



Transcript

Inclusivity in the Afro-Latine Community feat. Natalie Muñoz and Obrian Rosario

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[00:00:00] **Frank:** In 2020, there are about 6 million Afro-Latine adults in the United States. That's 2% of the U.S. adult population and 12% of all adult Latine population. Yet, while Afro-Latinas have a very strong sense of culture and identity, the African American community and the Latin community often don't know how to make sense of it. As a result, Afro-Latinas sometimes feel excluded and discriminated against. Let's dig into it.

Welcome to HU2U, the podcast where we bring today's important topics and stories from Howard University right to you. I am Frank Tramble, today's host, and I'm here with Natalie Muñoz, a recent doctoral graduate who focuses on Afro-Latin identity. We also have Obrian Rosario, a student in the BA/JD program and the president of the Changó Howard University's Afro-Latine Student Association & Spanish Speaking Society. Welcome to our podcast. How are you all doing?

[00:01:05] **Obrian:** Great.

[00:01:05] **Natalie:** We're good. Thank you for having us.

[00:01:06] **Frank:** Good. Thank you for coming. You know, I'm excited about this conversation. Let's dig into the first part of this, which is the delineation and descriptions between Latin, Latinx, and Latine. As we look into society and the marketing and how we write things, I think there's, kind of, a discrepancy in how we actually present those. So, you know, Natalie, from your perspective, what does it mean? What's the right way to, kind of, define the community in 2023?

[00:01:32] **Natalie:** Yeah, so, I think, everybody's perception is going to be different. I think the global majority of Latinos use Latino and Latine, especially if you're looking at outside of the United States, but I think the youth are really pushing the use of Latinx or even Latine. And so, that came from really wanting to create more gender inclusivity and inclusion for LGBTQIA students. And so, even though 4% of the population use those two terms, I think it's really important that I used it in my research just to accurately represent what this newer generation is pushing for.



[00:02:10] **Frank:** So, Obrian, you are on the student side of this. Do you agree? You know, is your generation, kind of, pushing a little bit different of a narrative?

[00:02:17] **Obrian:** Absolutely. I think that we are pushing a different narrative and we're pushing a narrative that's more inclusive of all peoples. I think that Natalie touched on just the difference between Latinx and Latine. Latinx was something that was also imposed by English-speaking folks. And so, when we look at the way that it works within the Spanish language and whether it's phonetic or not, I know that my grandma is probably not going to throw an X in there to be gender inclusive.

Whereas an e, which is used in the Spanish language, flows better and it can actually be integrated and really respect people's identities, which is what we're trying to do. I think that that is a phrase that is more inclusive, and I see our generation making that move to make sure that we're being inclusive more, even with our vocabulary and the way that we're addressing one another.

[00:03:01] **Frank:** Yeah, thanks for that. And I know that's hopefully going to affect how we even address our communications along the way. You know, our new president, Dr. Ben Vinson III, is actually one of the experts on Afro-Latin culture, specifically also in South America and in that space. You guys got to be excited about our new leader focusing on this particular portion, right?

[00:03:20] **Obrian:** Absolutely.

[00:03:21] **Natalie:** Oh, definitely. I think President Frederick also brought up during graduation ceremonies that he'll be working closely with him because they are thinking about bringing a Caribbean studies program to Howard. And I think, you know, just being able to elevate the voices of Afro-Latines but also Caribbean students, Howard is just going to add to the inclusivity on campus. And so, very excited about the future president's research and experiences. It sounds like he has a very much a Black global perspective, and I think that going to do some good things for Howard's campus.

[00:03:57] **Frank:** Yeah. All right, so, I want to start with you, Natalie, and to talk a little about your research, which I, I found to be very interesting. One of the things, as you focus on Afro-Latin community and identity, one of the things that we see is that there's an effect on the mental health side. Can you talk just about your research and, and what are the areas that you've, kind of, found and some of the things that you found during your time doing that?

[00:04:18] **Natalie:** Yeah, so, what I found was basically, my research is on the experiences of Afro-Latine students at HBCUs, and it included four HBCUs in the Northeast, which makes sense because the majority population of Afro-Latines are located in the Northeast. And so,



what I found, in terms of looking at how HBCUs shape their mental health but also their ethnic racial identity, is having spaces for students to be their authentic self where they, they don't feel like they have to assimilate to, like, the stereotypical idea of what Black culture is, and really just allowing them to have their individual voices and celebrate the diversity within the Black diaspora does wonders.

And a lot of the research also pushes to this idea that HBCUs really have the opportunity to work against anti-Blackness within the Latine community by including transnational curriculums in their classes, by having professors who also identify as Afro-Latine, by even some of the students were advocating for having Afro-Latine mental health clinicians as well.

Because they did come across some conflict and some ignorance around, you know, not being Black enough or maybe not being American enough, specifically for the ones who were foreign-born. And so, it's a constant battle, I think, within our identity because sometimes, we also feel like we're not Latine enough, you know.

Especially, I think, these newer generations where their parents were, kind of, forced to assimilate and they may not have taught them Spanish, right? And so, there's all these kind of boxes that people try to put us in, to tell us, you know, whether we fit into being able to identify or not, whether it's phenotypic features, hair features. But the reality is, is that the Black diaspora is just so diverse that we really don't fit into any box.

[00:06:14] **Frank:** I think that's one of the misconceptions about HBCUs, but particularly Howard, is that when we talk about the Black students that are here, I think the world thinks of just one monolithic kind of ethnicity overall. And the reality is it's extremely diverse here for all the reasons you just said. And we discussed earlier the fact that the community does feel sometimes discriminated against in those spaces. Can you describe some of the ways that the community has felt that, and what does that mean?

[00:06:43] **Natalie:** Yeah, so, definitely for some of the foreign-born students, especially the ones who didn't speak English at their HBCUs, they experienced some xenophobia, they experienced some language discrimination for some of the students who were maybe half African American, half Afro-Latine. They were able to, kind of, code switch a little bit better and assimilate better to campus culture.

But definitely, I think, for freshmen and sophomores, it was a little bit harder in terms of finding their space on campus. The universities that had Afro-Latine clubs like Changó and the work that Obrian has been doing on campus, I think they had a much easier time adjusting to the campus culture. But the majority of the schools in the study, they don't have a jungle.



And so, those students really felt isolated in their programs, although they still found ways to be resilient and to make friends. And actually, a lot of them connected very much with other international students, or Caribbean students, or students who were coming from Africa directly because they had that, like, migraine experience. It was still difficult for them though.

[00:07:49] **Frank:** Yeah, I know, when I went to school, there was a program for migrant students who came up from the Texas area to come to where I was in Michigan. We tried to put as many places, these support systems in place to try to help integrate them into what was already a very, for me which was a PWI, a very white experience.

So, in your research, you said that 16 out of 17 students that you interviewed felt there was a sense of belonging at Howard, but you had some recommendations on what other HBCUs and what our community can be doing a bit better. What were some of those recommendations?

[00:08:23] **Natalie:** Okay. Yeah, actually, I want to, I want to give the mic to Obrian real quick if you don't mind, but maybe you can talk about your personal experiences in terms of your sense of belonging on campus, and then we can both, kind of, go back and forth on some of the recommendations.

[00:08:37] **Obrian:** Yeah, no, I think that definitely, I have found a sense of belonging at Howard. I grew up in New York City, which is an extremely segregated school system. It's the most segregated school system in the nation. So, I was often the darkest person in the classrooms, finding myself in spaces of, like, gifted and talented, honors, top class, all the smart kids. "The smart Black kid," that was me.

I never had space to be the Black kid and the Latine kid. There was no space for both of my identities. And so, just coming to Howard, embracing my African roots has been something that has changed my life completely. But I noticed that there wasn't a space for that both, right, to be Afro and Latine. Changó was something that existed.

But during the pandemic, we saw a dip in leadership and a dip in membership, and it was very hard to organize and get folks together. But of course, there's still Afro-Latine students here on campus. And so, I identify with a lot of what Natalie was saying, like, organizations on campus, like the African Students Association, the Haitian Students Association, the Caribbean Students Association.

And groups like that made space for me to find space as an Afro-Latino, but there still wasn't an Afro-Latino organization. And so, coming into Changó and really helping to revitalize Changó After the pandemic, we had no members, no money, and no programming. And since then, we've been able to program over 35 times, we have over 52 members, and the money is coming.



[00:10:01] **Natalie:** But that's all through fundraising efforts, correct?

[00:10:04] **Obrian:** Right. Yeah. So...

[00:10:05] **Natalie:** So, you guys still don't have an official budget.

[00:10:07] **Obrian:** Yeah, so, we don't have an official budget through Howard, and we haven't necessarily gotten the supports that we've needed here, but we've been able to build just from the DC and DMV community and just my prior community organizing experience. But yeah, just having to build that space and make sure that that space continue to be on this campus was something that I wanted to leave as my legacy before transitioning and going into Howard Law School.

But I had to build that sense of belonging for myself, and I had to build that space for other Afro-Latine students. And what we've seen is a lot of folks feeling like they're at home, feeling like they're with their family and familia, coming to a space where they can speak in Spanish and speak in their mother tongue, and then identify with other people and just talk about the issues together was something that Changó has created and I've been able to create through Changó. The sense of belonging wasn't always there, but we built it.

[00:10:56] **Natalie:** Yeah, and I think that's one of the beautiful things that came out of my research is just the sense of resilience amongst the students and what they've been able to create, and even just the community that's they've built, especially here in DC. They have networked with nonprofits in the area, Dominican Professional Association and other Afro-Latine community members to really build, like, they had an incredible fashion show.

They brought students from New York City, high school students in for a full weekend and allowed them to meet with professors here at Howard and really exposed Afro-Latine students to the HBCU experience. They also had workshops for them. I mean, it was an incredible weekend, and you could tell that the students were emotional, thanks to the leadership within Changó.

And so, some of the things that, you know, the students spoke about in terms of what they need moving forward was they want something that's more consistent, right? So, having space for Afro-Latine students that's built only on student leadership is challenging because if a student drops out or if a student becomes overwhelmed with life challenges, then those spaces, kind of, disappear with time, right?

And so, creating a space where students know, like, this is where we can meet, this is where we can find community, I think, is so important. And the other part is collecting data that, kind of, you know, shines their voices. Because part of the issue is, is that the federal government



mandates that we collect certain data on race and ethnicity, and that's not always inclusive of the Afro-Latine identity. So, I actually don't know what the exact statistics are at Howard.

And there might be some students who are Afro-Latine, but they may not check the Hispanic box because maybe they've experienced racism within the Hispanic community, or they may just check Hispanic and not check the Black box, right? And so, how do we collect data that, you know, fulfills the requirements for the federal government but also is student-centered, where students can easily find each other and easily market towards a specific community so that when they do the programming, no student is left behind.

Other things that they suggested was, I know other universities, they have, like, heritage funds, right? So, having an Afro-Latine heritage month, or even, like, a Caribbean heritage month. And so, some of the research that I hope to do in the future, I really want to look at all the other students within the diaspora as well, such as other Caribbean students and African students, to, kind of, see what their experiences are at HBCUs as well.

And just to make sure that we have this campus, we have all this diversity, but how do we get to a point of inclusion and multiculturalism and not just existing in the diversity, right? And I know that Howard started a new freshman class, so one of the recommendations that the students had was to have a freshman class on Black global diversity. So, I think that would be amazing. And even just creating systems where students can more easily find classes on Afro-Latine history or Afro-Latine identity.

Because right now, the search engine doesn't necessarily allow you to search for that specifically. So, the courses exist, but it's, kind of, like students only find out about them at Howard through their friends or if they're connected to a specific professor. But the ones who have taken those courses have said how much it has helped them to unlearn anti-Blackness in their community, how it's helped them to really embrace everything about them.

Like, there was one student I interviewed that they were having suicidal ideations because it got to the point where they just didn't feel like they belonged anywhere. When they would go to their home country, Dominican Republic, they were told that they were too American. When they would come to United States, they were too foreign. Right? And so, that connection between, I think, identity and mental health is so important, and I don't think it's talked about enough.

And the research is just showing, like, allowing students to be their authentic self to really have pride in their ethnic racial identity can serve as a protective barrier for racism and also just improve your self-esteem, the knowledge of self. And we've seen what it does for African American students. And so, I would love for HBCUs to just be more mindful of how can we recreate what we're doing already for African American students for all students who come to Howard from the diaspora.



[00:15:24] **Frank:** Yeah, I think you, you've hit on some really good, important points there. One of the things I think about as Howard, we always say that Howard is actually a microcosm of really the, the larger population, so things that happen at Howard really are also the things that are happening in America right now.

As we think about that, and some of the listeners here outside of just an HBCU community, what would you tell an African American right now, who does not identify as Hispanic in any sort, how can they be supportive? What can they do if they don't have an ability to program or they don't have an ability to do any of those things, but also just want to be supportive of the community and the relationships they have? What would you advise them, Obrian?

[00:16:04] **Obrian:** My focus is always on community, and when we're in community with one another, we are able to learn about one another and more fully respect one another. And so, look for community, whether that's joining a book club and reading about Afro-Latine identity, whether that's even throwing on an Afro-Latine Spotify playlist and immersing yourself in the culture.

I think that's really what will break down the barriers and will bring about that indifference. At Changó, we seek to create immersive experiences, and so every programming and everything that we did was literally bringing people into our culture, whether that is through eating the food with us, listening to the music with us, or digesting the literature with us. And so, find an Afro-Latine person and get in community.

[00:16:48] **Frank:** Yeah. I constantly try to think about ways we bring people together and the one thing that I always feel like connects us is food. I always say, if you want to be racist, be racist the way you eat, meaning if you don't like a race, don't touch the food, you know? No Taco Tuesday for you. None of these other things that we've tried to create-

[00:17:03] **Obrian:** Right.

[00:17:03] **Frank:** ...you know? But if we can get together and actually dine over food and enjoy those things, I think that's always a window into it. So, I got to ask you both though, what are some of the foods that, that you love that also represent the culture that people can talk about? And are there any restaurants or things around that help to, kind of, you know, especially in this area, in the DC area, to help immerse people in that space?

[00:17:25] **Obrian:** Yeah.

[00:17:26] **Natalie:** Yeah, I agree with you. I think food is definitely a community builder. And when I think about our history in terms of, like, Black solidarity and resistance work, it's always surrounded with food, right? There's definitely a lot of restaurants in the area that you can



support. Los Hermanos is the Dominican restaurant, and it's owned by two local Dominican men who, at the end of every day, they donate their food to the homeless in DC, and so they do great community work.

But there's also restaurants all over, all over DC that support El Salvadorians, Dominicans, Cubans, everything. Also, one of the things that you had mentioned in, in terms of what students wanted to see was some Latino food in the food court, right? And so, even if it was just, like, once a week where students could actually try different fruits from all over the Black diaspora, I think that that would be amazing and really open up their eyes to even just the diversity of the cuisine within our cultures.

[00:18:26] **Obrian:** Yeah. Some of my favorite foods are mangú, which is a typical Dominican dish, is mashed plantains.

[00:18:34] **Frank:** I know that dish. It's a good dish. I like that dish.

[00:18:37] **Obrian:** Period. I like platanos maduros, I like arroz habichuela, which is rice and beans, and a lot of our foods are similar across the diaspora. Like, I'll find myself sitting around the cafeteria with my friends from across the diaspora and be like, "Wait, you eat that, too?" And so, I have a different name to it, but we're all eating the same thing in different ways.

[00:18:52] **Natalie:** Definitely.

[00:18:52] **Frank:** Yep.

[00:18:53] **Obrian:** But platanos maduros, for sure, are my favorite.

[00:18:54] **Frank:** Right.

[00:18:55] **Obrian:** And Los Hermanos is, like, the singular DC Dominican restaurant that I know of, and they've also actually provided food for some of our events.

[00:19:06] **Frank:** Yeah. Oh, good, good, good. Platanos, I, I, I was introduced to that about 20 years ago, and I was like, I still haven't figured out how to cook it myself, but I love those things. Oh, man. So, so, as we think about food, are there any events that maybe Changó has created or events on campus that you all either want to see coming up in the next year, moving forward, or, you know, even that you may have plans for?

[00:19:27] **Obrian:** Yeah, Changó has a whole list of events that we have planned for and that we will hope to continue to implement on Howard's campus, and we would hope that the university would pour into it and make it a bigger effort outside of our 50-member organization.



But things like a multicultural affair. Last year, we did a multicultural affair with 10 international student organizations.

Everything from your African Students Association to the Caribbean Students Association. We came together under one roof to share about our cultures in a sort of tabling event. We would love to see something like that happen in a bigger way on the yard where everybody can be immersed in the culture. We had a showcase where we displayed Afro-Latine talent.

And so, we had a fashion show. There was singers, there was dancers. We had that off-campus. Imagine what that would look like if it happened on Crampton and students knew about it and were able to come to it. I think that, like, even just taking it out of just creating an Afro-Latine heritage month would be something that's bold and unprecedented. But we have Hispanic Heritage Month, and we can program during Hispanic Heritage Month, and we can switch out our Soul Food Thursday and maybe do Mangú. I don't know, I'm just dreaming here, but...

[00:20:32] **Frank:** I mean, that's a dream I want to join, so.

[00:20:35] **Obrian:** Yeah, and I think that continuing to create spaces for, like, our culture to continue to take display. The talent show was just one display, but if folks knew that there was, like, a dance team that's available to them, which we were forming within our organization, and they went to the dance team's performances and got to immerse themselves in the culture that way, even having classes taken with Afro-Latine being the focus.

There's some classes at Howard that touch on this, like African and Latin diaspora, but it only happens within the Spanish department. And so, if you're a Spanish minor or Spanish major, you get to take those classes and you take them in Spanish, but they don't happen in English and so we got to make the move to also make sure that that's available to students outside of the Spanish department.

And I think that we also had things like book talks with prominent Latine scholars. We also did discussions with the Haitian Students Association, just talking about the divide on the island of Hispaniola between Haitians and Dominicans. If we have more spaces to have conversations and we have more spaces to listen to music, if we have more spaces to dance, more spaces to eat, then things will change.

[00:21:42] **Frank:** Okay. All right, so, final question here. I want you both to answer this one, okay? So, Natalie, from the perspective of research, we'll start with you. What is the one thing you want people to learn from all the research that you've done in this arena thus far?



[00:22:00] **Natalie:** The one thing that I think I want people to learn is, is really that being your authentic self is healing, right? And it's also an act of resistance, right? In terms of loving who you are at your core, your history, your ancestry. And I think that it's incredible to see, like, the opportunities that a lot of the Afro-Latine students have had at their HBCUs that I know that they're not getting at a PWI.

And so, I want students to know that there is those possibilities because the, the challenge, I think, that I've seen today is a lot of students graduate from college, but they may not have the knowledge of self or the confidence to get the positions that they want, right? And so, often, we, like, deem success as like, "Oh, you got an A in a class," or, "Oh, you actually graduated," but is that success, you know, if you don't believe that you belong in a boardroom or if you don't believe that your voice is worthy of being heard?

And so, I think we need to start reframing the way that we look at success in college because if a student leaves the university with a strong sense of self, a strong ethnic racial identity, then regardless of what obstacles come their way, which there will be, right? Because we live in a racist society. I mean, we see what's happening in Florida right now where Black history is trying to be erased.

And so, I think there's no better time than now for Black people from the diaspora to start building solidarity, and there's also no better place to do it than an HBCU. And I think they're, like, right there. They're doing what they can. But I think if we did a little bit more, we could see so much more improvement in terms of relations between Afro-Latines and African Americans, but also being able to advocate each other in a time where we needed more than ever.

[00:24:08] **Frank:** Yeah. Thank you for that, thank you for that. Brian, for our listeners who may be incoming students into the 2020, I think it's the 7 class, 2027 or 2028 class...

[00:24:18] **Obrian:** Yeah, it's crazy.

[00:24:19] **Frank:** I know, right? So, for the Afro-Latine students that may be coming in and trying to find that sense of home, Changó might be a place for that, what's your message to them and what do you want them to know about when they come here?

[00:24:32] **Obrian:** Yeah, absolutely. Love is in action. And bell hooks is all about love. She describes love as in action and it's the willingness to extend oneself for one's own or another spiritual growth. When we built Changó, and we built it up from the ground, we sowed the seeds of love in it, and we wanted to continue to see those seeds sprout and grow.

And so, know that no matter what, Changó is a loving community that accepts you and loves you and has its doors open for you and celebrates you, your culture, and your achievements.



And also know that Changó isn't just comprised of Afro-Latine students. Some of the folks on our e-board are African American or African students. So, we're a community that's open to one and open to all. And so, if you're curious about learning about Afro-Latine identity and communities where the community is loving and accepting of you, and by the end of our meeting, we might have you dancing some bachata.

[00:25:21] **Frank:** Hey.

[00:25:21] **Natalie:** Wepa.

[00:25:23] **Frank:** I love it, I love it. And I got to know when that next meeting is so I can try to go learn a couple things, you know. Thank you both for joining us on the podcast, Obrian, Natalie. It's been absolute pleasure. I hope that everyone has taken away at least one thing. And the thing that I've heard is really, it's all about Black solidarity. It's about respecting each other.

And as Dr. Frederick, you know, he has a phrase that I, I love and I hold true to my heart, which is, "Our responsibility is to amplify each other's humanity." And the more that we can do that, the more that we can start from that particular place and see people, make sure that everyone feels heard and feels seen in those spaces. I think we will continue to change the world. And I know as long as you two are out there, there's going to be a lot of changes.

[00:26:05] **Natalie:** Thank you.

[00:26:05] **Obrian:** Period.

[00:26:07] **Frank:** Thank you guys so much for joining us. This is HU2U, the podcast where we bring today's important topics and stories from Howard University right to you. I am Frank Tramble, today's host. Thank you for listening. HU!

[00:26:17] **Natalie:** You know!

[00:26:17] **Obrian:** You know!

[00:26:18] **Frank:** All right.

[00:26:20] **Obrian:** Period.