The Afrolatina identity in the United States is nuanced in having various experiences of racial formation which influence self-perception. An early discussion of the complexities of the AfroLatina identity came from Angela Jorge, an Afro-Puerto Rican scholar in her groundbreaking article, “The Black Puerto Rican Woman in Contemporary American Society”. Her work caused a stir at a conference in Albany, New York in the late 1980’s for giving voice to the psychological pain that living these experiences often create for AfroLatinas.

To identify as Afrolatina is to employ the lens of Hispanidad, a complex system of racial stratification in Latin America, and the contrast to the all or nothing of Black/White dichotomy in the United States. Additionally, Afrolatinas are burdened with being thrice victimized by race, hypersexualization and socio-economic inequality.

Following Jorge’s work, Marta Cruz-Janzen in her article, “Latinegras: Desired Women – Undesirable Mothers, Daughters, Sisters and Wives.” defines AfroLatinas as,

“Latinas of obvious black ancestry and undeniable ties to Africa, women whose ancestral mothers were abducted from the rich lands that cradled them to become and bear slaves, endure the lust of their masters, and nurture other women’s children. They are the mothers of generations stripped of their identity and rich heritage that should have been their legacy. [AfroLatinas] are women who cannot escape the many layers of racism, sexism, and inhumanity that have marked their existence.”

In the Caribbean and Latin America, the institution of slavery created a process of racial formation, where the content and importance of racial categories is determined by social, economic, and political forces. When European explorers came across the Atlantic and landed in the Caribbean, they not only brought slavery and death, but also theories of racial superiority.

Spain was one of the main groups of colonizers who embraced and employed notions of white racial superiority which created the framework for how Latin American society would deal with indigenous and African slave populations. There were three periods of Hispanic racial formation that occurred in the Caribbean: imperial, postcolonial and expatriate. The imperial era lasted from 1492, when Columbus landed in the Caribbean, to the late 19th century, when Spain lost its American colonies. The subsequent post-colonial era stretched until the expatriate era began with the emigration of Spanish Americans to Europe and the United States (Kaminsky, 1994). Throughout these periods, Spain and its colonists tried to assimilate the different people they conquered under what is known as Hispanidad.
In her article, “Gender, Race, Raza”, Amy Kaminsky explains that this is a means of trying to control a conquered people by attempting to create unity through a race that associates them with the dominant one. Hispanidad willed a whitening of, first Spain and then its colonies, suggesting the promise of supremacy when a person associated themselves as being Hispanic (Kaminsky, 1994). Hispanidad created the covert racism that exists in Latino culture because it created seemingly homogenous national identities that do not directly talk about race. Historically and presently, this manifests itself in the numerous barriers to social and economic mobility Afro-Latinas often face because of skin tone throughout the Americas. Statistically many of the most impoverished people in Latin America come from these communities.

To go along with the notion of Hispanidad, Caribbean and Latin America society constructed a spectrum of race classifications based on appearance that is unlike what is found in the United States. The racial stratification, or classification of people based on skin tone created a caste system which has greatly impacted Afrolatina identity and self-identification. Phenotype refers to an individual's observable physical traits. It is these observable traits, such as hair, lips, and body structure that has created an extensive sliding scale of how one may identify racially. In Latino culture, where racism is often covert, these classifications are important in marking how “white” someone is. Ones’ ability to identify as “white” is dependant on more than blood. It is not as simple as someone being simply white or black; one can be jabao, rubio, trigueña, indio, mulatta, or negra, prieto among a rainbow of terms that describe distinct appearances.

The social construct of “race” evolved in such a way that light-skinned individuals were regarded with more respect and and social standing and were often better of economically. From this caste system came the desire to eliminate any trace of African ancestry from external appearances. Some who describe themselves as Latino/a attempt to “avanzar la raza” (“improve the race”), wedding and having children with someone whose phenotype and skin color are more European.

The members of the newly established society hoped their children, especially those borne of interracial sexual intercourse, would have features that would redeem them from association with their African ancestry. African facial features included wide noses and a full set of lips, whereas a narrow, more “refined” nose and smaller lips were associated with European looks. AfroLatinas bear the brunt of shame when it comes to the whitening of the race, often seen as the reason why African features would be passed onto her children.

The emphasis on the female bodies of Black ancestors derives from the collective memory of dark females being sexually enslaved and raped by conquistadores and other White Europeans. According to the article by Lillian Comas-Díaz, “LatiNegra: Mental Health Issues of African Latinas”, the racial discrimination and stigma that AfroLatinas face in their lives has an effect on their mental health. AfroLatinas often have self-esteem issues due to issues with being multiracial. It is not uncommon for an AfroLatina to associate her dark complexion with negative qualities due to being surrounded by that sentiment all her life. Due to her inferior social standing in Latino/a society, the AfroLatina experiences a huge sense of powerlessness and learns to be helpless. It can be a tremendous psychological burden. Just like the “Jezebel” stereotype that African-American women have to
deal with, an AfroLatina’s sexuality is perceived as uncontrollable, and in turn, irresistible to men (Comas-Diaz, 1996).

The intensity of racism is amplified in the United States, where AfroLatinas go from a covertly racist society to an openly racist one (Jorge, 1986). The nuances of phenotype are not in the racial discourse of the United States. Unlike their home countries, “one-drop” of African blood is enough to be classified as Black in the United States. The little protection that identifying with a nationalist identity gave AfroLatinas in Latin America is null and void on the U.S. mainland. Suddenly, there is a necessity to choose sides, so to speak. This painful process leaves many to either cling to their Hispanic identity and reject their African roots or embrace a Black identity. Latinos are aware of the status of African American people in the United States; the desire to be seen as white is an attempt to not suffer the same fate.

From my experience, living between the Latino and American racial paradigm, this has been both stressful but also an opportunity to become a bridge between the silences. Through media, being surrounded by mostly light-skinned Latinas and African Americans, relaxing my hair, witnessing women bleach their skin, I received the message that society saw me as less than. It has been the understanding of the aforementioned historical precedence that has allowed me to remove the burden of hating myself for being of obvious African descent and only reducing myself to the idea that my black body is only for male consumption.

The complexities of the AfroLatina identity are being explored through personal narratives interwoven with facts; the aspect of sharing life stories of internalized racism has created a way for AfroLatinas in the United States to not only express the struggle of living with the complexities of race but to empower themselves. By understanding this history and where AfroLatinas in the United States are in their journey for self-love and self-determination, there is an opportunity for healing. There is the choice to be in denial and there is the opportunity to be able to assert and be proud of our African roots by not being forced to face the strict dichotomy of race in the United States.