that it could cost Cuba, specifically Fidel's post-revolutionary legacy, around notions of assumed and lawful equity for all. Moore (2010) argues that, "Cuba's black-led, multiracial opposition movement is an open embarrassment to the Castro regime. But it is also a disquieting development for the traditionally right wing, anti-Castro organizations around the world that have long claimed to be the heralds of the battle for 'freedom and democracy' in Cuba" (p. 459).

Moreover, CRT postulates that the economic disparities between races is a way for dominant groups (whites) to systematically maintain positions of power economically while keeping others in the margins, disenfranchised, and its application in Cuba would be no different. Economic access and mobility or the lack thereof for Afro-Cubans has a correlation to crime. "The economic crisis that began in the nineties also had a disproportionately negative impact on black youth, who were far more likely to be unemployed and relegated to marginal roles in the society than their white cohorts. Blacks and mulattos are also disproportionately represented among the hustlers and prostitutes who, among other marginal activities, cater to the tourist trade (Farber, 2011, p. 177).

Moore (2010) suggests that the disparity will only grow in Cuba, as "black dissidents in Cuba argue that racial disparities on the island are worsened by the Obama administration's recent decision to allow Cuban Americans to freely send remittances (worth an estimated \$1.5 billion yearly) to their relatives. More than 85 percent of Cuban Americans are white, they say, so the beneficiaries in Cuba of the new remittances policy will also be white" (p. 459). Blue (2007) furthers this claim with the following: When remittances

are added to total annual household income, however, race becomes more significant...Proportionally, many more white households shifted from the lowest two income categories into higher income categories than did black households (p. 59).

It is important to note that not all Afro-Cubans informally interviewed during my initial round of data collection perceived racism as prevalent in Cuba. In fact, a few even went on to posit the colorblind notion of equality in the country. Unsure of why some of the lived realities were different, I began to share the contradicting accounts I was receiving from others when interviewing individuals, and something incredible happened. For the Afro-Cubans who initially told me that racism did not exist in Cuba, their narratives grew contradictory. It was as if by revealing that others had admitted to racialized experiences, then they, too, were granted permission to speak more openly about their own experiences. It was almost as if, the initial message was propagandized, though, whether intentionally or not, I could not survey. When attempting to gain a general understanding of the racial climate in Cuba, I would casually engage the topic of racism and race relations in informal conversation with the strangers who would indulge me, but the degrees of responses related to their perception of racism in Cuba varied. Farber (2011) documents a similar experience by explaining, "...interviews conducted...on the island showed a wide spectrum of attitudes toward race among black Cubans, ranging from the view that race no longer matters at one end to the perception that the country is fundamentally racist at the other end" (p. 183).

For example, while perusing art within a neighborhood of makeshift home/ storefront galleries, I continued to come across the same pair of young men. As with most recurrent introductions, you become friendly and even familiar with one another. As this

was the case, I casually interviewed them about their perceptions of race in Cuba. One identified as white Cuban and the other, an Afro Cuban and they expressed that they were close friends and had been for many years. When asked if there was racism in Cuba, both returned a resolute, “No!” The white Cuban even shared that his girlfriend was an Afro Cuban and he was attracted to Black women. At that time, his Afro Cuban friend returned with a dubious challenge that claimed racism is very subtle in instances of relationship preferences of families. It was at that pivotal transition, that the Afro Cuban told his white friend that he himself had experienced racism when he expressed interest in dating a white Cuban girl, and she shared that her family did not approve. He explained that her family did not want her to date a Black person. His white friend stood gape-mouthed in disbelief. It was clear that they had not previously had this conversation or one like it. It was a moment of revelation, an uncomfortable one, but a critical one. From that brief exchange came another admission from the Afro-Cuban man. He furthered his claim of racism in Cuba to explain that it was almost impossible to get work at hotels or in restaurants as easily as it was for his white friends. Though not explicitly referenced or attributed to his revelation, this Afro-Cuban man’s experience was likely not an exception, but a clear example of the following standard that Farber (2011) describes:

The Notion of *buena presencia* or ‘good appearance,’ closely linked to the racist notion that whites are more attractive – and also more acceptable to white tourists – than blacks, is a crucial factor determining who gets hired and promoted. According to the study, no more than 5 percent of the managers, professionals and technicians in the tourist industry are black and mulatto. The jobs that blacks have

do not typically bring these workers in contact with the tourists, while whites predominate in jobs that do. (p. 177)

I was witnessing something transformational; the floodgates opened for open, honest, and authentic conversation. Though I was a foreigner in this exchange, I seemed to have facilitated the critical space to engage the conversation. It appeared that though the white and Afro Cuban men were good friends, they had never discussed race or racism. Specifically, the Afro Cuban man had never openly discussed his racialized experience with his white friend. Rather, the white Cuban was completely unaware or at least demonstrated notions of colorblindness that CRT challenges as a dominant liberal idea. This is the probable result of the political Cuban discourse around race soon after the revolution, which claimed that “racial discrimination had been eliminated and was no longer a necessary topic of debate” (Blue, 2007 p. 40).

Another interviewee Carlos, an anthropologist who would later become an official research participant that I would revisit during my second trip to Cuba, explained during our preliminary interview that he felt that the contradictions among Afro-Cubans in how they discussed racism and their racialized lived experiences was due to the fact that most of them had internalized their oppression. As a result of the internalized oppression, he felt that many Afro-Cubans were acutely unaware of what systemic oppression looked like, though they were experiencing it every day. This could be explained as a consequence of the way in which Cuba’s post-revolutionary discourse addressed racism, which was contradictory, at best. There are increasing holes in the Cuban racial ideology of the 1960s. This is explained by Benson (2016) in the following:

While some Cubans of color agreed with the revolution's raceless sentiments, others used the state rhetoric to demand additional reforms. And a third group found the image of revolutionary nationalism without blackness unsettling and paternalistic, and looked for ways to lead organizations that recognized both their blackness and their Cubaness (p. 24).

Whether it be the recent and growing curiosity from African-Americans who wish to support their Cuban brethren and become informed about movements around racial progress taking place there, the re-burgeoning civil rights movement in Cuba that had stops and starts from the 1960s through the 1990s (Moore, 2010), the budding international intolerance for systemic oppression in the form of racism, or the socioeconomic shift that is highlighting the growing economic disparities among the races, Cuba is on the brink of something socio-politically transformative, particularly for its Afro Cubans. But perhaps its more than that. Perhaps, it's a question of historical oppression fatigue for a country that has experienced so many unique periods and tumultuous transitions only to have not yet fully realized a sense of equality beyond rhetoric and law. Roberto Zurbano (2013) articulates this sentiment beautifully with the following explanation:

Blacks have had to face the new opening of the private sector in Cuba with a disadvantage. We inherited more than two centuries of slavery and sixty years of exclusion in the Republican Period (1902–1959), and over half a century of revolutionary rule (1959–2013) has still not been able to overcome them, because of the way that racism is disguised and renews itself when not debated or not openly confronted politically and culturally (p. 71).

Nevertheless, it is imperative to create critical and safe spaces for these crucial conversations. The degree of transformation that I witnessed as a researcher who simply facilitated the dialogue and provided the platform for the storytelling exchange was indicative of the dissonance experienced by so many at the intersections, in this case, Afro Cubans, who have yet to reconcile the correlation between their race and oppressive experiences, which is why intersectionality is a useful theoretical model here. “Intersectionality is a model that effectively addresses complex individual, relational, structural, and ideological aspects of domination and privilege arising from forms of difference treated oppressively” (Ramsay, 2013, p. 455), even when those forms of oppression and marginalization are not always explicitly and overtly enacted.

V. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

“It is through the effort to recapture the self and to scrutinize the self, it is through the lasting tension of their freedom that men will be able to create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world”- Frantz Fanon

Using a sample of diverse artists from around the island of Cuba- each of whom I wanted to observe and interview in the natural and unmanipulated environment of their art spaces- meant that I had to be both flexible and willing to travel. Based on my previous visit when scouting potential participants, I traveled across the island to identify who they could possibly be and the communities that they called home. One of my sites was in Cienfuegos, which was roughly three hours away from La Havana (by car), which was my central hub. I was traveling independently as a researcher, and thus, needed make arrangements that would allow me to get from one site to another. Sometimes this was facilitated with the generous help of a Cuban national friend, and on other occasions, I was had to make my own arrangements. For that reason, I thoroughly immersed myself in the culture of the country and though only temporarily, became a community member. Because I am not a Cuban national, I was not permitted to use the national bus system to arrive from one city to another, which is the cheapest way to travel across the island. With considerations around this challenge, I had to hire a community taxi. This experience also informed my research and is later referenced by a participant, so it's only appropriate that I explain it here.

Community taxis are regularly used in larger cities like La Havana by locals to travel from one point in the city to another when time is a consideration. To be clear, there is no mystery behind the name. They are called community taxis because they are a

community resource utilized by multiple members of the community at a time. To secure one, you must first identify a community taxi car, which tend to be older in make and model like most vehicles in Cuba due to the embargo. Additionally, they are unmarked (containing no external commercial labeling) and do not share a common color or aesthetic, so very similar to securing a taxicab in in the outer-boroughs of NYC (not Manhattan), it takes a somewhat familiar understanding of the cultural practice. The flagging down of a community taxi is a rather informal but clearly systematic process. Though, without prior knowledge or proficient language abilities, a foreigner or tourist could easily misunderstand the process as one of an underground or covert operation. The practice demands a unique sense of familiarity and proactive inquiry not for the faint of heart.

It is important to note that community taxis are typically less colorful, shiny, and pristine in their aesthetic than the tourist taxis, because they are not typically utilized by tourists or intended to attract tourists. Rather, they are tools of convenient utility intended to get locals from one place to another on the island. The community feature of the experience requires identifying a community taxi that contains occupants who are traveling along a similar route, which wouldn't require the driver to depart from a linear route. Once the destination is disclosed and agreed upon, the other passengers move over or rearrange themselves to make room for the newest addition. However, if the taxi and current passengers are not going in a direction along the trajectory of the newly requested destination, then the taxi and its patient passengers continue on leaving behind the inquirer for another attempt until a successful match is made. This can take only a few minutes or several when seeking transport within the city or its outskirts depending

on the location and the current traffic. Nevertheless, this method is standard only when traveling relatively short distances within or around the city.

Though seemingly small in geography, traveling from city to city across Cuba requires hours of travel by car. Fortunately, the roads are well-built and the drivers are accustomed to meeting the needs of multiple hires at a time. In fact, it is unlikely that they'll transport less than two passengers across longer distances, as it's not economical for the driver. This is an unofficial system with an actual hire checkpoint where you can state your destination and then wait for an unavailable driver. Then you wait for someone to accept your assignment, which can take anywhere from thirty minutes to an hour of wait time. Passenger pick-ups along the route aren't expressed in advance, but they are to be expected. As one can imagine, over the course of hours in the car together, there are periods of silence punctuated with conversation among strangers. I do wish to note that with each of my experiences, I was the only Black passenger. The other passengers on the long distance cross-country journey were white Cubans. It would not be difficult to imagine that this was a direct result of cost. Community taxis, though more convenient as they are direct and faster than the economical interstate bus option, they are a far more expensive mode of transport.

And so it began...I set out on an empirical adventure in a foreign, yet familiar land to capture the stories of people with whom I somehow felt communally connected, to address the following questions:

1. How do Afro-Cubans think about their intersectional identity?
2. What are the historical roots of activism for Afro-Cubans in Cuba?

3. How are Afro-Cubans building coalitions with respect to the current sociopolitical climate?

The Stories That Spaces Tell When You Listen

Callejón de Hamel is a clearly Afro-Cuban intersectional space. It's also a simultaneously activist space that by its very existence is an act of resistance against the suppression and sequestering of African culture within Cuba. Callejón de Hamel is intentional in its centering of Blackness, as it is Afrocentric in its depictions of Black subjects in the art, its Black residents, its Santería religion shrines and its music (exemplified in Figure 9 as from the Congo). Lewis (1990) says that "art should reflect a continuum of aesthetic principles derived from Africa, maintained during slavery, and emergent today" (p. 4). Highlighting the elements of Africa as a source of pride in a Cuban space alongside Cuban flags, is a central purpose of Callejón de Hamel, tantamount to its role as a site of community education.

Callejón de Hamel is a neighborhood intended to celebrate Afro identity and African culture. There are references to Yoruba, the Congo, and African folklore. This is especially important in Cuba, where African culture, especially religions of African origin were suppressed and deemed anti-Cuban, because "whites looked down on traditional African religion, considering it with amused derision at best or as uncivilized savagery at worst" (Farber, 2011, p. 164). African traditions and customs were socially suppressed by the mainstream in Cuba, and thus, their descendants could only continue their traditions and customs through oral storytelling. Unfortunately, the knowledge and culture was beginning to fade with the passing of the Yoruba ancestors (Bravo, 2015). So, efforts to preserve it are both political and historical.

In short, Callejón de Hamel is a community site of social action. People live, play, work, create, and educate in that space. I noticed an increase in foot traffic during my March 2017 visit compared to my 2015 visit. Undoubtedly, some visitors may still view the space as somewhat occultish and exotic as so much is still unknown or hidden about the Afrocentric contributions to Cuban culture. Some tourists may find it curious, but whatever one's initial understanding of Cuba and Cuban culture, it is reinforced with a deeper understanding of the African influences on Afro-Cuban culture. The juxtaposition of both Cuban symbols (e.g. the flag) throughout the space and African references, carries with it an intentional message. It is not loud or riotous in anyway, but the message is intentional and it is clear. It is that the African and the Cuban are not disconnected and cannot be detached, because both are Cuba and that is not an essentialist idea.

Taking the Message to the Streets: Social Movements as Quiet Riots

"Tell me, what is the point of art, if not to wake the masses?" – Kavindu Ade

Before I could initialize my analysis of the aforementioned questions, I had to first examine three critical things. First, I had to attempt to understand who my participants were and how they viewed themselves in the context of their world and experiences. Secondly, I had to engage their work with respect to the various mediums through which they brought it forth, and explore what inspired and informed its creation. And finally, I had to evaluate the ways in which the first two features worked in concert to inform their activism for social change.

It was during my first visit to Cuba in 2015, that I met one of my participants to whom I'll refer as Carlos. It was an early afternoon, and I was in Cienfuegos walking down one of the pristinely manicured pedestrian roads adjacent to the main square in the

colonial town, when I saw what could only be described as an aesthetic disruption. Just outside of this particular storefront were two large speakers playing Marvin Gaye's, "What's Going On," with a host of different people actively painting, drawing, talking on the stoop, and dancing. They all appeared to be Afro-Cuban, and many of them were wearing dreadlocks and some were even wearing head wraps in the traditional Afro-Caribbean style. I was surprised to see so many people in a shared space with this natural, Afro-centric aesthetic. Frankly, I had not yet observed this as a common aesthetic in Cuba. It was clear that they weren't tourists and this was more than a store with goods to sell. I approached the Black man with long dreadlocks who was standing in the doorway with his arms crossed and a welcoming smile. Unsure if it was a private event, I greeted the people gathered around the doorway, approached him and asked if I could go inside. He turned, politely ushering me to pass through the doorway. I felt welcomed and enthusiastically curious, but assumed a gingerly position of not wanting to intrude with an inappropriate degree of familiarity. I imagine that he noted this, so he invited me deeper into the space and encouraged me to proceed freely. While inside, I discovered what looked like organized chaos- paintings, posters, sculptures, canvases, pamphlets, and scattered art supplies. Unlike the other art galleries that I'd explored across various cities/ towns on the island, almost all of the art that I saw contained Black people, African-American icons and political activists, symbolic Rastafarian elements, and or political messages. This was clearly more than an art gallery. It was a site of activity; a social hub in the community. This was made clear, when as we chatted inside, several different people walked inside, showing Carlos their latest creations, asking questions about various events that the organization was sponsoring. It had a constant flow of foot traffic with

vibrantly familiar exchanges. There were probably more visitors who were well-acquainted with the space and Carlos, himself, than there were curious visitors who happened inside. As we chatted, I told Carlos more about who I was and informed him of my research. He was immediately interested and proceeded to ask me questions about the racial climate in the United States. He wanted to know what inspired my research and I explained that I wanted to better understand activism within the African diaspora, specifically in the Afro-Cuban community, as a way to address racism.

We continued to talk about his role in the gallery space and in Cienfuegos. Carlos explained that he had a natural interest in the topic, because he was an anthropologist but opened the “alternative cultural space” to provide a center for artists and musicians who were political activists. He shared that he thought it was important to have an unpretentious, accessible yet gritty place to gather as a community and wanted to broaden the reach, connections, and engagement among art activists from all over the island, especially underground artists who believed in promoting a message. Carlos explained that the center, PocoBonito was intended to be “a place for the people in the community to come, talk, and learn with and from each other.” At the same time, the artists could come and go fluidly and had a place to create and be inspired by each other, the community, the things they saw or experienced in the streets. That was why he and the other artists weren’t resigned to being inside of the gallery, but instead, continued to work on the sidewalk and on the street. Carlos explained that the space was more than a gallery, but it was also a hub for developing social action projects.

Carlos felt it was important to keep the community presence and remain attuned to the pulse of community. The community and the process of creation could be engaged

live- in real time- not only through perception. Relationships could be forged without formality and it occurred organically. This is part of the street artist culture, which Lewis (1990) explained as:

Street art is first a message-oriented art, for it seeks to influence opinions regarding cultural and social goals. Its subject matter generally reflects social conditions, and the street artist is usually attempting to provide visual experiences that promote dignity, pride, and self-understanding. Because of the social nature of street art, it is necessary for those interested in pursuing it seriously to experience the environments of their subjects and first critics. Artists using this means of expression have rediscovered the city as a fertile environment for creativity. (p. 285).

When asked if he believed there to be racism in Cuba, Carlos stated without hesitation, “Yes. Racism is very subtle but it exists.” When asked about discrimination about interracial dating between white Cubans and Afro-Cubans, he replied with the following:

Carlos: That’s true. That’s why there is no trouble, because if you talk to people on the street, most white people will say that there is no racism in Cuba and a few Black people will say there is but others who will say there is not. But it is established, so people don’t think about this. In the Cuban people’s mind, there is an established standard with white at the top of beauty and Black down here. When you see famous black people- musicians or football players in Cuba, they are always with a white Spaniard- a girl or a guy. If she or he is not white, then they are very light. It’s just established. Most people don’t think on it, but white is up here (gesticulating upward) and Black down here. If you are rich or you are famous, they go after what is white.

It's important to note that just art as art has been instrumental in criticizing the status quo and the systems that perpetuate oppressive power structures, they are equally guilty of promoting that message. Though, this is typically done in commercial art forms. It is in some of these illustrations, that one can see the propagation of dangerous stereotypes that reinforce a false ideology. This has also been the case in Cuba, particularly regarding the portrayal of Blacks in commercial films, as noted by Farber (2011):

Even the high-quality and frequently critical Cuba cinema has suffered from the same problem. Black actors have been given leading roles mainly in movies dealing with slavery or with issues of marginality, black religion, or breakdowns of social discipline and lawbreaking. Matters pertaining to discrimination and prejudice have been addressed only on infrequent occasions. (p. 174)

I continued to inquire about the aesthetic differences I'd observed, particularly noting a far less visible natural hair aesthetic. To be clear, at the time of our exchange, my hair was in a short mohawked afro with a very visible coarse, tightly coiled texture. To this Carlos replied,

Yes, yes...I like your hair. You will not see many Black women here in Cuba with this hair...they wear the unnatural fake hair or straighten it all the time. Anything to not look Black, you know? Maybe a few in the big cities, like Havana, but not many at all.

This pursuit of a Eurocentric standard of beauty was conceivably the ideal in Cuba as is the case in most former European colonies, including the United States until the Black Power Movement and other social movements that insisted on a reclamation that Black is beautiful- reclaiming and redefining Blackness as something positive and an identity around which one should have pride. This was also a task of the Black Arts Movement

of the same era, where, “African American artists embraced the concept of self-determination through self-expression, which involved the demand that they formulate their own aesthetic principles.” (Lewis, 1990, p. 143). This meant rejecting Eurocentric, Victorian, Anglo standards of beauty that had been popularized through traditional art. More specifically, it required them to redefine aesthetic principles and insert themselves into their art. Consequently, “They began to assert themselves and, in doing so, developed self-reliance, self-respect, and self-pride. As they began to strive for social and cultural independence, their attitudes towards themselves changed...” (Lewis, 1990, p. 59). Tragically, the pursuit of Eurocentric standards as perfection, even at the negation of one’s own ethnic heritage is deeply historical. It’s white-washing Blackness for the perceived appeal of whiteness, which in this case, an improvement on what you are by mere association or the altering of appearance. Carlos stated that Afro-Cubans who found fame or wealth, sought white romantic partners and also, that the natural Black aesthetic was not seen as desirable and rather unpopular. This is underscored by Farber’s point that “higher class membership identified with a higher level of whiteness...and through the acquisition of ‘better’ hair and other physical features” (p. 159)

Though PocoBonito is an alternative space for primarily young, artists engaged in political activism in Cuba, the inspiration and mission is very much like the one described by Lewis (1990) for African-American artists a few decades prior:

An ethnic group seeking to cope with today’s complicated problems must first have organized ideas and system’s that are clearly understood and can evoke responses. Outdoor murals, billboard art, and street art are all terms used to describe the community-oriented art projects springing up in urban centers across the

United States. Rapidly becoming aware of the impact of visual symbols as a means of disseminating social ideas, African American artist are using street art to interpret the experiences shared by African American's. (p. 284).

Therefore, it only felt natural that I return to the art activist community hub of Poco Bonito. It was clearly a creative center and refuge for those seeking to be in the company of individuals who were committed to impacting social change or for those who were pursuant to social change through community activism with their artistic work as the medium. So, I returned to Cienfuegos in 2017 to Poco Bonito. I came upon the store front gallery and was thrilled to learn that Carlos was in the midst of planning a large scale community event. The testimonies that follow are the result of the engagement I shared with three different art activists who were all involved in differing way in the K'Bola Project. Our exchanges occurred over two days and three different interview sessions. The engagement included an interview the day before as they were preparing for the event in the gallery. The day of the event during the showcase and late into the night and early morning after the event concluded for reflections.

I have attempted to capture the aspects of our engagement that addressed the three questions I sought to answer through this experience and present them as three separate but clearly related narratives. In an effort to honor the authentic exchange I did not retrofit their responses into my questions. Rather, I have attempted to interweave the revelations that were organically discovered in our exchanges throughout the narrative in a way that addresses each of the three questions. Some were obvious while others were less explicit, but the unsubjected truths that provide the answers are there.

Disseminating Truth through Alternative Means

During another subsequent interview session at Poco Bonito, Carlos revealed that he was organizing a street festival and concert called K'Bola Project. The K'Bola Press Release is included in Appendix Section. Carlos described the event as one in which there would be various artists from all across Cuba whom he and another organizer had personally scouted after months of traveling across Cuba to various cities and towns to go see, hear, and experience their work live.

When asked about this process and the reasoning behind it, Carlos responded with the following in our exchange:

Carlos: We bring in people who are not from the city. The music, the musicians are good. This they have a very strong message. We mash in the way we sing. I'm not able to say, when they sing they are pouring in air my songs. I pick. I notice the work of them, and if it's the same message than we bring them.

Interviewer: How do you get exposed to the different artists if they're not from here?

Carlos: We go all around the country.

The fact that Carlos strategically poured so intently over the artists and their message before committing to invite them to participate in the K'Bola Project, made it clear that his process included a critical element. Carlos, a community organizer and activist with the intention of building community to promote and grow racial pride and awareness, ultimately needed to witness other artists demonstrate a certain degree of social consciousness and shared awareness before receiving them as part the activist community. This reinforces the Gurin et al. (1980) claim that stratum identification requires having similar

beliefs, ideas, and interests, while consciousness speaks to the political beliefs and subsequent action as a consequence of recognizing that shared awareness. In short, that is how Carlos sought to coalesce with other art activists, building a coalition of artist activists from around the country to impact change by raising consciousness among members of the broader community.

I returned to Cienfuegos to document the K'Bola festival and concert. It wasn't taking place too far from the Poco Bonito gallery. I watched the frenzied preparation of technical set-up and was, myself, eager to witness the final product. It was a street art event in the center of Cienfuegos that consisted of various mediums of art including installations, rap performances, dance, live painting, and graffiti art.



Figure XIII. Artists paint on the street while a spoken word performance occurs

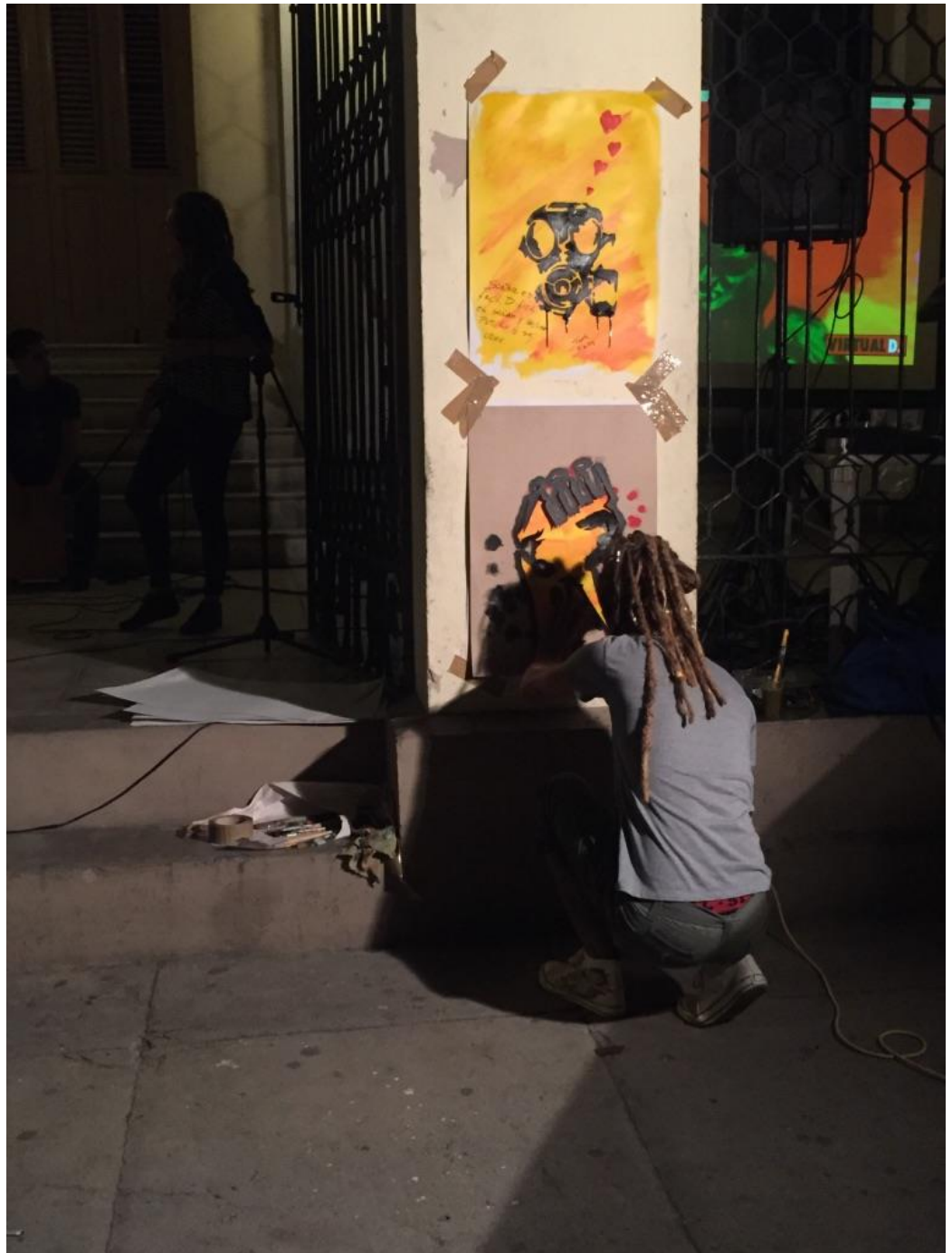


Figure XIV. Artist simultaneously stencil painting with installation and concert in background

Moreover, it was happening in the street, where equipment would be carried and set-up, so that people could literally walk-up to the art, even if they stumbled unknowingly across it and could participate. The community members were diverse in race, age, gender, and I imagine socioeconomic status. Yet, they were all present during for the same show, but clearly having a different experience. Perhaps, they received the same message, but interpreted it according to their individual level of social consciousness. In short, the event consisted of a diverse group of artists, performing a multitude of works using various mediums, was organized by artists, and voluntarily staffed by artists- all taking place on a residential street just off of the main square.



Figure XV. Attendees/ passerbys document the spontaneous art and performances

This unique communal feature defined by both people and place, is not unusual, as Lewis (1990) documents here:

Performance, installation and environmental art are often related and dependent on other art forms such as painting, sculpture, drama, and dance. Artists engaged in these art forms, frequently rely on their peers working in traditional media to assist them with the activities necessary for the development and execution of

projects. Artists involved in performances, installations and environmental art are primarily interested in the process, rather than the product. (p. 276).

Hence, it was environmental art in the most literal way. The community was a part of the natural environment. Some were invited, others simply stumbled onto the spectacle. The environment, however rugged or gritty, provided an unmanipulated, natural stage and backdrop, while the facilitating crew and artists were spectators along with the organically grown street audience. According to Lewis (1990) the meshing of culture, art, and environment is intentional on the part of the artist:

Artists committed themselves to the proposition that their work should be regarded primarily as serious attempts toward improving the quality of their physical and cultural surroundings, rather than as mere commodities to be bought and sold. Parks, fields, alleys, farms and numerous other types of alternative spaces proved to be suitable sites for excavations and installations. (p. 276).

I sat with Carlos again after the show and discovered that the city did not assist with the production or contribute to the resources to bring the show to life.

Carlos: We need permission to play, to do what we do. Without permission, we get arrested.

Carlos appears slightly disappointed that the very city of which he is a member and proprietor fails to support such a public display, but the sentiment behind this quickly fades to the more pragmatic reality of the fact that it is strictly a consequence of the activism work that he does.

In short, this is evidence of the reality that activists, even art activists whose methods and modes may be considered less overt, are often forced to negotiate the rules and

parameters of systems to bring their work to public spaces. Oftentimes, they do this with the hopes that they can maintain the essence and intention of their goal/ message. There is irony in that- the fact that even the outdoors is a controlled environment, but specifically, controlled by the city, which represents an institution, which represents on some level, the state. When I asked Carlos if he relied solely on live performances to inform his decision of who and what to include in the event, he had the following to say:

Interviewer: So you go to other cities and you listen to other concerts. Do you get anything from social media or is it always live?

Carlos: That's the only way.

Interviewer: Why is that? You said it resolutely.

Carlos: I think there is a lot of prejudices with hip hop music. People are critical, and not everyone would be open to this.

Interviewer: Do you think in that way there's still an element of control in messaging? Yes. I think everybody deals with that. There's no point in asking because it's common knowledge.

Interviewer: Do you think it's specific to Cuba?

Carlos: I think it's out of Cuba. But in Cuba you can contextually, you can speak to almost certainly feeling that there's control over what types of messages are acceptable over a public medium. The public medium, they have to pause because, when people are criticizing, it could be a good critique or no, because they {the criticizer against the state} may or may not be right. They are right or wrong. That type of controversy, point of view is never shown on the media.

So, censorship or the reframing and reconstructing the narrative was something over which Carlos and his fellow organizers assumed a great deal of care to prevent.

Carlos continues on to explain that everyone in the community was invited. However, even people who wished to support the event, didn't do so out of fear. While those that did, did so surreptitiously. Carlos ascribes this largely to the associations made with subversive hip-hop. That is hip-hop that is assumed to be critical of the state. So, rather than experience it personally, some people resign from supporting the art, because of the label it's garnered. Carlos describes the difficulty of procurement for permits and access for such a public even in a public space from people who either misunderstood what they were doing or what they were about, while also being averse to wanting to understand. The result is a failure to authentically connect with those who have preconceived notions and fear around what the art activist wish to accomplish.

Carlos: The people are invited. they don't think but just because they label it {hip-hop} like that, not many people want to help us. We cannot make a concert because we need permissions. Those people who are in power to grant us permission, they are afraid. They just simply like, 'no, 'because' they don't have reggaeton, you know. They don't see us; I see it as the message that we're thinking.

Carlos does make a point to state that reggaeton, a genre of rap of which he and the majority of artists I interviewed were highly critical, is not perceived with the same degree of threat, if perceived as a threat, at all. In fact, Carlos shared that the genre of reggaeton is not included in the K'Bola Project at all. This leads me to inquire about that choice, as it is a hugely popular, profitable genre, particularly across most Latin American countries. Carlos explains why he doesn't believe reggaeton to be part of the movement-

largely because it lacks a critically conscious elements and relies solely on the commodification of its message- a largely capitalistic approach to art.

Interviewer: I notice you described this {the K'Bola Project} as a movement. Do you see this project K'Bola at Poco Bonito as a movement? If so how would you describe the movement?

Carlos: There was a time when the movement was working. We decided to leave the concert, it's like the music is known, the message is... we know what it is, and the people who are singing are all of our friends. People cannot tell you about it, they ask us to this social media. We do not, because we travel. They are all friends; they gave us their music on a USB. That's how we have so much music. Most people, they don't know that this is also cure {to censorship}.

Carlos is averse to social media as the sole source of promotion to find new talent. He still believes firmly in a grassroots approach- connecting directly, interpersonally with others. This means traveling, however inconvenient, to the people to engage them personally in an effort to experience their undiluted truth.

Interviewer: So what is it you want to accomplish exactly? Having said so many Cubans don't even know that critically conscious hip-hop exists. You're almost doing a national project to create local consciousness.

Carlos: That's pretty much it. We have a very good message. We can make people better people. So if not everybody who listens, the few people who think about this. This is very good logic.

Interviewer: You said you wanted the people who participated to leave as better people. And how do you want them to be better people based upon what you want to accomplish in your movement.

Carlos: Right now, it's a concept for our society. A way of behave, that's not good in any way. Hip hop artists, {not} a concert of reggaeton, we have the power to. If people get this message closer to people, this will be a solution. The next solution we will make based on it.

Interviewer: So is the movement in reggaeton messaging or commodification?

Carlos: There are artists that write, some do and they {Reggaeton artists} don't. But we are really a project.

Interviewer: Can you explain, because I personally am not as familiar with why reggaeton may be considered subversive to a movement around critical consciousness?

Carlos: I mean, the only thing that people only care about is money. They will think like, it's like commercial American hip hop. They say in Spanish, they do it the same. All of them.

Interviewer: There's no underground reggaeton?

Carlos: No.

Interviewer: It's been commodified and commercialized?

Carlos: Yeah.

Carlos believes that the K'Bola Project should showcase artists who present art with messages that are radically conscious and political in nature. Though now occurring in contemporary Cuba, this was also a shared consciousness of Black artists during the Black Arts Movement decades prior in the United States of America. As a fellow artist in the Black Arts Movement, Neal (1969), illuminates the mission of the Black Arts Movement

with, “We advocate a cultural revolution in art and ideas. The cultural values inherent in western history must either be radicalized or destroyed, and we will probably find that even radicalization is impossible. In fact, what is needed is a whole new system of ideas” (p. 29). This is undeniably similar to Carlos’ criticism of reggaeton and why it wasn’t a genre that is considered radical or consciousness enough for its inclusion. To Carlos and many other Afro-Cuban art activists, reggaeton is not hip-hop; it does not satisfy the underground progressiveness of what hip-hop was intended to achieve- which was to bring a critical message to el pueblo, the people. Stahl & Watson (2013) purport that “hip-hop has become first and foremost a multi-billion dollar business. The lyrics, which did initially have some socio-critical content, have succumbed to the mainstream with its traditional focus on love and showmanship” (p. 186). It is this type of commercial hip-hop around which reggaeton is associated and one of the reasons the Cuban art activists I engaged do not want reggaeton associated with their socially conscious underground hip-hop movement.

Carlos continues to return to this point of critical consciousness and the lack of effort on the majority in Cuba to engage in it, regularly. This is what is guiding his art activism. Critical consciousness, around racism specifically, is not a guaranteed byproduct of literacy and education. Jones (2013) extends that point here:

The fact that tens of thousands of Afro-Cubans have achieved the intellectual capacity to read, analyze, compare and extract their own conclusions thanks to the knowledge obtained through the existence of the Cuban Revolution should not deprive them of their right to question, denounce or silence mistakes or forbid them from proposing ideas or solutions for the nation’s failures and unfulfilled dreams.

Rather than weakening the government and its institutions with his actions, such a courageous, frontal approach fortifies and creates a positive environment of concern, interest and a social commitment to create a better nation which is, in essence, what the Cuban Revolution is all about in the first place (p. 74).

I deduce from what he's shared, thus far, that Carlos' critical consciousness comments are what I perceive to be directly related to a heightened social consciousness around Black identity and liberation. So Carlos and I dive deeper into his identity and how it informs and impacts his work.

Interviewer: For you to be an organizer, this is your brainchild. Your passion that you are realizing in a very concrete way. How were you able to reconcile your own identity to develop a consciousness that you could put into action socially? What was that process for you? I know it's a heavy question.

Carlos: It's a shame that you didn't talk to him, we did a lot together. We have a lot of chance, he's black like me. Were concerned about racism, black people. We had the need to spread this.

Interviewer: 3 years ago it started right?

Carlos: And that's what made us start. Art, music, we want people to think about these things. We didn't have any other way to do it. Media or the bigger I don't know, audience, so that's the way we found to put this into discussion. It's not that we really achieved, but so far for a few people who follow us, this is the only thing that really enjoyed the whole month.

Mere exposure to a work of art is not sufficient to occasion an aesthetic experience. There must be conscious participation in a work, a going out of energy, an

ability to notice what is there to be noticed in the play, the poem, the quartet.

"Knowing about," even in the most formal academic manner, is entirely different from creating an unreal world imaginatively and entering it perceptually, affectively, and cognitively. (Greene, 1995, p. 379)

Maxine Greene expresses exactly what Carlos hopes to achieve through these organized communal engagements with the arts. These engagements aim to accomplish two things at once- provide a site for expressions of social action and provide a means of informal education through thought-provoking, conscious reflection and interaction through that shared social action.

When we do these concerts. Reggaeton, a little bit of rumba, no one wants to commit with reality. Except with the hip-hop artists. That's my view.

Interviewer: Interesting. Racially, you seem to be very... very proud of your blackness of your afrodescendency. Was that intuitive for you? If you were in a society, I'm asking this as brother and sister in the diaspora. One thing I recognize personally being in a society where everything about you aesthetically, intellectually, is reconstructed in a negative way. For me anyway, I think it takes some intentionality to reject those negative false constructions around blackness and reconstruct it in a way that's authentically positive.

Carlos: It came with a lot of reading. Some concepts, things that seem to be natural are forced by the society, sometimes by the family or the media. And getting all this information I realize sometimes black people in Cuba are under oppression but we are realizing that neither white or black realizes oppression over the black because it comes so naturally. Sometimes it's hard to prove there is racism.

Interviewer: Did you have some experiences with racism Carlos?

Carlos: Everyone.

Interviewer: Yeah I talked to some people who said that no there's no racism here, were all Cuban.

Carlos: What people? That's like a documentary {that} is from Raza. The documentary made by the Martin Luther King Foundation in Havana. It's called Raza. They asked the same question to black woman and white woman. The white woman would say there's no racism and the black people would say there is. The white people don't even notice sometimes. For white people you say what will you find with a black person, they will say it is not. Purity is white. It's just natural, they don't think they are being oppressive, but it's natural. I don't think it's natural.

Carlos is displaying a clear critical, racial consciousness about his identity. His ability to understand and articulate that though it is commonplace and a widespread ideology, the raceless Cuba does not exist and racism is real- not the trivial isolated occurrence that it's been constructed for years to be. He attributes his degree of self-awareness and critical social consciousness around race within the larger stratum to reading and education. Though Lewis (1990) makes the following assertion around African-Americans, specifically, it can support the Afro-Cuban experience of art activists, as well. He claims that the primary obligation of racially conscious artists is to:

understand and use, whenever possible, elements of their cultural heritage. A second obligation is to understand the power of art and the use of that power to inform and to educate. The African American artist should also establish a direct relationship with people at all socioeconomic and educational levels. In this role the

artist is an interpreter, a voice that makes intelligible the deepest, most meaningful aspirations of the people. The artist is a channel through which their resentments, hopes, fears, ambitions, and all other unconscious drives that condition behavior are expressed and become explicit. In this role the artist is a community resource, valued and supported because he or she forsakes the “ivory tower” and gets to the heart of community life. What kind of art meets the artist’s obligations to the community? (p.4)

When considering whether or not one has moved the needle to incite transformation in an individual or even a community, there are considerations to be made. So, I ask Carlos if he feels that he’s successfully activated and engaged people. This is the exchange:

Interviewer: I see you activating and engaging people in your community and beyond.

Carlos: I think I do, I think I bring my friends that didn’t see that way. Now they see the same way I do. Maybe I can leave the country and see that it will keep going.

Interviewer: Do you think it’s possible to build coalitions from this type of work? People who don’t see that they share the same oppressions with other people. Do you think coming to Poco Bonito, having these conversations, these critical dialogues, this revelation of consciousness, do you think it’s possible for them to experience it, singularly or multiple times and build a network across difference.



Figure XVI. Hip-hop group from Havana performing at the K'Bola Project

Carlos: The reason? My friends are here. They came from Havana. I have friends like them all around the country. There doing their stuff, the concerts, and the message. They are doing stuff. But I think it's still too small. It's kept in very small circle so it's not making the change that it should. We need people to start thinking with their heads, otherwise I don't really have the way. I haven't shown, but because they are set in mechanisms of control of this badness, this mechanism is realist. Cuba couldn't be a beauty as some people think it is. It's shown more and more every day. I think this kind of civic work is important.

Carlos describes his work as a civic duty, an ethical and moral responsibility to the greater good. Much like another Afro-Cuban activist, the renowned and highly controversial Roberto Zurbano, Carlos criticizes the lack of reach that racial consciousness has in Cuba and hopes that his work will help to catalyze that racial consciousness in the fight against racism in Cuba. Zurbano (2013) posits the following:

Our racial consciousness still remains insufficient and it would make it a small (or ephemeral), triumph to have a black Cuban figure isolated at the top in a prejudiced milieu, leading a country whose political and cultural links to Africa some Cubans still try to hide. Eventually we will be able to have a black Pope or President whose hands will not be tied. As for me, I will continue to struggle for and dream of a country where black people are the builders, owners, and critics of our destiny as Cubans, where we will enjoy fuller citizenship. That country has yet to arrive, but aside from dreaming it, I go out searching for it every morning.

(p. 72)

Blurring the Defining Lines

One of my participants, a graffiti artist, muralist, and screen print artist, to whom I'll refer as Pepe, used his art as a platform to fight for gender equality and bringing awareness to domestic violence. He's a muralist who uses the graffiti style of spray paint to place subversive messages on industrial and popular iconic images. He wore long a long and full beard with a few waist long dreadlocks adorned with sporadic bead placement.

Interviewer: What is the significance behind Poco Bonito?

Pepe: First, it's the name of a regular for us, we have someone with the same name. We like the idea to show people something different and maybe you'll see with simple eyes, something ugly, it's not the traditional art in Cuba. There are we care more on the message of the painting.

Interviewer: So, you said something very interesting- it's not like traditional art you find in Cuba, it also has a message. So all of the pieces in this gallery Poco bonito have a message. How is it not like traditional Cuban art? And also what is your contribution as an artist in the messages you'd like to bring forth?

Pepe: The problem with traditional art in Cuba, you see, the traditional souvenir for the tourist. The all-American car, tobacco. It's something empty, you take a photo and take it. This is not a great process behind that. When you, for example, you think of idea of a line of work of something you want to it. You think in your mind, think in your mind, you go to cartoons or something like that. You have the idea or concept you want to paint in your work. You know?....

Pepe makes a clear distinction between traditional art in Cuba and what he considers to be real art. Traditional art imbues nothing critical. It is art that has mass appeal to tourists like the American cars of the 1950s and Cuban cigars. Both of which are linked to American capitalism. These type of souvenirs bode well with tourists and can be easily reproduced for mass consumption. Essentially, it is commercial, and it also lacks a message, and the message for Pepe is crucial to being representative of something “real” in Cuban society.

This is a clear point of contention for the art activists who endeavor to make art that reflects the reality of the oppressed and thus, aspires to bring attention to the circumstances of their oppressive experiences. In this way, the Afro-Cuban art activists in Cuba have an ethical principle that is central to the movement and tethered to their art. That ethical principle is liberation and the actions that would undergird that liberation are equity and access within and among all institutions and practices for Blacks in Cuba. Again, this is another parallel to the Black Arts Movement that predicated this current social movement in Cuba among Afro-Cuban art activists as Neal (1968) explains in the following:

Consequently, the Black Arts Movement is an ethical movement. Ethical, that is, from the viewpoint of the oppressed. And much of the oppression confronting the Third World and Black America is directly traceable to the Euro-American cultural sensibility. It is a profound ethical sense that makes a Black artist question a society in which art is one thing and the actions of men another. The Black Arts Movement believes that your ethics and your aesthetics are one. (p. 30-31).

Whereas, the art that Pepe and the other activists in his art activist community aim to show a different kind of art to people. One that rejects the commodifiable aesthetic.

Pepe: I have a project, what I create is only for graffiti. That project I go to Havana, in Havana with some friend of mine, he's a musician. There is a hip hop festival. In the morning is always for graffiti and the night is always for hip hop. In Havana I paint sometime, Matances, all my graffiti's.

Certainly, not all graffiti is political and like art not all graffiti is intended to be interpreted in a specifically political way. Some graffiti incite public discussion or critique social elements that beg for social change. Nevertheless, the only one that can affirm the claim either way is the artist, but that doesn't negate the way the audience, however private or public, experiences it. And with subjective engagement comes subjective interpretation.

Lewis (1990) says that "...art should also help to enrich the physical appearance of the community. This does not call for uncontrolled graffiti and fanciful false facades on buildings. It does require a diverse art: an art that exploits every possible quality of individual difference in the artist who produces it. (p. 4). Therefore, Pepe is as diverse as the art he produces. His art, be it murals or graffiti, is a mechanism for his message- a message intended to raise awareness while promoting effective change within society.

Pepe: I paint something because I have the talent, it's behind the idea of what I give. It's a concept, it's going to make all the community one, even the children in the community. I create it because we need real art, not only in the galleries but in the street. People of Cuba need art in life, some ideas what I work a lot.

Pepe explicitly says that he aims to educate and unify the community, including children, through his art- real art- and the street is the place of location for such action. This is explained further by Stahl & Watson (2013) in the following:

For street art, the place of action is, as the name already says, a crucial factor.

Unlike the artwork on the private walls of the artist's studio, street art takes place in the public eye and is accessible to all. Quite apart from their artwork, the artists also convey first and foremost the mere fact that they exist. At the same time, they shape their environment and imbue it with their own, idiosyncratic interpretation. (p. 16-17)

It can be understood that artists who engage in street art also are able to validate their very existence. Therefore, they can no longer be rendered invisible in the professional institutions that dictate value or worthiness of recognition. To Pepe, real art is street art, and real art should be fully accessible to community members, not just in institutions that determine what is art and what is not.

This was a criticism of gallery culture, which limited access to the artists who wished to show their work by created the criteria that decided what work was valuable or worthy of being exhibited, so both they and their work were dismissed. The non-elite in society were also visibly absent in these professional art spaces/ galleries, because not only was access restricted and exclusive for predominantly Eurocentric taste and patrons, they were not even considered. This was a barrier in the art world, and like most institutions, race played a key indicator as a factor of obstruction. Art activists seek radical transformation, and thus, sought more than recognition and notoriety in the existing art world, which most Black artists were excluded from to begin with. Rather, their goal was to revolutionize the art world and address the imperative of the art activists' cultural responsibility of social engagement and political activism, which meant creating a space for

the communities who were ignored and rendered invisible by those who held the institutional power (Morris & Hockley, 2017).

Specifically, Pepe aims to combat the hypersexualization and sexual commodification of women- which is perpetuated by patriarchal and misogynistic institutions.

Pepe: I am against violence, {and}the inequality of women in our community. I try to show to the people, it's not just men's its women's. Women is not a simple object you can sell. It's important to know his role in society right now. Using the body for women in sale or for produce. It's for the woman too. You need to respect your ideas. You have your own kind of bubble, to self-protect, that bubble will not resolve the problem. In any time, it comes back again. It's about that. My conscious.

Herein lies the consciousness, as articulated by Pepe himself, that leads to subsequent action. Pepe speaks directly to the commodification of sex and women's bodies. Pepe does not accept a passive recognition of culpability on the part of men. Rather, he expresses the importance of men knowing their role in society, which is associated with the active consumption of sexualized women- whether that be through the male gaze or active participation as a consumer of misogynistic culture.

However, in addition to placing the liability on a system that commodifies bodies, rendering them docile, Pepe also says that women have a responsibility around respecting their ideas and protecting themselves. In this assertion there is also a call to action for women. Pepe, says through metaphor, but in the simplest of terms that existing within a "bubble" will not combat the issue of capitalist misogyny. He acknowledges that misogyny is a systemic challenge that requires action. More specifically, it requires action on

the part of those who are oppressed to insist on this change, and in this case, the oppressed are women. I suggest that it is this consciousness that has the possibility to activate. In closing, Pepe insists on shared accountability and action to influence social change.

Though he identifies as male, Pepe considered himself a feminist with a strong predilection for all things that are traditionally considered feminine in the patriarchal and misogynistic Cuban culture.

Interviewer: Why this issue? Do you self-identify as a man?

Pepe: Yeah, {but} not in the hard meaning of man...For example, I am man because I have balls, something else. I don't have boobs, but {I am} no man in the psychological behavior. For example, I love pink. I am a very cute, I love the cute stuff. I prefer the woman's. In that case I am not man.

Pepe: I don't believe in masculinity...

Pepe is aware that he presents as male and is biologically male, and he underscores that by acknowledging his biological genitalia. Yet, Pepe refuses to be pigeonholed by societal norms that assign behaviors, attitudes, values, and interests to binary genders. In that sense, Pepe is gender non-conforming. This is political. Specifically, Hill-Collins (2000) identifies it is sexual politics, which, “examine the links between sexuality and power” (p. 165). However, the way that he self-identifies is not what makes him an activist. He is an activist because his radical social consciousness is reflected in the way that intentionally rejects hyper-masculinity and the socially constructed semiotics that are pre-assigned to girls and boys and then, uses his art to give criticize these restrictive and constraining stereotypes. Pepe uses the examples of the color pink and the term “cute,”

which are traditionally associated with girls/ women and the feminine, which are socially constructed gender meanings assigned to categories of biological sex (Hill-Collins, 2000). By voicing that these socially rooted feminine characteristics are in fact, things that he personally associates with himself (as a biological male) and how he self-identifies, he is transgressing an oppressive norm, because “sexuality is socially constructed through the sex/gender system on both the personal level of individual consciousness and interpersonal relationships, and the social structural level of social institutions (Foucault, 1980) (Hill-Collins, 2000, p. 165).

In short, Pepe rejects masculinity as a part of his identity or a social construct around which he aligns himself, and that for him, is a way to subvert an oppressive institution regarding gender identity, while asserting power through embracing a prideful self-identity that celebrates femininity.

Interviewer...Tell me about why you became personally interested in subverting messages that were against the violence of women, against violence...

Pepe: The start was when, with no reason, you start to believe and concern about some topic. It marks something difference or special in your life. I tried to protect something. Very young, I lost my mom to cancer. The woman of my family, you see the meaning of a woman. And I don't have it. I see people... I try to fill the hole I have in my chest. I believe that the best stuff of what I can do is try to protect, you know? The image I have in my side (Pepe gestures to a painting in the studio).

Art is political, but the political is also personal. For Pepe, it is deeply personal and both the personal and political culminate in messages he brings forth in his artistic expression.

For instance, his art focuses on gender equality and it seeks to bring awareness about violence against women. Pepe's consciousness is arguably a direct result of the patriarchal presence on his formative development and how the direct influence of women in his family have impacted the way he sees himself and his position in the world. Undoubtedly, his social action is tied to his personal experience and identity as a man who was enculturated into a home with a rich and strong feminine presence. This is also compounded by the loss of his mother, which he experienced at a young age.

Interviewer: Talk to me about this particular painting, which I will take a picture of as a reference (See Appendix).

The painting is a very industrialized style stencil of the backside perspective of a woman from torso to thigh in thong underwear with exposed buttocks that are blocked by her bound handcuffed hands. Across the painting in red is the word, "CENSURADO" or censured in English, in all capital letters.

Pepe: This one is about stopping violence against the woman. At the same time, it's don't try to sell the violence. You can't side with that. I create that painting, very basic and then I censorate {censor} the painting myself. I censor my own painting.

The subject of the piece is an almost nude woman in lacy thong underwear without a visible face. This is symbolic of the fact that she can be any woman; she represents women. The fact that she's handcuffed is representative of constraints, a restricted position and powerlessness. The subject is handcuffed behind her back, which implies that she wasn't responsible for her own bondage, removing a sense of agency. And yet, the elements of this image are almost ubiquitous- everywhere from lingerie commercials and film, to graphic novels and comic books- making them easy to reproduce and sell for economic

gain. Angela Davis (1981) makes an intersectional claim that proposes a correlation among sexism, racism, and capitalism in the following:

The class structure of capitalism encourages men who wield power in the economic and political realm to become routine agents of sexual exploitation...when the capitalist class is furiously reasserting its authority in face of global and internal challenges. Both racism and sexism, central to its domestic strategy of increased economic exploitation, are receiving unprecedented encouragement. (p. 200)

The critical element of Pepe's piece is that he's placed "CENSURADO" across the subject and painting as a whole. The commentary itself is literal criticism- a denunciation of sexual exploitation and restrictions placed on women. The fact that the words are red and in all capital letters make it almost scream out from the image, as an urgent call to action.

Interviewer: You {wrote} censored {on} the painting? Why?

Pepe: It represents violence. It represents something masculine.

Though, Pepe associates violence against women with something masculine/ patriarchal in nature, I do want to postulate that Pepe is not suggesting that masculinity is "an immutable biologically and psychologically determined product of men's inherent nature," rather, he recognizes the "social determinations, especially under conditions of capitalism" that influence the way we understand masculinity as a society (Davis, 1990, p. 45). Rape and sexual violence against women is a flagrant abuse of power, and it is that power that is a systemically oppressive force in institutions that perpetuate it through imagery, messages in the media, the ideology associated with masculinity and gendered behaviors, and the capitalist commodification of women and women's bodies.

Interviewer: Do you have any other work that has this theme?

Pepe: I have some photos, and I have a stencil for oil painting. The name {of the painting} is "Self-respect."

Interviewer: So, you're fighting violence against women and promoting self-respect. So this is a sentimental issue, not just a political issue.

Pepe: I try to show to the people, it's not just men's, its women's. Women is not a simple object you can sell. It's important to know his role in society right now. Using the body for women in sale or for produce. It's for the woman too. You need to respect your ideas. You have your own kind of bubble, to self-protect, that bubble will not resolve the problem.

Pepe's activism surrounding violence against women, including sexual assault, is an intersectional fight that Angela Davis (1981) describes in the following:

An effective strategy against rape must aim for more than the eradication of rape- or even of sexism- alone. The struggle against racism must be an ongoing theme of the anti-rape movement, which must not only defend women of color, but the many victims of the racist manipulation of the rape charge as well. The crisis dimensions of sexual violence constitute one of the facets of a deep and ongoing crisis of capitalism (p. 201).

Pepe: It's personal, I don't like politics because its bullshit. Maybe you can fight against the political stuff, but only with people in power.

Interviewer: Trust me, I understand completely now. My heart is broken in several ways.

In this moment, Pepe and I have a clear moment of consensus regarding a sense of despair around politics and more specifically, our disillusionment with politicians. It is important to note that Trump had been in office for less than two months at the time of this interview.

I'd met with Pepe the day before the K'Bola Project in the studio while he and several other artists were gathered in the gallery. When asked about the K'Bola Project, Pepe describes it as: *It's a project we have {not} in the gallery, with underground music and art. Hop hip music, painting, and graffiti.*

Based on Pepe's description, the K'Bola Project is a consolidation of various art forms coming together with music. Specifically, underground hip hop, which is subversive and intended to promote a certain degree of consciousness among listeners. Moreover, the art activists are not charging for the event to make it accessible for everyone in the community-locally and those who are traveling to attend the event from elsewhere.

Pepe: It is be in the street, it's for free.

Pepe emphasizes that the K'Bola event is both outside in the streets of the community of Cienfuego, and it is also a free event for members of the community. Therefore, it is in the community, of the community, for the community and the fact that it is free means universal access for all, particularly in a country where Afro-Cubans experience a disproportionate amount of economic hardship. Universal access is radical because it removes systems of hierarchy.

Pepe: I am only part of the crew, but the creator of the project, the manager itself is Carlos.

One of the most powerful aspects of coalition-building is the aspect of shared responsibility toward the common goal. This was evident in Pepe's admission above. His central role in bringing the K'Bola to life on this particular day was as part of the crew, an equally critical aspect that contributed to the success of the event. Everyone has a role in the movement, and that role may change based on the event or the day, because everyone is valued as a critical to advance the cause and the message.

Beyond the K'Bola Project, there is another aspect of the movement which has to do with the reclamation of what was lost in order to progress, explained previously as the concept of Sankofa. According to Pepe, there is an intentional reclamation of and pride in African influences- in music, in hair (natural or locked), aesthetic, and even language. Pepe explains with a wry chuckle that "the only people who speak Spanish in Cuba are tourists. Cubans speak 'Cuban'- a mix of African language- Yoruba words, American, pop culture, and Spanish all together." It is interesting, if not intentional that Pepe listed African language as the first in the sequence and the Spanish influence on contemporary language in Cuba as last in the sequence. I suggest that it is either consciously or unconsciously connected to the fact Spanish is the language of the oppressor- the Spanish colonizer and Africa are the roots of the people, even though colonial domination and post-colonialism decentered it through its attempts to erase it from Cuban culture, altogether. This reclamation is an attempt at, "the emergence of Africa from foreign domination and that continents struggle to regain its own ways of life while participating in a complex world structure, contribute greatly to this increased awareness." (Lewis, 1990, p. 3). By insisting on the inclusion of African culture in Cuban culture, art activists are defying the

singularity of identity. They are insisting that identity be understood, respected, embraced and celebrated- not simply tolerated- as part of the Afro-Cuban contemporary reality.

Hope: A Fight Against Disillusionment

When asked about how he came to be involved with the other art activists, his explanation was simple enough. He told me that he was searching; *“searching about. Looking at what is spiritually and economically available. I found Carlos, he told me the idea for the project, and I fell in love. We are like three years in the workshop.”*

Ali described Coco Bonito as *a simple idea...it is from the beauty in the places that the people, they cannot see. That they {themselves} are not...like a black woman or fat woman or old house...You {We} are trying to capture that beauty.*

Interviewer: It's very social, to me it's a social movement. Would you consider it a social movement?

Ali: Of course, we are trying to get money because money is not the essence of the light but everyone needs money. Our work is more for the people of the street. For the people, underground people. Yeah I think that is society, it's such a work.

Interviewer: So would you consider it a grass roots movement because your focus is the people of the streets?

Ali: Yeah.

Interviewer: Why is that important?

Ali: Because the people. That kind of people is the most hurt people.

Interviewer: Most hurt how? In what ways?

Ali: Spiritually, economically, socially, in many ways. People, entire families, fathers doesn't know their sons. Mother doesn't care about the son. Women in the streets, there are many, many problems.

Interviewer: So you think by working and mobilizing these people, the people from the streets, you can produce change? What do you hope to happen?

Ali: Our goal is, we are a tiny project, but at least it is a little piece of hope. We are trying to show the people that there is another way to get happiness or to get comfortable. Because they know just one way you know?

What is the one way you feel the people know?

Ali: For San Fieras, my neighborhood, people doesn't know for example sometimes what is good music or a good movie. Who is the president of I don't know? Honolulu, whatever. Things like that, we are trying to open the mind of those people.

Interviewer: Would you consider that education? Alternative education?

Ali: It's just not education, it's the environment. It doesn't matter if you are the educated man, but if you are of this environment, a lot of bad things, and a lot of bad system. Eventually, your soul will get broke.

Right, what are those systems? Racism? Oppression? Are those? The ones you're talking about?

Ali: Yeah, there is a lot of change... We still have that, those feelings, we feed into. Those feelings about presence, machismo, that kind of loss. Like I say, we are trying to change that. Our commenting, in the places where we live. And if we change, hope so, we can talk about change in San Fieras.

Location and Place

Interviewer: How does that start? Conversations? Because you're using art to create...

Ali: We are using art because we noticed that art can be a healing way. You don't make, but if you have a good piece of art or a good song or a good movie you can start that kind of thinking, you know? You can put the people to think. What's going on? Why am I in this situation? Why I don't do something about that?

Again, Ali speaks to the critical importance of wanting his work to inspire critical thought for those who engage it. By engaging in critical thought, Ali hopes to inspire social consciousness and healing. Greene (1995) recognizes that this is, “not the only role of the arts, although encounters with them frequently do move us to want to restore some kind of order, to repair, and to heal” (p. 379).

Interviewer: Right, and you made how many pieces today? Because you were painting while the music was playing.

Ali: I made 3 paintings. Basically my work is about focused on the individual. Not on the man or woman. But individual, not in the mass because in Cuba, one of the idea of the revolution at the beginning was like um, give the power to the mass. To the group.

Ali assumes the responsibility of seeking out the authentic elements of individuals through his art to tell their story and convey their emotional experiences while provoking thought and a deeper, potential relatable consciousness for the viewer. This notion of making the experiences of an individual a point of focus, is somewhat antithetical to post-revolution Cuban political identity, wherein which national identity as a way to progress the unit is paramount. Camnitzer (2007) contends that “the younger artists see themselves not only as artists but also as a part of a political spearhead” (p. 316)

Ali: In Cuba, you were saying, the idea of give the power to the mass. So the mass can decide about everyone. Everyone can decide about everyone. That's a good idea, political idea that's good. But, that start with the idea if the power is from the mass, then the individual can be important. So, in our society, you can be with a lot of people around you, but still you can feel that loneliness. I am speaking of that, when you are in a big society, you don't talk with anyone. You feel so outcast, or stuck to show bad things. Like, you're start think bad things, against women, against gay people, just bad things like bad thoughts like hate or whatever. So my work is focused on the individual, I try to show with colors, how this feels. The colors are like a trick, character in my work, also lets white space I am talking about that. I am talking about the absence of love or absence of self-respect. Something like that.

Interviewer: Interesting, one of your pieces that you painted tonight during, how do you say this?

Ali: Pena, like pity. La Pena.

Interviewer: But I saw two paintings that you did. One was a heart that looked like it was behind bars.

Ali: That was out of my plans. I spoke with some guy before I start, this guy around 50s years, he told me his own history. I push that, and I respect him because not everybody can do that. So he told me about 27-35 years ago he was in jail. He fell in love with the officer who was working with him, a woman officer. They have this love story, and 20 years later, they met again. And now they are living like husband and wife. He told me the idea of putting a heart behind bars. So I tried to recreate that.

That the arts make substantial demands on those who would use them to make things expressive or lovely will come as no surprise to anyone who has seriously engaged in the arts. The arts - both in creation and in appreciation - require the use of our faculties of abstraction in order to make judgments about relationships that will submit to no crystallized rule (Eisner, 2005, p. 10).

This is what Ali did in his creation of this painting. Ali took the abstract sentiments of an incarcerated person's tender connection with someone in a position of power and authority and attempted to make sense out of it. To capture the complexities of their unlikely story in his artistic depiction. Ultimately, Ali hoped to recreate and inspire that evocation of emotion that the man incited in him from those who engaged the work he was inspired to create as a consequence of that exchange.

Interviewer: So it was inspired in the moment.

Ali: Yes... I love the history that is one of my ideas about how love can change things.

But, really really love, no false love.

Interviewer: What's false love?

Ali: False love for us is like people say that they love the country but then they are speaking bad about the country. Not because they want to change the country, they're just speaking bad. That is false love.

Interviewer: You're talking about Cubans that left for other countries that's false love?

Ali: Yeah. Not everyone. A lot of Cubans go just because they can't live here anymore. Other Cubans, for some people. Have money here but they just leave because they hate the country. Situation made that country.

Indeed, some Cubans who have fled Cuba may have they couldn't live there anymore, but fiscal resources- wealth or capital- in some form, was often a vehicle for the means to even have that choice. It is white Cubans who have historically and currently, have the means and access to leave, due to both generational wealth or remittances from family members in Miami who send money, which provides access and choice. This contemporary reality is historically linked to both capitalism and race in Cuba among other countries. Taylor (2016) states that "Capitalism used racism to justify plunder, conquest, and slavery, but as Karl Marx pointed out, it would also come to use racism to divide and rule – to pit one section of the working class against another, and, in so doing, blunt the class consciousness of all." (p.206)

Interviewer: What's the situation?

Ali: The political scene. You can't blame the country; we've made the land. It's not the guilt {fault}, the land is not to blame. Blame the system.

The fact that Ali can both identify and subsequently assert blame on the system that is operating in Cuba and to some degree maintaining the oppression of some of its people, is an example example of awareness, social consciousness, and active resistance. Saying aloud is active resistance, because in the past, speaking such things had grave consequences. Even now, there are arguable repercussions. Ali is defining in own understanding of the operationalization of social and political processes in Cuba. His art is the tool

that is providing varied disruption and strategic resistance to the oppressive system that he's criticizing. Camnitzer (2007) suggests that Cuban art "has developed into an increasingly sophisticated tool of constructive criticism and improvement of the system. Even when aesthetic ruptures occur, this awareness gives Cuban art a sort of steady continuity" (p. 318)

Interviewer: And so, does that speak to the political aspect of your art?

Ali: Yes, I have a political aspect of course. I think everything has a political side.

Interviewer: Even art?

Ali: Yeah, my art is more focused on the people. Something in there, that it's not the center of my speech.

Ali's explicit recognition that his art is a conduit of complex communication beyond the verbal speaks to the intentionality behind his work and the messages it carries- even through insinuated or implied messaging. According to Camnitzer (2003):

Critic Garardo Mosquera described the position of the new Cuban artists as 'informed by a variety of languages,' with ethics coming to the foreground and 'a wider sense of a concern about human conduct, a faith in human betterment, the absence of nihilism, alienation, or an existential cynicism. (p. 317)

Interviewer: So the question...is what do you hope to provoke from your viewers? When they see the painting what do you wish to provoke or invoke.

Ali: Of course I wish of what I want to provoke. But you know, in the end everyone can notice different things. That is art.

Ali: But my goal is the people, when they watch my paintings, of course, they love the colors. The colors and the shapes. I want to then ask myself why my colors are like that?

Unfinished like that. But that is a start point. If you can ask that to yourself, and if you have that question on your mind then you can start to think a lot of question from that. About what the painter didn't finish, because it seems like it's not finished. Why didn't the painter finish the face, body, landscape? At that point you have to think, who is that character, why do they always look like they are mad? For example, we have proof whether it's too strong. Too much sun, too much hot. When the people are working by the street, they are always like um, how do you say that? (To demonstrate the gesture, Ali wrinkles his forehead)

Interviewer: Furrowed brow.

Ali: Exactly. That's what I show in my paintings. That is, I think, Cuba. That kind of expression. The daily expression. So the viewer can start to ask, is it because the weather? The sun? Or anything else? Here in Cuba, it's a mix. Of course because of the sun, it's too strong. But that hate, accelerate what you have inside. Bad things you have inside. So you go out in the street in the sun and it's too hot. And you start to think, oh I don't want to leave my home. I don't have enough money. I have 3 kids. Why am I here? They start to make those questions. Like what is the meaning of life? What is the power of love? Can be or can seem like a kids question, because you see all those love movies, but those are the breaking point question. That is my goal. That is what made me work. We show one face in the street, we show another face at work, we show another face at our lowest. We have another work inside, you know?

Interviewer: And your art is meant to bring out thoughts about the one inside?

Ali: Yeah.

Interviewer: So I understand, what was your third painting?

Ali: The third was, I have, and I take the smiley symbol. You know, everyone use that symbol. Actually, everyone uses the symbol on the internet.

Interviewer: Emoji's.

Ali: Yeah, yeah happy. But I sense people texting between, and they put on the smiley. But they are not happy or laughing. They just put on that. I take that, I used the smile? It's a simple question, why I use a smile. You have a lot of good things in your world. Marijuana, Women, good food. Or I use smile because you don't have money, you lose your work; it's not the end of the world. If you die, it's the end. But it's actually not the end, it's just a different past, a different way. That is why I use that, and not in the same way that Facebook people use it. Something like that.

This is another example of Ali's use of ironic messaging to provoke reaction or rather, invoke a response from the viewer. Though some may regard his reinterpretation as cynical criticism or simple pop art, I posit that it is far more intentionally complex. It is perhaps, a formal solution toward rectification- rectifying some perceived ill in society through constructive criticism. Camnitzer writes, "Formal solutions, particularly among the youngest Cuban artists, are the product of ethical speculations. Their work is comprised of an indissoluble web of humor, social criticism, political positions, ethical stands, and formal play" (p. 316).

Interviewer: So you use it as a form of satire, a critical commentary about what's real, what's a fallacy?

Ali: I try to use the irony in that. I use that like a mask, but of course not the carnival mask. And people know the theater mask. When I use that icon as mask, people start to think why. I want people the ability of ask. People use the ability to ask. To ask why, all

the time, why you are president. Why you have so much money and you don't do anything for peoples... people always say Africa people, or Latin America people or immigrants in US. Why? That is the central, main question in my work.

Herein lies another instance where Ali is inciting critical questioning. However, it is not one-sided, but rather, dialectic. He is using his art as a medium to invoke critical questioning of oneself, of others, and of systems. Ali states that this technique is central to his work. Thus, his art, like many younger Cuban activists whose “art unites a sophisticated education with political awareness and grass-roots sensitivity” (p. 316). Therefore, it is this critical questioning that ideally leads to shared social consciousness.

Interviewer: Do you ask, do you think that it's, speaking about asking questions and asking why? Do you think people are asking themselves questions about their identity right now in Cuba?

Ali: I think so, not just Cuba. In Cuba we have a special situation. We are the Caribbean; we are the central Latin America. But Cuban does not seem like Latin American people.

Ali expresses almost emphatically, that Cuban identity and Cubans are perceived to be different than other Latin Americans. Cubans have a different identity and perceive themselves differently. Thus, applying a broad stroke understanding to all members of the Latinx community around their experiences, forcing a homogenous identity, particularly with Cubans, is even more colonizing.

Ali: Cuban is different. You can't compare Cuban to Chilean people, Panama people, Jamaica or Barbados. Cuban people are just different. Of every culture in Latin American. Belize is close, but still Cuba is different because all of the history. The geography.

In terms of identity, yeah. I think the Cuban people are asking about that. They are asking instead, Cubans get international long time ago.

Questions around intersectional identity are thought to be attributed to social factors and “psychological changes such as the development of ‘global consciousness,’ are said to facilitate the growth of a transnational civil society” (Davies, 2011, p. 37). Thus, the pondering of what it means to be Cuban and to possess a Cuban identity, which Ali references, can be associated with the internationalization of the island and its complex, multicultural development over time. Cuba is Spanish, American, African, of the former Soviet Union, the Caribbean, and due to its location, a highly desired economic treasure.

Ali: ...People know us as the key of the Gulf. The big prize always want Cuba. Spain, for instance, the Soviets, then Americans, then the soviets. So, it's like the lady in the neighborhood that everyone can be with her. And she's poor. Eventually the guy comes with the love, money. So, Cubans now are asking themselves about what is my identity? Because we have so much mix of Spanish culture, Chinese culture, American culture, not just about that.

Intersectional identity regarding race and ethnicity is also a consequence of location, history, and economics, particularly that of the Diaspora, which makes for a transnational culture in Cuba. To Ali's point, Davies (2011) also suggests that “the global economy is another factor influencing the development of transnational civil society; periods of economic globalization such as the late nineteenth century and the present era appear to correlate with periods of a transnational society” (p. 37). This was the case in Cuba with the varying influxes of migration from different locales- resulting in a transnational country.

In fact, a transnational country that preceded the technology from which it typically results.

Interviewer: Chinese? Wow.

Ali: Yeah, it's not about, I have to know what is my identity. And then, they have to fight for that. Cuba yeah, Cuba know the story about the Spanish people in Cuba. But now, if you ask Cuba, what is your identity? They will say I am a Cuban. But sometimes, they don't know why, you know? That is a big word. So...

Cuban identity is ambiguous for many Cubans. To be Cuban is many things at once. It is a nationality, an ethnicity, and a culture. However, when it comes to the racial question, for many it remains abstruse and less static. Perhaps, this is because, "Ideologically, 'race' is in a constant process of being made and made repeatedly." (Taylor, 2016, p.24)

Interviewer: So it sounds like you're saying, does their national identity kind of overwhelm other aspects of their identity in Cuba? You say the Cuban will say I'm Cuban. What does that mean in terms of race, gender, how those all come together. Are they separate or do they come together. Or are they erased?

Ali: I think that that word, that sentence of I am Cuba. That means a lot of things. I am a mixed people; I am a cultural somehow society because we have so much culture. Maybe not like the Mexican culture or Egypt. We have a little bit of time, for example I love music. So Cuban knows that. When they go to Europe and say I am Cuban. Automatically, people know yeah, you are Cuban. You know how to dance, how to sing, how to move, you know about cold war. Something like that, because we were in the middle of that. So much time. But you know, the meaning in the deep, the why is the question. Why? You understand?

Ali continues to return to critical questioning as a way to understand and make sense of reality.

Interviewer: Absolutely. So are black people in Cuba proud to be black? Are you proud of the afro part of your identity?

Ali: Yeah I think so, a lot of people. For example, I consider myself mixed because I have African people in my family. But I also have a Spanish people so I am a mix and I feel proud about that. Not about what did to get that. I am proud about that new product, you know? The coffee milk, like you say. But yeah, I think that people face problems about where they come from. Sometimes, people say no, they're racist with black people. Here we have that, but we also have black racist people.

This is a critical aspect of Ali's context for understanding the world. He personally identifies as racially "mixed," which is referred to as mulatto in the literature. However, from my perspective Ali reads as Black with his milk chocolate skin, full lips, and dreadlocks.

Interviewer: Against who?

Ali: Against the same black people. Like black black people, like original black they say to me that I am not a black people. Because I am mixed with white. So, that hurts. We are working for people have to understand that we are not black or white. Cuban is mixed in every sense, in every ways. Yeah, I think the Cubans are proud from where they come from.

The ostracizing or othering of mixed Cubans by Black Cubans is an example of internalized racism. As a result, the oppressed becomes the oppressor. This leaves Ali and perhaps, others who also identify as mixed race or mulatto with a strong sense of social consciousness a bit fractured regarding where they fit in the identification stratum.

Interviewer: Do you think that your art, as it presents questions for the viewer? Do you think that it presents questions around identity?

Ali: Yes. For example, I have this line of work with the men's faces. But I also have no line with African descendant woman. When I start to work with that, people start to ask why I was painting that. I say, my mother, she raised me alone. She's black, and she's also coming from Spain, African mix. So somehow I am trying to, Cuba is not just the {indistinguishable}. Cuba also has blonde girls, black girls, and white girls. It's a community, so the identity I think have to start first through the skin. Through the biology, to why we are like that. So yeah, I work with that in my work. I use those kind of questions about the identity. Why we are so different, why we have to be equals. So it's something like that.

Mixed race and social consciousness of racism and oppression in Cuba remain a point of contention.

Interviewer: How are you able to get to a place where you reconciled your identity? For example, you say with pride, that you are an afro descendant. You are Spanish, you are mixed, but you recognize that there are black people who are racist against other black Cubans who aren't black or afro enough. It sounds like you've moved beyond that; you've affirmed who you are. If you have, what helped you or is helping you in that transformative process. What's helping you reconcile who you are?

Ali: I have not begun that yet, I am in the middle of the change. I am in the middle of the process. I just understand.

Ali confesses that he is still in the midst of intrapersonally reconciling his own identity.

Ali: I think that when you have information, when you have acknowledgement. I think that's one of the problems that people, what's the word. Experimented with. They haven't the knowledge, we don't know what's happened. So I don't have the acknowledgement, but I know that we are human beings just as much if you are black, white or blue. You are me, we have the same structure as human. As animals, so we just have different skins. So I understand that from the beginning.

Intersectional and transnational connections are forged because of shared human identity.

Interviewer: Intuitively? Or you learned it.

Ali: Both, because my mom, I know everyone say that they have the best mom. But my mom, in my case, she's a Spanish teacher. So she had to free a lot. She told me since I was a kid that I have to decide somehow I will be official. And I have to know that everyone, we are equals as a human being. Not black, white, Chinese. That is our race, human kind. Nothing else.

Interviewer: So you learned that from an early age?

Ali: Yes, I grew up with that way of thinking.

Interviewer: And that was an influence from your mother?

Ali: I think my grandma. She was a nurse, she had all that humanity inside her. I think she learned a lot about caring the sick people. The dying people. She understand what was somehow the meaning of life. It's not about having enough money. It's about if we have this assigned this time, of moment, of earth we have to build.

Interviewer: Is that why you became an artist?

Ali: Yeah.

Interviewer: Because you wanted to what?

Ali: At the beginning, it just was an expression way. I have so much inside, I don't understand why I'm doing what I paint. Or why I made this sculpture. But I have to study, the colors. So I understand why I use red or white. I paint in vertical format and not horizontal, because for me that is strange. That's what I'm going to say. Vertical is an animal of improvement. In the developing countries, they are building all in vertical. But I don't use that in that way. I say vertical is the better way of grow. You know? We grow in vertical, we don't grow in horizontal.

Interviewer: Almost like evolution?

Ali: Exactly like that.

Interviewer: So for you it's intentional?

Ali: Exactly. We can reach our highest goal growing vertical. If you grow lineal or horizontal you don't get anywhere. The point of, not everybody wants to get. You have to develop your soul. Go to the stars.

Interviewer: So is that another way to encourage liberation?

Ali: It's like the seeds. They will always go up.

For Ali, vertical painting strokes are the figurative representations of vertical growth, uplift, and social mobility. This thought as applied to his artistic technique “implies a libertarian spirit of openness, the widening of postmodernist poetics, which have been assimilated in order to confront local situations. All this coexists with a utopianism of human and social transformation...” (p. Camnitzer, 2007, p. 317).

Interviewer: Like an analogy of work, planting critical thought in order to promote growth for the person who engages it. Spiritually, emotionally, politically...

Ali: I think that politics is something like racism or like denominations or like money. I know that I have this feeling that in some point, we will not use that anymore. We will not need it. The first native people, they don't need that. We just create that because we made mistakes.

Ali believes that racism is an institution that can be outgrown or perhaps, evolved past. However, I argue that capitalism is a more pernicious institution with far too many benefactors, and thus, it has the ability to influence other potentially oppressive institutions that can and will continue to advance it. In support of this assertion, Taylor (2016) writes, "Capitalism is an economic system based on the exploitation of the many few. Because of the gross inequality it produces, capitalism requires various political, social, and ideological tools to divide the majority – racism is one among many oppressions intended to serve this purpose." (p.205-206)

Interviewer: So you think we can evolve past racism and politics? Gender inequality?

Ali: Of course, of course. Yes, yes. I believe in this world, there is enough for everyone. So, we just have to know how to divide everything in equal parts. And that's it.

Interviewer: You don't think that's political?

Ali: It is, but it's a concept that something we put up there. It was not in the beginning of the earth. We put that up here. And it's like clothes, like cars, like iPhone. They are needs the system or media or fashion say that you need that. Like Madonna, you don't need Madonna. You have land, put up some seeds and take care and then you can get your own fruits. Or whatever you know?

Interviewer: So, I noticed a lot of the black women here, like, I don't see them wearing their naturally hair, short course curly whatever. I see a lot of braids and weaves.

Hair There, Their Hair, Everywhere!

Ali: Somehow, the western way to think is that you have to follow the leader, you have to look like the best actress or whatever. Here, girls they don't use the natural hair. They say no, it's bad hair.

A resistance to the negative associations with Black Cuban women began as early as the mid-2000s when a group was established that centered around that purpose. Benson (2016) provides more detail here:

In the mid-2000s, a group of Black and mulata women began meeting in each other's homes to strategize about how to tackle the new economic difficulties and racial discrimination that emerged during the island's economic crisis of the 1990s. This group, which called itself the Afrocubanas Project, was composed of a variety of women of different ages, professions, and sexualities, all of whom shared a common desire to promote a positive image of Black Cuban women. (p. 54)

I say, no it's your hair. It's what nature give you. It's not just a gift, it's a present. You have to feel proud of what nature give to you. I always told her that there's a lot of white girls from Europe with dreads, so I always make this question. What is that telling you?

Ali encourages deep reflection and political thought around the idea of what culturally appropriated Black aesthetics on white European women suggests and the irony is not lost on him. Ali applies a critical recognition of the negative impact that western, Euro-centric ideology has had on Afro-Cuban women who have embraced anti-Blackness, even at the expense of devaluing their natural selves. Ali is suggesting that Afro-Cuban reject whitewashing and instead, embrace cultural pride. This is an assertion of Black

feminism. “Black feminism is a struggle against the pervasive oppression that defines Western culture. Whether taking aim at gender equity, homophobia or images of women, it functions to resist disempowering ideologies and devaluing institutions” (Jamila, 2002, p. 390)

You know, I think now, the international level, world level, we are looking the way back to our roots. Which is Africa, everyone knows that.

In his last two sentences, Ali has just described the philosophy of Sankofa.

Interviewer: It's a good point, it's true. For everything, to plastic surgery, to the hair. Do you think its cultural appropriation? Taking and stealing from another culture without giving them credit?

Ali: Yeah of course, it's the globalization of culture, it's the globalization of everything. I think some part is somehow, it's how to make a lot of money with college. They start to implant these ideals on the people. For the boys, you have to use your beard, vintage new fashion. You have to use your beard. They build like a maze, like a human being who has everything. Western things...

Ali speaks to the western influence of globalization and capitalism and their impact on the consciousness and behaviors of Cuban people. Taylor (2016) argues that, “Capitalism is an economic system based on the exploitation of the many few. Because of the gross inequality it produces, capitalism requires various political, social, and ideological tools to divide the majority – racism is one among many oppressions intended to serve this purpose.” (p.205-206)

Ali: Everybody is supposed to be equality. But destroying the first cultures. The original cultures. Like the Balkans. Or in Africa.

Interviewer: They are doing it usually to commodify it, to make money on it. Not to celebrate or honor it.

Ali: And the people sometimes they just don't get it.

Interviewer: Most people...

Ali: Exactly. You have to use what you want, and not because some magazine, or people say that you have to use Prada on Tuesday because...

Interviewer: Kim Kardashian is wearing it.

Ali: Because the sun, the tower of signs say to you this is stupid.

Interviewer: So many people use this as a barometer for it, way of life. I was just curious about that, with the women, I'm just noticing different cities. I was in Trinidad, Cienfuego, Havana. I didn't see, I saw some men in an Afrocentric natural presentation. I didn't see any Cuban women, and I was just curious not negative...

Ali: In Havana, there is a lot of black young girls that left their hair natural, just because Havana is the capital. It is the door to the world, you know artists and celebrities they go to Havana. But here, you are like 270 something km from Havana, so it doesn't reach. We don't have the big events, we don't have the big concerts, or whatever.

Location and proximity effect exposure to the outside, which subsequently impact knowledge and awareness.

Interviewer: But you do have transformative concerts and workshops so...

Ali: You can find that in the capital everywhere. But I think we are getting more international. Not just Cubans- everywhere. People now, sometimes they don't say no I am from china, or Kosovo. They say I am from the world. That is our home. People are starting to get that.

Global connections are growing and resulting in global identity, which may one day promise a degree of global citizenship.

Interviewer: An awakening.

Ali: Yes, but sometimes, people misunderstand that with globalization. That is another killer with the suit.

Findings, Limitations, and Implications for Further Research

Very different from the traditional ways that groups with homogenous identities form coalitions for social action, this research allowed me to uncover that people with different identities can decide to intentionally coalesce as a community to address multiple issues that impact more than one marginalized group. This research speaks to the crux of intersectional activism. Activism that seeks to educate and liberate individuals, who as a consequence of their identities, experience various forms of oppression- most centrally, racism. More critically, the findings that my research through my participants stories brought forth, explain how that intersectional activism happens in the unique space of Cuban society. In short, it is happening through the subversive and strategically organized mode of art activism.

Moreover, these findings helped to uncover that unlike in the United States, the repercussions of intersectionality in Cuba were more veiled, making it more challenging to visibly identify the ways that marginalization impacted certain communities. Comparatively,

much like racism is shrouded beneath the thinnest of veils in Cuba, CRT posits that racism's permanence and pervasiveness is such that it is relatively disguised as normalcy in American society (Solorzano & Delgado, 2001). Though certainly real, intersectionality is less apparent at the intersections of race and gender as traditionally conceptualized.

One reason is because unlike in some other countries (i.e. the apartheid in South Africa and Jim Crow in the United States), there were never any official laws of racial segregation in Cuba. Therefore, the fallout surrounding racialized instances of marginalization, however systemic, were embedded in social practices.

Another reason the systemic oppression of Afro-Cubans can seem more covert to an outsider, is because the racial majority of Cuba reads as Afro-Cuban, even though they may not actually racially identify that way. I addressed this previously in the literature review. Thus, racism is less perceptible, making it harder to conceive and fully detect as a contemporary reality. This is why the subjugated stories of those who are experiencing it and activating against it, are critical to understanding the lesser known realities of those who are impacted.

In addition to the two previous reasons, this research helped to explain a third reason why racial marginalization at the intersection of multiple identities fails to be recognized as pervasive. Communism and the socialist distribution of property, goods, and internal wealth, make class divisions more difficult to perceive. The rhetoric and policies in Cuba surrounding equity in the way the government manages and distributes wealth and resources, betrays the reality of those who are negatively impacted and displaced. Those living in the economic margins are disproportionately represented as Afro-Cuban. The

literature may provide the statistics, but numbers can be rationalized to support a less unfavorable narrative, but the authenticated distinctions became clear only through hearing people's stories and spending time in their spaces.

This brought me to the second research question and what new knowledge was created through my analysis of what I uncovered, which is, What are the historical roots of activism for Afro-Cubans in Cuba? Through the stories that my participants shared and the spaces that I observed I saw stark contradictions between much of the literature on the Afro-Latinx experience and their reality. It became clear after listening, watching, and learning, that there is a refusal on the part of post-colonial nations to confer that the contemporary economic benefits that they enjoy are a direct consequence of the enslavement and subsequent systemic oppression of Blacks. Thus, a transnational theory like Africana Critical Theory was an important framework for analyzing this work because it grounds the contemporary racialized experiences of Cubans (expressed through their voiced narratives and my firsthand observations) in a post-colonial understanding. There are dramatic inequities in contemporary Cuban society surrounding the Black experience as a consequence of systemic racism that bespeaks a forlorn, complicated history that the revolution of 1959 allegedly rectified.

Deracialization in Cuba was an attempt to sanitize a shameful history while simultaneously absolving themselves of the ethical responsibility to employ fully inclusive practices in every social, political, and economic aspect of Cuban life, particularly for Afro-Cubans.

Incidentally, the resulting national pride among Cubans as a part of the post-revolutionary discourse means that there are limited means by which to challenge it. Thus, it is artists who are finding creative ways to disseminate messages that provide a counter-narrative to the national one in their respective communities. That counter-narrative is a form of social action. Ultimately, social action is the result of civil strife in a society that refuses to exorcise notions of supremacy that operationalize across systems, however covertly, to maintain inequitable power structures. In summary, the historical roots of activism in Cuba have always intended to interrupt and disrupt. There was a period when such organized disruption came with severe consequences- accusations of betrayal to nation and subsequent violence. However, it is a new generation of artists who are the creative transgressors and as such, they are hoping to bring conscience to a contemporary Cuban society that in the past, insisted on shrouding the marginalization of its fellow countrymen and women. They aim to transgress by inciting community consciousness through the intentional stories that they tell through their craft in communal spaces.

When addressing the third research question, which is, How are Afro-Cubans building coalitions with respect to the current sociopolitical climate? I found that each of the art activist participants are animators of social action, though they engaged that animation in different ways. A key indicator of how they animated, activated their passion and intention through the purposeful merging of art and politics, and the role they assumed was related to their own identity.

Carlos engaged his role as a central organizer- one who brought intersectionally diverse communities together from around the island and across the globe. In his efforts, he is a facilitator of adult education and learning through his efforts around social action. Carlos

looks to incite learning and subsequent shared social consciousness through creative methods that bring diverse community members and artists together. His social action is strategic and structured and this is demonstrated through his intentional practices to informally educate communities beyond the space of formal education institutions. Carlos recognizes that, “this type of adult education empowers learners to gain skills to assess the social and political contradictions and injustices of society, and assert action in addressing those contradictions and injustices” (McKay, 2010, p. 26).

McKay (2010) elucidates the ways in which the community education that Carlos facilitates by creating spaces for artists with shared social consciousness to come together is no longer about education being for the sole benefit of individual advancement. Carlos is a self-identified anthropologist, but his work would certainly support that he uses various art forms as critical pedagogy and elements of CRT to incite change throughout various communities in Cuba. According to McKay (2010):

When critical pedagogy and critical race theory (CRT) act in concert, adult education gives stage to the voice of the learner. CRT challenges governance based on the interpretive structure of socially constructed reality that is disconnected from the individual’s reality. Therefore, CRT encourages a method of naming one’s reality, by use of storytelling and counternarratives. Counternarratives act as a tool to: (1) challenge the perceived wisdom of subscribers of a dominant culture by providing a context to understand and transform an established belief system; and (2) open new windows into the reality of marginalized citizens by showing them the possibilities beyond where they live, and the shared aims of their struggle. (p. 26-27)

Not all who encounter the gallery or attend the community projects are artists or even aware that there is an educational component embedded into the experience. However, such intentional educational engagement with those envisioned outcomes are by deliberate design on Carlos' part. The art- in whatever form it takes- is a counternarrative and thus, critical to the accepted dominant narrative.

Pepe is a feminist who queered perceptions of masculinity in his aesthetic. Pepe wears pink, a presumed feminine color, and wears gender fluid clothes. He queers masculinity through his rejection of the way he feels men are traditionally socialized. He extols how he himself was enculturated within an intimate community of women, raised by matriarchs (in the absence of his mother) who shaped his understanding of himself as a man, alongside women. Lastly, Pepe queers masculinity in his work. The male gaze is both the object and critical subject of Pepe's art. He seeks to inspire conscious thought among spectators who view his art while critiquing social practices that promote misogyny, sexual exploitation, and the objectification of women. In addition, Pepe uses his personal appearance to assert a social critique of the traditional ways in which masculinity and gender norms socially constructed and understood.

Ali is an existential artist who seeks to translate both the unconscious and emotive responses from the people, whether it be their joy, their pain or their passive unawareness, into art. He is a provocateur of sorts and a hopeful agitator. Through his work, Ali criticizes the inhumanity of incarceration while also highlighting the possibility of hope through love and interpersonal connection. As described in the previous section, Ali also criticizes capitalism and the ways in which it drives mass production and manufactured images that control what the Cuban masses understand to be the ideal. Thus, he asserts

that these work in conjunction to promote false ideals and further the gap between those that have access to wealth and those who don't in Cuba. Ali's work criticizes the psychosocial and the economic effects of systemic oppression.

I recognize that there were some limitations to my study. As I explained, my positionality was not one of them. However, the most significant is cultural. I am not Cuban and Spanish isn't my first language. So, even though I attempted to accurately capture and interpret my data, my observations, and interactions with my participants, some cultural nuances that are expressed through the culture of language may have been lost in translation.

Though I uncovered some powerful revelations that answered degrees of my initial research questions surrounding how Afro-Cubans understand their intersectional identity and how they build coalitions, this research also presented some additional questions, which could be explored in future research. Though this research was critical, though not exclusively so, in its foundation, I would propose that an extension of this research explore how social action that revolves around a sense of shared purpose through coalition building advance equitable human experiences in society to build capacity for impacting long-term change. Moreover, I witnessed social action in punctuated moments across various spaces- organic and planned- but would suggest further research on how social action can spur sustained social movements over extended periods of time. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to witness the observed instances of social action evolve into a movement that I could document for the duration that I was present, and I suspect that a longer stay in that environment might allow one to do that.

As underscored in the literature review, post-colonial racism among Blacks is not unique to Cuba. In fact, it is a lived reality for many members of the Afro-Latinx community across Latin American and other Caribbean countries. Thus, future research around this topic can certainly extend to countries with similar histories. Though the post-colonial histories may be similar, the way in which these communities are activating and operationalizing change within their distinctive environments with respect to the complexities of both geography and unique political history, is certainly worthy of deeper exploration. Another possibility for future research revealed through some of the points that Ali brought forth, is globalization's role in this identity and consciousness conundrum and how that can subsequently impact transnational activism. David (2011) claims that transnational social movements are possible through the combination of both transnational advocacy networks and transnational coalitions. Perhaps this research can extend my current domestic intersectional activism with activist communities even further- making them global possibilities across nations. I would even further contend that this is already occurring with the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Its germane roots began in the United States of America, and it has since caught fire globally across Europe and Africa.

VI. CONCLUSION

Social justice movements imagine a different world, so they are creative endeavors in their very DNA. What Dr. King did, what Cesar Chavez did, what Dolores Huerta did, what Nelson Mandela did- they had to imagine something that wasn't there. That's art." - Ava DuVernay

And Here Lies Our Truths- Laid Bare For Your Interpretation

There is no failsafe prescription to what incites social action within an individual or an even broader movement within a stratum in a society. There are documentable events and growing tides and trends in responsive behaviors that can culminate into patterns that allow us to predict social movements or even understand social movements, perhaps, but typically, there are some distinctions that can only be explained from subjective involvement in a particular context. Jones (2013) writes:

As an Afro-Cuban who lived through and survived the brutal social inequality, segregation, racism, despair and hopelessness that existed in Cuba before the triumph of the Revolution, I was fortunate to experience firsthand an important period of incredible educational opportunities, social mobility, equality, and development—the unparalleled flowering of dignity and self-esteem afforded to Blacks and others in Cuba who had heretofore barely been able to even envision such a reality (Jones, 2013, p. 73).

Based on my findings I contend that the way we perceive our salient identity/ identities are the central influence on shaping our reality. However, I also believe that influence can be affirmed as positive within an identification stratum, because it creates a sense of

shared community and pride about that community. From that shared sense of community can come shared social consciousness. And that, I posit is critical to the activation of a collective. It can be argued, thus, that pride around identity influences consciousness and is therefore, an essential part of what catalyzes social action. Neal (1969) writes:

We bear witness to a profound change in the way we now see ourselves and the world. And this has been an ongoing change. A steady, certain march toward a collective sense of who we are, and what we must now be about to liberate ourselves. Liberation is impossible if we fail to see ourselves in more positive terms. For without a change of vision, we are slaves to the oppressor's ideas and values- ideas and values that finally attack the very core of our existence. Therefore, we must see the world in terms of our own realities (p. 54).

And so what did bearing witness to the realities and experiences of Afro-Cuban art activists in Cuba teach me as a fellow Black activist living in America? Quite frankly, far more than could ever be captured in a discursive text. It was a spiritual exchange of trust, intention, and shared purpose. Land, sea, and language may separate us, but our experiences are no less connected. I was granted access but not passively given audience to see, hear, and experience their work and stories, because to some degree, I was a part of the community. I, too, am a member of the African Diaspora betrayed by my colonial displacement and like a Phoenix rising like my elders and ancestors across the globe, remain doggedly determined to change my- our reality of subjugation and systemic marginalization, complicated by intersectional identity and exasperated by intersectional oppression. I interviewed my participants, but they also interviewed me. In order to be in that

space, I had to demonstrate my desire to learn and most importantly, honor our spiritual and ethical contract, which is to always act with and on what I take away.

Because of my positionality I recognize that some academics will read this and diminish altogether the scholarship that went into creating this work. In fact, I almost expect it. I, too, recognize that my proximity to the subject matter may influence my interpretation, but it also serves as a unique gift. It allows me to interpret what was shared, told, and experienced with an intimate eye and attuned ear. That insight goes beyond what methodology can offer. It is born of a blood line. A desire to treat the participants and the knowledge that they imparted on me, with the honor of something far too sacred for flimsy ethnography.

In approaching my research questions, I situated this research in the critical for three central reasons, which are firstly, my participants- each of whom embody one or more marginalized identities and thus, a historically silenced voice. Secondly, myself and my positionality, as a Black woman activist researcher who resides temporally in the academy, but always in society shrouded in the realities of my identity and experiences, and finally, the relativity of now- a critical time of social and political uncertainty and upheaval not only in The United States, but in the global world, and particularly, the United States' growing inflammatory and strained relationships with the nation state of my site, Cuba. In the short time from the inception of my research until its publication, I have witnessed dramatic changes on all fronts, which cannot be denied and certainly, cannot be relegated to a singular approach to ascertaining empirical truth. The embargo between both countries was relaxed and then, re-intensified through policy, once again limiting access in the political, social, and economic sense for the people. This will undoubtedly

have a dramatic impact on Cuba's economy, which saw a temporary boom through a resurgence of American tourism. This meant that those who were not in a position to receive remittances from relatives living in the U.S. still have means to economic mobility through increased tourism. Therefore, this surge was largely beneficial to Afro-Cubans who do not and did not historically receive remittances in the same way that their white Cuban counterparts did. These disparate economic realities are explained here by Zurbano (2013) as, "white families to receive remittances from abroad, especially Miami, the nerve center of an overwhelmingly white Cuban exile community. The other reality is the sector of the Cuban population that does not receive remittances, that black majority" (p. 71). So, I have witnessed life for Afro-Cubans before, during, and after these policies were implemented or rather re-implemented and fortified along with the incredibly odd, recent accusation of the threat of Cuban bio-terrorism against American embassy employees this summer and some American tourists this fall.

To further underscore the degree of organic change that impacted this research, was that of Fidel Castro's death, who died on November 25, 2016. The reactions to his demise could not have been demonstrated more contrastingly. In the United States among Cubans in Miami there were displays of high energy celebrations and makeshift parades-honking horns and crowds dancing in the streets. Whereas, in Cuba, people also took to the streets, but with tearful and mournful expressions of grief. Some left sentimental messages on the walls of buildings in graffiti forever memorializing Cuba's love for their beloved "Jefe." I spent time in both Miami and Cuba before and after Castro's death and was able to witness the political energy in both spaces on both occasions. Though this is not a focus of this study and none of my research questions explored that relationship,

Castro's life and even his death was a silent participant in this research. However, that is something that could certainly be explored in subsequent research.

Thus, I labored to honor the stories and the truths of my participants and my own while recognizing the significance and influence of location and subjectivity. My insider-outsider positionality as a Black woman activist could be considered a limitation, but I argue that it was an added benefit that enriched my research. In an effort to mediate my embodied reflections as a reflexive researcher, I maintained a reflexive research journal. I recorded my thoughts, emotive responses to what I observed and discovered, and that which inspired me. I understood that to be truly honest to the research and authentic to myself and my participants, I had to acknowledge myself as both object and subject alongside this research. Much of who I am- Black, womanist, activist- was also the very subject of my exploration. So, as I analyzed my own reflexive thought, it only seemed fitting to apply Black Feminist Thought to its examination. I do not believe that either of these admissions diminish my approach to critical analysis, but rather, exemplify and demonstrate why this is an appropriate, if not necessary epistemological frame. Black feminist thought emphasizes the dynamic between Black women's oppression and activism within the matrix of domination. Though my participants are not Black women in the exclusive sense of membership, their struggles and agentic response to their experiences of oppression are tethered to mine. In fact, it is their commitment to promoting human agency and insisting on accountability through their activism for the liberation of those living in the margins- even when they are the global majority, that this epistemology transcends borders as both applicable and necessary.

In closing, “the existence of Afrocentric feminist thought suggests that there is always choice, and power to act, no matter how bleak the situation may appear to be...It also shows that while individual empowerment is key, only collective action can effectively generate lasting social transformation of political and economic institutions” (Hill-Collins, 2000, p. 237).

“The struggle is inner: Chicano, indio, American Indian, mojado, mexicano, immigrant Latino, Anglo in power, working class Anglo, Black, Asian--our psyches resemble the bordertowns and are populated by the same people. The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the "real" world unless it first happens in the images in our heads.” — Gloria E. Anzaldúa

Hence, it is both art and a shared social consciousness around race, but moreover, intersectional oppressive experiences, that brought together a visionary community organizer, a feminist, and an anthropological semiotician. Yet, they are ALL artists, all humanitarians who feel compelled to bring both awareness to their community and activate change within it, however they are able with the resources that they possess. They live in a society, unlike most of us, with curious parameters where regulation and censorship (however official or not) from the state is a reality and not a hollow threat. Though I recognize that distinction, I don’t wish to sensationalize it. After all, our dubious sensibilities around security and civil liberties are being confronted and tested more now by our governing bodies in these United States than any other time in recent history. The United States is not nearly as morally superior and exceptional as messaging would like us to believe. As Taylor (2016) asserts, “American exceptionalism operates as a mythology of

convenience that does a tremendous amount of work to simplify the contradiction between the apparent creed of US society and its much more complicated reality” (p. 29). In fact, our intersectional liberties as women, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and people of color- Black people- are currently under vicious attack by the government tasked with protecting us. And yet, for many of the marginalized groups in America, historically, have always been. The brutal recognition of that fact insists that we begin to understand our intersectional experiences in an intimately interpersonal way. So, I don’t dare wish to romanticize our current sociopolitical state in the United States of America as somehow morally superior or exceptional to that of Cuba, as the two countries may very well have more in common than will ever be publicly admitted.

Where Do We Go from Here?

In conclusion, Neal (1968) writes, “Afro-American life and history is full of creative possibilities, and the movement is just beginning to perceive them. Just beginning to understand that the most meaningful statements about the nature of Western society must come from the Third World of which Black America is a part” (p. 39). Cuba, though only ninety miles from the United States is thought to be a distant, foreign nation- a Third World nation antithetical to the ideals of the United States of America and thus, contrasting in nature to the experiences of the American people. Rather, the question remains about which Americans are our experiences thought to be so dissimilar? For Black Americans, although there are some clear distinctions, there also appear some uniquely parallel experiences regarding racism and systemic oppression. These experiences have been documented in different ways over time, but the histories and the contemporary experiences do converge in undeniable ways. Art and the artists behind them have also

been at the helm of revolutionary efforts to activate their respective communities to incite social change. In short, “as a part of the new antiracist movement in Cuba that includes hip-hop groups, intellectuals, and artists, it is clear that Black and mulato activists today are both aware of their past and looking toward building a more inclusive future” (Neal, 1968, p. 54).

Afro-Cubans, much like African-Americans in their historical pursuits for justice, have used and continue to use creative mediums and methods as a way to subvert the controlling institutions that would regulate their radical messaging. They have also transformed communal spaces into social action spaces in an effort to educate communities en masse. Thus, it is Neal’s aforementioned statement that resonates the most profoundly with me, because it reconciles the oppressive struggles of Black America with the global majority (as indicated by the Third World descriptor). It also implies that it is through building coalitions as an interdependent and interconnected entity that we can continue toward the advancement of a shared consciousness. From that shared consciousness, we will further architect the creative movement that can help propel and progress our intertwined liberation.

So, thus, the implications for further research can address how those transnational advocacy networks can grow, spurring transnational coalitions, and subsequent transnational social movements (David, 2011). Conceivably, that can lead to liberation on a global level for all people, particularly Black people throughout the diaspora. It is worth considering the ways in which freedom has been unfairly applied to civilizations that engage oppressive practices even now. As Angela Davis (2012) writes, “What has that freedom meant for people of African descent? What has that freedom meant for the black

world? And what has been the relationship to communities that are differently racialized but which, nonetheless, suffer under cycles of oppression” (p.135)? Claiming freedom when the practices demonstrate that such a claim or even policy is a fallacy, or as Ali puts it, “false love” for the people and societies that endure that oppression. And there is no room for false love in true liberation.

In conclusion, I remain as galvanized as the intersectional collective that Carlos called forth to share their art and passion with their community members, as altered as the walls that Pepe painted, and as moved to action to document the stories of people who feel less visible, with the same degree of sensitive urgency that Ali did. *That* is my transformation as an artist, a writer, an activist and a scholar, and that for me, will always hold the gravity of the transformed soul.

APPENDIX SECTION

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction

My name is **Skyller Walkes** and I am a doctoral student at Texas State University in **the College of Education**. I am conducting a study about racism experienced by members of the Afro-Latinx community in their immediate communities and if and how they utilize art and artistic forms of expression in public spaces as a form of activism. I also want to see how that art and the forms of artistic expression in public sites can be used as a form of protest or empowerment to influence coalition-building in communities.

Before we begin, you will read and sign the informed consent form. I am also going to record this conversation so I can transcribe it later. In order for this to be as confidential as possible, I'd like for you to select a pseudonym that I will use throughout the written portions of this study (should you choose).

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study.

The overarching question of the study seeks to address how racial, intersectional identity affects the lived experiences of members of the Afro-Latinx community in their immediate communities. An extended question to be explored through dialogue or observation is how can art in public/ shared spaces serve as a site of activism and coalition-building for members of the Afro-Latinx community. That activism may include empowerment/ protest.

INTERVIEW ONE (In no particular order with respect to rapport development)

1. How do you describe yourself or self-identify?
2. How do you feel your racial/ ethnic identity impacts the way that you self-identify?
3. What other identities do you possess that influence the way you self-identify?

4. How do you feel your racial/ ethnic identity impacts the way that others perceive you?
5. What other identities do you possess that you feel influence the way that others perceive you?
6. Does racism exist in your community?
7. If so, how or what instances have you observed or experienced that contributed to your understanding of the instances or events as racist in nature?
8. Possible probe: From your perspective? From the way in which race is discussed with either positive or negative connotations?
9. Have you ever experienced racism in your community?
10. How would you describe your experiences as influenced or impacted by race?
11. Do you think other members of the Afro-Latinx community would openly share similar experiences around their racial identity in your community? Why or why not?
12. May I do a gallery walk and view the art in this space?
13. Can you explain the art and its purpose in this space and in the community?
14. How do you think the art by Afro-Latino(a)s can preserve and empower Afro-Latino(a) identity in this space? In the community? Please explain why this is activism.
15. What helps to inform and promote your activism?

Possible probe: Are there resources that you could share?
16. How is your activism connected to your racial identity?

Photo/ Artwork Elicitation

1. What does this photo/ artwork mean to you?

2. How does this photo/ performance/ artwork capture the essence of your social action / activism message?

Each participant will share what the photo/ artwork means to them in relation to their identities, lived realities and experiences. If needed, questions will be used as probes to help participants through this conversation.

3. As the photographer/ artist/ performer, what does this photo/ artwork/ piece mean to you?
4. How do the photos/ performance/ artwork demonstrate how others are potentially impacted by your racial, intersectional identity?
5. How do the photos/ artwork exhibit how you are impacted by your own racial, intersectional identity?

APPENDIX B: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION SHEET

Name_____

Psyeudonum_____

Email_____

Phone number_____

Which of the following would you use to identify your gender?

_____ Man

_____ Woman

_____ Transgender

_____ Gender Queer

I identify racially/ ethnically as:

_____ African American / Black

_____ Asian/ Asian American/ Pacific Is-

lander

_____ Latino/ Hispanic/ Chicano/

_____ South Asian / Middle Eastern

Puerto Rican/ Dominican

_____ Biracial/Multiethnic

_____ Native American/ American Indian

_____ White / Caucasian

Indigenous/ First Nation

_____ Other

What is your year in school? (If applicable or student)

_____ First year student

_____ Sophomore

_____ Junior

_____ Senior

_____ Graduate

_____ Doctoral

I am involved on campus _____ Yes _____ No

If yes, in what organizations / roles / positions?

APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT

Study Title: *AgitProp Art as Activism Within the Afro-Latino(a) Community*

Principal Investigator: Skyller Walkes, doctoral student in the College of Education **Co-Investigator/Faculty Advisor:** Dr. Ann Brooks

Sponsor: N/A

You are invited to participate in a research study of how intersectional identity for art activist members of the Afro-Latinx community influences, affects, or informs individuals' experiences around social action. This study will also help foster an understanding of how art can be used in shared spaces to potentially empower, activate, and build coalitions within communities. You were selected as a possible participant because you identified or presented as an activist in the Afro-Latinx community who engages art or forms of artistic expression in a communal space. This research has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Texas State University. Please take the time to read over this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before you agree to participate in this study. Questions may be about the possible risks and benefits, rights as a volunteer or anything else about the research that is not clear from this form. Once you've read over this, and after I've answered any questions, you can then decide if you want to be a part of this study or not. This process is called "informed consent."

The study is being conducted by **Skyller Walkes, a doctoral student from the Adult, Professional, and Community Education program in the College of Education.**

STUDY PURPOSE AND BENEFITS

This body of research aims to explore how the intersectionality of Afro-Latinx identities affect perceptions of racialized experiences for individuals who engage activism through art in communities as a form of either protest/ empowerment. The benefits of this study

are that it can add to the literature by showcasing various ways in which members of marginalized intersectional communities are moving from the deficit lens of invisibility to enactors of social action through coalition-building in community spaces.

PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY:

This study will be conducted in an environment of your (the participant's) choosing. Preferably wherein which I have access to or the possibility of observing your engagement with art activism. There may also be the need for subsequent interaction for the purpose of fact checking.

If you agree to be in the study by serving as a participant, you will participate in and complete the following:

Complete a demographic information sheet

Participate in a 30-60-minute observation during organization meeting

Conduct a possible 30-60-minute post-meeting interview with the researcher

Permit brief check- ins with Skyller Walkes at the conclusion of the study (via phone, email, or in-person)

Agree to have the interviews audio-recorded and referenced throughout the research using your actual name _____.

OR

Agree to have the interviews audio-recorded using a pseudonym_____

I consent to having information collected from:

_____ Audio recordings of interview 1; audio recordings of interview 2 (should a second interview be necessary);

_____ Photographs and audio recordings from observations and gallery walks

RISK, STRESS OR DISCOMFORT

There will be minimal risk associated with your participation in this study through the personal interviews or photo elicitation. During the interview process we will discuss topics like identity, racism, your racialized experiences as a member of the Afro-Latinx community, activism within your community, coalitions within your community, art as a form of protest or empowerment, etc. These conversations will occur in an environment of your choosing where you can participate openly and at your free-will. If at any point you feel upset during this process, you can certainly disengage the interview and we will end immediately.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Participant confidentiality is considered highly important throughout this process. It is important to understand that participants' personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Their name will be coded using a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality throughout the study. All data will be transcribed using a pseudonym rather than their real name, and all personally identifiable material will be kept by the researcher and destroyed after one year. All photos used as data with identifiers apart from the various paint chips option, will be reproduced to conceal any identifiable features or characteristics. The consent form that contains both the subject/ participants' name and pseudonym will be stored in a locked filing cabinet of which only I possess a key.

SUBJECT'S STATEMENT

All information in this study has been explained to me. I have had the chance to read this form over and ask questions. If I have questions regarding this study, I can contact Skyller Walkes at swalkes@txstate.edu. This project 2016K8158 was approved by the

Texas State IRB on March 25, 2016. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB chair, Dr. Jon Lasser

512-245-3413 - (lasser@txstate.edu) or to Monica Gonzales, IRB Administrator 512-245-2314 - (Meg201@txstate.edu).

If I have questions regarding my rights as a participant, I can contact the Texas State University Institutional Review Board at 512-245-2314.

Researcher Print Name _____

Researcher Signature _____

Date_____

Participant Print Name_____

Participant Signature_____

Date_____

APPENDIX D: HUMAN SUBJECTS PROTECTION

Institutional Review Board Approval

{IRB approvals and exemptions included}

CONFIDENTIALITY

Participant confidentiality is considered highly important throughout this process. It is important to understand that participants' personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Their name will be coded using a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality throughout the study. All data will be transcribed using a pseudonym rather than their real name, and all personally identifiable material will be kept by the researcher and destroyed after one year. All photos used as data with identifiers that disclose a participant's name who wishes to remain anonymous, will be reproduced to conceal any identifiable features or characteristics. However, for the participants who have consented with written permission for the use of their actual names, including those who may be considered public figures/ artists, it will be documented on the consent form with a check box indicating that option. The consent form that contains both the subject/ participants' name and pseudonym will be stored in a locked filing cabinet of which only I possess a key.



In future correspondence please refer to 2016K8158

April 1, 2016

Skylier Walkes
c/o Emily Summers
Associate Professor
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Texas State University
601 University Dr.
San Marcos, TX 78666

Dear Skylier:

Your application submitted 2016K8158 titled, "Art as Activism Within the Afro-Latino(a) Community," was reviewed by the Texas State University IRB and approved on March 25, 2016. It has been determined there are: (1) research procedures are consistent with a sound research design and do not expose the subjects to unnecessary risk. Reviewers determined that: (2) benefits to subjects are considered along with the importance of the topic and that outcomes are reasonable; (3) selection of subjects is equitable; and (4) the purposes of the research and the research setting is amenable to subjects' welfare and producing desired outcomes; that indications of coercion or prejudice are absent, and that participation is clearly voluntary.

1. In addition, the IRB found that you need to orient participants as follows: (1) signed informed consent is required; (2) Provision is made for collecting, using and storing data in a manner that protects the safety and privacy of the subjects and the confidentiality of the data; (3) Appropriate safeguards are included to protect the rights and welfare of the subjects.

This project is therefore approved at the Expedited Review Level until March 31, 2017

2. Please note that the institution is not responsible for any actions regarding this protocol before approval. If you expand the project at a later date to use other instruments please re-apply. Copies of your request for human subjects review, your application, and this approval, are maintained in the Office of Research Integrity and Compliance. Please report any changes to this approved protocol to this office. A Continuing Review protocol will be sent to you in the future to determine the status of the project.

Sincerely,

Monica Gonzales
IRB Regulatory Manager
Office of Research and Integrity
Texas State University

OFFICE OF THE ASSOCIATE VICE PRESIDENT FOR RESEARCH

601 University Drive | JCK #489 | San Marcos, Texas 78666-4616

Phone: 512.245.2314 | fax: 512.245.3847 | WWW.TXSTATE.EDU

This letter is an electronic communication from Texas State University-San Marcos, a member of The Texas State University System.

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