

Student Stories: From Afro-Argentina to Latino Voting Behavior

by SUSANNA SHARPE

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Prisca Gayles

Prisca Gayles recalls eating delicious soup at a fancy Asian restaurant when she was a girl. “Pay attention to the different flavors,” said her mother. “What ingredients do you taste?” Prisca and her astute siblings were apparently successful at this endeavor, for her mother was able to recreate the soup at home in the kitchen. Perhaps this same attention to detail and nuances is at work in Prisca’s scholarly endeavors. She is pursuing her PhD in Latin American Studies with a portfolio in African and African Diaspora Studies. She might add a portfolio in Women’s and Gender Studies as well.

Prisca works with Professor Javier Auyero of the Department of Sociology in the area of urban ethnography. Because her research focuses on Afro-Argentines and Afro-descendants in Buenos Aires, she has found the study of critical race theory, as well as the Black Studies Theory and Methods course, to be particularly important.

Various events and circumstances influenced Prisca’s current focus in graduate school. An Oakland, California, native, she recalls being the only Black girl on the swim team at an elite girls’ school as a child. She



Prisca Gayles and Frank Rodriguez.

felt alienated by the jokes the other girls made in the locker room about the appearance of her dry skin. Prisca majored in Hispanic Languages and Literature at the University of Pittsburgh as an undergraduate, where she was drawn to the study of Afro-Cuban culture. While pursuing her

master’s in political science with a certificate in Latin American Studies at the University of South Florida (USF) in Tampa, she learned that the state of Florida would not fund student travel to Cuba.

Faced with a dilemma, she quickly found an intriguing solution: a professor told her

about a project through the Cátedra Libre de Estudios Afroargentinos y Afroamericanos at the National University of La Plata called “Retumba Tango: Rediscovering the Black Roots of the Tango.” It was based in Buenos Aires and La Plata. A lifelong dancer with serious performance experience in a wide variety of genres, Prisca found this topic compelling on several levels, including the question of Black identity and blackness in a largely white society. “I became interested in the invisibility of blackness in Argentina,” she says.

When asked how, exactly, the invisibility of blackness manifests itself in Argentine society, Prisca gives several examples. “There are certain terms in Argentine Spanish that connote negativities,” she says. “To say that someone ‘*es una negra*’ means they are conniving or tricky.” Similarly, “*negro de la mierda*” is an insult rooted in racism even if one is not speaking to a Black person. Prisca also refers to “the misconceived notion that Blacks aren’t there, so how could there be racism.”

In Buenos Aires, Prisca attended events organized by Black activists, such as members of Misibamba Argentina, an association of Afro-Argentines who self-identify as being “*del tronco colonial*,” descendants of slaves. Yet as Prisca points out, Afro-Argentines don’t have to be “*del tronco colonial*.” They can be the descendants of Cape Verdeans with Portuguese passports who arrived in the early twentieth century, or any other Afro-descendant person born in Argentina. She says that Argentina is making efforts toward recognizing its minorities, citing the name change of a plaza in Santa Fe, from the Plaza de las Dos Culturas to the Plaza de las Tres Culturas, an initiative of Misibamba. Afro-descendant culture is also celebrated by white Argentines, such as those who participate in candombe sessions in San Telmo while acknowledging the cultural and ethnic roots of this Afro-Argentine musical tradition.

But the question of how Argentines experience and perceive Black culture is complicated when fantasies and idealized portrayals of blackness bump up against everyday lives of Black people. Prisca alludes to the thought of Michael Hanchard in this regard: “You cannot only align behind the politics of Black cultural production because there’s a danger in the exotification and commodification of Black culture, and

it becomes a show and not about the lived experience of Black people.”

When she is not working toward her PhD, Prisca enjoys dance, music, and cooking. She trained in many styles at Dimensions Dance Theater in Oakland and performed with the Pitt Dance Ensemble while earning her bachelor’s. She is also trained as a fitness instructor and has taught kickboxing, Powerlifting, and Cardio Hip-Hop. Her tastes in both music and food are eclectic: she mentions Thai-Indian fusion, and says her musical choices run from Motown, salsa, and bachata to 80s pop and classic rock. Her family roots are artistic and spiritual: her father is a visual artist and a musician; her mother is disabled and training to become a biblical health coach. Prisca is very close to her five siblings, who supported and cheered her over spring break as she donated a kidney to a nephew in need.

Frank Rodriguez

It’s hard not to notice LLILAS master’s student Frank Rodriguez when he walks down the hall. At well over 6 feet, he cuts a striking figure and has an outgoing and affable personality to match. His preferred mode of transport on campus is skateboard, the subject of “Pushing Wood,” one of the many rhymes he has written and recorded under the name Mammals Babble in collaboration with a good friend who composes hip-hop beats.

Frank took up the skateboard as a child in Santa Barbara, California. He grew up there with his parents and brother. As a teen, he worked with his father and uncle at a country club, where he bussed tables. He was exposed to César Chávez and issues of immigrants’ rights in high school. As an undergrad at UCLA, he majored in political science and minored in Chicano/Chicana studies, with a focus on labor and workplace studies and civic engagement. He attended UC Berkeley during the summer of his junior year through the PPIA Fellows program, which encourages communities of color to pursue policy studies.

After finishing his bachelor’s degree, Frank entered the Coro Fellowship program in Public Affairs, where he was introduced to political campaign work. “I was sent to Orange County to support Phu Nguyen, a Vietnamese-born candidate running against an anti-immigrant candidate

for the California State Assembly, 68th District. That’s when I really combined labor with politics. I went to work with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), and then on a few elections.”

His undergraduate education and work experience in California piqued Frank’s curiosity about comparisons with other states that have large Latino populations. After he spent several years as a college graduate in the workforce, his mother, a house cleaner, encouraged him to go back to school. He chose Texas. “I wanted to come to Texas to see the contrast in Democrats’ role in the state,” he says. “Political and labor organizing in Orange County helped me compare the organizing efforts of Democrat-dominant Los Angeles County and Republican-dominant Orange County. That same curiosity is what brought me out to Texas.”

But instead of continuing in a government or political science program, Frank chose the interdisciplinary LLILAS. “I found a lot of power in liberal arts,” he explains. “I have been on the policy track since undergrad at UCLA. But I wanted to take advantage of my curiosity with the lens of an academic, not an organizer.” Returning to school and choosing LLILAS was a way to “balance reflection and action,” says Frank. “I plan to get back into organizing, and I don’t plan to get a PhD anytime soon.”

For his thesis, Frank examined and mapped electoral behavior Texas in relation to immigration reform politics and Latino politics, looking at how political parties perceive Latino influence. This necessitated delving into the history of the electoral map in Texas and examining changes in voting patterns as well as the catalysts of these changes. “Cartography, the study of maps, has really caught my fascination, especially how maps have evolved for political parties to better canvass voters.”

Frank used Google maps and GIS to synthesize data and create the maps he worked with. Yet despite the quantitative nature of much of his work, he says “It is important to start talking to communities and hear from them rather than just counting.”

Frank, who served as president of ILASSA, the Institute of Latin American Studies Student Association, is good with people, and well suited to starting the conversations with voters that he plans to have. ✨