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Oral History Interview with Caroline Fermin
Crossing Borders, Bridging Generations, 2011.019.042
Interview conducted by Liza Zapol on March 1st, 2013 in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn.

LIZA ZAPOL: [00:00:00] Um, and I'm gonna just begin kind of formally.

CAROLINE FERMIN: Sure.

LIZA ZAPOL: This is Liza Zapol for the Brooklyn Historical Society Project, Crossing Borders, Bridging Generations. It's March 1st, 2013. And we're here -- where are we exactly?

CAROLINE FERMIN: We are at the Church of Saint Luke and Saint Matthew, the Episcopal Church in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn.

LIZA ZAPOL: Awesome. And can you introduce yourself?

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yes. My name is Caroline Fermin and I consider myself a dancer. And I live here in Fort Greene.

LIZA ZAPOL: Awesome, thanks so much. So um, like I said before we sort of begin with a biographical approach. And yeah, feel free to just put the wire to the side or whatever. Um, and so uh, if you can just start by telling me where and when you were born and a little bit about your early childhood memories, perfect.

CAROLINE FERMIN: Um, I was born in Houston, Texas on [redacted for privacy]. Um, and I was born, yes, born in Houston uh, to my mother who is a Houstonian her whole life, a native Texan, and my father who is a native of the Dominican Republic and had moved to Houston for his residency or graduate school or something like this. And they had met and had just gotten married and had me (laughs). I was born nine months after they got married.

LIZA ZAPOL: Wow.

CAROLINE FERMIN: Right on the tail. (laughter) And I grew up in Houston uh, for the first three years of my life, and stayed often with my grandparents, my mom's parents, my mom's sister and brothers, a pretty large family over there. My mom is one of five and they have many children, I have many cousins. So I grew up kind of in that family for a while. And then my dad got um, a job at Tulane University in New Orleans. So my

little sister was born and right away we moved to New Orleans. And I was raised for the rest of my life in and outside of the city proper, um, so yeah, but we would go back to, to Texas often. It was kind of like a second home. And my mom had like a bumper sticker on her car that said, native Houstonian -- or native Texan, had a flag, very proud of it. So we went back like two or three times a year to visit grandparents, the family. We never had a Christmas at our own house. We always have Christmas with my grandparents. So Texas became like very much part of my history um, which includes like the rodeo -- I have an uncle actually who rode broncos in the rodeo.

LIZA ZAPOL: Oh my God.

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah (laughs). And then later became a welder. (laughs) He, he's not unusual, like the rest of that family wears the um, button-up shirt, the cowboy boots. As you see I'm wearing mine right now. And then the cowboy hat to church every Sunday. So very, very much proud of their Texan heritage, which includes like barbecue and brisket and family and church.

LIZA ZAPOL: Um, and where, what were your earliest memories, where were they there, were they in New Orleans?

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah, I have a few there, um, actually one of the earliest memories I have is with my dad, because OK, this area where we lived in Texas, um, South Houston is very much like a Mexican area. And so I grew up next-door to a Mexican family. They had a little girl my age and we would play together all the time. And I remember like conversing in some Spanish with her. But it's funny because I didn't do it with my father as much. I learned it more from like a Mexican family. And so some of my earliest memories are like playing with this girl Destiny I think was her name in like a kiddie pool in the backyard [00:05:00] when it was August, like sweltering. And I also have early memories of my dad teaching me Spanish words. My first word was gato which means cat. So like when I was little, I was speaking in more Spanish and hanging out in this, this area that had a lot of Mexican influence. Um, and so one of the earliest memories I can remember is going to the Fiesta supermarket, which is the uh, you know like Fairway here, like imagine Fairway but like massive and full of um, Mexican food, like cactuses and yuccas and all kinds of different vegetables and fruits. And it's like a

madhouse. I think I remember at the time like the floors being like perhaps saw-dusted down, you know, to keep down -- I think it's since become like upgraded. But I remember like no AC, I remember sweating. I remember my dad taking me in um, just taking me in the shopping cart, I was like sitting in the shopping cart. I remember looking up at all of the, they had strung like party flags throughout the, the supermarket and just like seeing all the colors and it was so loud and crazy. Just remember that memory.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

CAROLINE FERMIN: It's like literally one of my earliest memories. Um, and then I remember (clears throat) I remember moving, I remember moving to New Orleans, getting in the car, like the moving van. And we got a house, we had lived in the city, so now we have a house in Louisiana, had a lot of like land. And I remember getting out and just like freaking out with my little sister, she's tiny, tiny. I was just like running around like crazy and so excited to see trees and flowers and bushes and um, there was just a feeling of like living in a, like anything could happen. Like I lived in a storybook, like it was like a secret garden kind of feeling. Very different than like the city where we had come from. Um, and so I basically spent the majority of my childhood outside, um, living like in a tree-house my dad built us, with my sister (clears throat) like riding our bikes and um, hanging outside. And then this was all before I like went to school, real school. And then going to real school, I remember like had a really hard time going to school. Um, because I was very shy but also because I was like suddenly very aware that I didn't look like everyone. Whereas when I was back in Houston, my next-door neighbor was even darker than me and, you know, spoke the same language as my father. And so here in this um, it was like a small community outside of New Orleans. It used to be like a vacationing area for like wealthier New Orleanians called Mandeville. And then has since become a town in its own right, but has maintained kind of that demographic. And there was not a great deal of diversity. And recently, I've been looking back at my childhood realizing how, how much I like wanted to see someone that looked like me, um, and I had -- so I had this hard time at school feeling, feeling different and I was on the bus coming home from school. I think I was probably five or six, like very little.

And this boy, he wasn't being mean, but I took it as mean. I took it as aggression toward me. He asked the, "Why is your hair so puffy?" And I, I was like, I started to cry a little bit. He was like, "It looks like an afro." And I had never heard that word. I didn't know what that was. Um, I just started crying because I thought it was like an insult, wasn't sure (laughs). And then simultaneously, or maybe it was a few days later, I might've compiled these two memories together, but another boy was like, "What's wrong with your lips? Why are your lips so big?" And I had never been like aware of my lips. But they were really, they were just very confused as to why -- and I wasn't black. Like there was definitely African-American students, very few, like three maybe in the whole grade level. [00:10:00] But I didn't look like that. I looked, they were like, something different about you. Something looks weird about you. And I just, that was like the beginning of being really, really self-conscious. I always wanted like a swingy ponytail. I was like obsessed with this ponytail idea, because all the girls were like very preppie, very um, you know, cheerleader-based, football cheerleader kind of school. So all the girls always did their hair in like bows, like ribbon. And (laughing) like, my poor hair, and my poor mom too, like she didn't know how to deal with my hair. She would like brush it for me, and of course that just makes it all the more wild (laughing). Um, and so just it was literally like a giant poof, crackly and dry. And we were using regular products from like the Kmart which don't work on my hair. And I would just come to school and try to put a ribbon in my hair, and just stare longingly at the backs of other girls' (laughing) ponytails. It was like an obsession. The hair was a big thing for me, huge thing for me, growing up.

LIZA ZAPOL: And how, how did you um, what, those stories about what happened to you on the bus and with these boys, did you talk about that with your parents, do you remember conversations about that?

CAROLINE FERMIN: I did, I did. I told my mom that she told me I had an afro. I was like so mad as if it was a bad word. She was like, "Oh, that's just a hairstyle." I was like, what? So she showed me some pictures. And she showed me a picture of my dad in the '70s who had picked out his hair, you know, was wearing like a chain and had a guitar, you know (laughs) going through this kind of hippie phase. But he had a little picked out hairdo. She's like, "Look, your dad has something that looks like an afro." That didn't

really make me feel better (laughs) as it does when you're a kid. Um, and then they would just, my parents were very, very good about telling us to just, you know, if they're gonna be mean to you, then they're not your friend. Because we would have like, quote-unquote "friends" that would say those kinds of things to us. They would, then they're not your friend. You don't have to spend time with them. They, both my parents really tried to instill in us to be like proud. My dad would be like, "You should be really proud about who you are," and, when you go outside, he would like say silly things like, "You can get a tan and they can't get a tan," like silly things to make us feel better. You know, my mom would say like, "People kill for curls. People would love to have your hair." It must've been sinking in, because I never felt *so horrible* about myself that I like would do something to myself. But it didn't sink in as much as I wanted it to as a kid. I still felt weird. And, interestingly, felt all the more awkward because my little sister turned out looking very different as happens, I notice with mixed kids (coughs). She ended up having fairer skin and more European like face, facial features, and her hair was like my mom's, like very soft and straight almost. She had the ponytail (laughs). So and then my brother came along when I was like eight or nine, and he also looked much more like my mom. But I definitely had more of the, my dad's family. So then that was also very aware, because people never taunted my sister for the same reasons they taunted me.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm. So how did you guys -- did you ever talk about that as a family?

CAROLINE FERMIN: Sometimes, we were really, my family was really open, again just my dad as a Dominican, just like everything is kind of like blah, out in the open and for everyone to share. Case in point like we would be watching National Geographic -- my dad is a scientist. We'd be watching National Geographic or whatever television on TV, Discovery. And we'd be watching like animals mating. And be like, "Ew, what's happening?" And he's like, "Well, the male is putting his penis in the female," (laughs) we were like little and he's just very like blunt like this. So very little was taboo at our table, and I say table because we actually had dinner together every single night. Um, we would wait for everyone to come home and have dinner together. And that's usually where we rehashed all the, all the stuff from the day and my dad be like, "Someone cut

me off on the way to work," and moan about the traffic. You know, [00:15:00] we would take our turns telling about school and this teacher and this kid, everyone would offer like advice. So dinner is usually around the table we would just throw everything out and talk about it. We, we would mention like, it was always a point of reference, be like oh, Juliana's got your mom's, your mom's hair, you know, you've got my legs, like you can jump really high. My mom would always tell me, "You have my eyes." We'd always talk about which parts we thought came from where. And, and even like if it wasn't from them, my dad would say, "You look just like my, my great aunt," take out pictures to point or ditto my grandma on the other side would insist that I looked like someone from their side of the family, my mom's side. Very much like a, always trying to figure out where we came from I guess (laughs) look-wise.

LIZA ZAPOL: It sounds like a very close family too.

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: What brought -- why did, why do you think your parents lived or chose to live in Mandeville in that part --

CAROLINE FERMIN: That's a really good question (laughs). Um, I think my dad really, my dad grew up in the Dominican Republic extremely poor. Um, really, really poor. And my mom also pretty poor, like they both came -- well my mom came from a farm family and my dad oh, some of my earliest childhood memories if you want to know are listening to my dad tell me how he used to like forage for food for three days and like what it was like the first time he got shoes. He can remember like getting shoes when he was, you know, a little kid or age six years old like strapping boxes to his feet so he could push the pedals on a truck and like drive a truck. Um, they didn't have like a four-walled house growing up. They had three walls, like a shack.

LIZA ZAPOL: Wow.

CAROLINE FERMIN: He was like extremely poor. It was, you know, coming out of from under the dictator Trujillo at the time and the family just lived in the mountains and then eventually came down to the cities. So he really I think wanted the American dream. He really subscribed to it for a really long time. And when the opportunity came to upgrade or advance, he really would. And he would often moan about like keeping up with the

Joneses and say like, "Oh I don't do that," but he, was like totally his MO for a while. Like he always wished he had a nicer car, and he always wished he could belong to the country club and play golf and um, always trying to like keep up with the perceived kind of deficit that he felt he had. And this lasted throughout our whole childhood until recently, when he kind of his realized for himself that he doesn't need to do that for himself anymore. But I think that's why they chose to live in this -- there's like great schools there, you know, like top-of-the-line schools which I know is important. And lots of space. He really wanted us to be able to run around like he had as a kid, my mom as well wanted kind of like a community feeling. But to be honest, the longer we lived there and the more the community developed, the more we hated it as a family. Um, and they, the whole family didn't want to move. I had already moved here to New York. They just really hated it, the whole energy had become less community-like and more frenetic. Trees are becoming chopped down and parks were being closed and just it was getting rough. But neither of them were gonna up and leave. And then Hurricane Katrina hit, and my dad lost his job and the, the house was OK, but the property was ruined, all of our, the magic garden that I had grown up with was like devas-- flattened, gone. Um, it was really sad for us. And devastating for my dad obviously to have lost his job, he's the sole provider for our family growing up. My mom was a stay-at-home mom. So um, he had to look for another job. He was tenured, he was a tenured professor at Tulane. Let him go after the hurricane. They let a lot of, just everything went crazy. And it was just, we were not the people that stayed. My family was not part of the group that stayed [00:20:00] after Katrina to rebuild, they left. And my dad got a job in Tuskegee and Tuskegee University and they live now in that area of Alabama, and are much happier, much happier. My little brother got a chance to go to high school in a like racially and socially diverse high school, and is like much happier. And so we kind of look back at Katrina as like this force that pushed us out of a place that wasn't helping our family grow.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm.

CAROLINE FERMIN: And now they're in a place where they're around more like-minded people, huh.

LIZA ZAPOL: What an interesting way to see that, that change and that shift.

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah, it took so long, Katrina was how long ago.

LIZA ZAPOL: 2006.

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah, it's really been, it wasn't like that for a while, really both my parents I think went into a pretty deep depression. My dad lost all his research, you know. Tough times. But now for sure, they're all happier, my mom, my brother, my dad. My sister still lives outside of Mandeville and still teaches there. And she still struggles, she just, the culture there is hard for her. But she's, she's adapting.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Um, can we go back to when you were um, kind of growing -- you were just going to school, kind of you were starting --

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: -- kind of realizing, feeling different and, did, in what ways -- you know how did you feel in school itself? Did you feel like the teachers also kind of helped or --

CAROLINE FERMIN: Oh God, no. Interestingly enough, and I, a lot of my memories about these kinds of things happened later, because I think that's when I started to put two-and-two together. But like when I was a little kid (ringing sound) the, the KKK was operating in my area, and in different, you know, areas outside of Mandeville. And my dad wouldn't go like hiking with us or like tubing down the river, because he didn't want to like encounter -- it was scary. I remember David Duke was the politician at the time, kind of aligned with racial tensions. And I remember my dad just like, and my mom, this is not good. Like if he wins this election, we're gonna leave Louisiana. I didn't have any like racially diverse friends. I only had white New Orleanian friends. So I didn't have anyone to talk to about this. But I remember being like frightened, like frightened any time I saw like a David Duke sticker or like I saw my friends' parents had one on their car, like I just remember being scared to like literally to death. I was like, they're gonna take my dad, so scared.

LIZA ZAPOL: So how did you know to be scared, like?

CAROLINE FERMIN: Because of, because of my dad and my mom telling me like what they represented. And, and being aware, like telling us to be aware that, just to be careful, because like we were, we were different and, and it was mostly not us, like the

kids, because it was my dad. He would get pulled over a ton, like a ton, he was always getting pulled over, and let go, pulled over and let go. Because, you know, wanting to make trouble with him. So he, he was definitely racially profiled a lot in our community. You know, people would ask him if they had, if he had a number for his gardening service, of his lawn service. He's like, I have a PhD, I speak five languages. Like no (laughs) you know, like we were, we would encounter this kind of ignorance a lot. So when I was a little kid, I think it was just after hearing my parents. But as I got older and I saw, yes, teachers, like aligning with certain politicians that had been aligned in the past with racial um, tensions and, and uh, I had a teacher once like use a slang term for Hispanics, in high school, like in a discussion, a high school discussion. And like, like panicked, I like didn't know what to do. And I just stood up in the middle of the class and was like, "You can't call people that." And he was like so embarrassed. But like, what? (laughs) So yeah, you know, certain teachers were amazing and very [00:25:00] you know democratic in terms of how they treated their students, and I guess I was never treated differently by teachers. But definitely they would say things and I would be like, that's not what I heard at home. You know, like this is the way um, this is the way the world works. And I would be like, my dad has a different perspective. He would always say, you know, Americans do this, that or the other. And um, I always looked on America and an American culture with like an outside eye, because our, our dad trained us to do that. Like we would say, I need that Barbie, or like I need this. And, you don't need that. You need food, you need water. You need family, but you don't need, and I'll tell you why, and he'll tell us, you know, like every dad does, like when I was a kid. But his when I was a kid stories are really crazy. Or we would sit down to eat and, be like, "I'm starving," and he would bang the table and be like, "You're not starving, you're hungry." We were like, ah! (laughs) He's right. So yeah, I often had like a different view than the teachers even.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, but it's interesting that then you also say you stood up and said something.

CAROLINE FERMIN: In high school.

LIZA ZAPOL: What, yeah, what, what in what drove you to speak up at that moment?

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah. I think, well in high school, I started, I applied to go to this performing arts high school in New Orleans. (makes angelic tone) *aaaahhhh*, (laughs) like the heavens opened for Caroline. And I got in and it's this um, beautiful school called NOCCA, New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts. And they have drama and they have dance and they have music and um, voice and I think art, yup, they have visual art. And they had just built this new facility on the Mississippi River across from the French Quarter, kind of the warehouse-y area. And just going there for the audition was mind-blowing, and just uh, the feel, it felt like getting into a comfortable bed, you're like, I made it. I'm so much more comfortable here. Partially because of the arts, but mostly because of the demographic, because like everyone was just more worldly, like the first question wasn't, what are you? Like what race are you, but was like, what instrument do you play?, or do you want to come see this concert later? We never even talked about -- sometimes, sometimes people did, but mostly out of curiosity, you know, at that age. But I think going to that school bolstered my self-esteem like 1000% and driving into the city every single day, spending more time in the city, um, spending more time with all different kinds of, of races and people and just a breath of fresh air from like the claustrophobia of the suburban lifestyle where I had been.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm.

CAROLINE FERMIN: And so then I would spend half the day in the morning at this public school in Mandeville and half the day at this um, arts school. So I did my academics in the morning and art in the evenings or afternoons. And it was during that time that I started to like mouth off sometimes (laughs) to the teachers or like um, talk back to, to students or, or even just be able to like talk about myself to students. I would say I was more aggressive than assertive at the time. I was either like roll over and play dead or very aggressive.

LIZA ZAPOL: Can you tell me a story about an interaction with a faculty member or student at that time?

CAROLINE FERMIN: Let me think. Well there was one, I guess it's not about race but more just about like feeling more powerful. Um, the, the, I was very good at school, very good at school. I loved school, especially science. (clears throat) And so my physics

teacher was kind of, like taking favor in me and really, you know, I was in the AP physics or whatever. Kind of I think grooming me to, to go into more science outside of high school. And I didn't realize this at the time, I think now I would have but (laughs) you know, by the end of the year he was like, "So which schools have you applied [00:30:00] for?" And I listed all these conservatories. And he was like, "You're gonna waste your time becoming a dancer?" And like the old me would've started crying, like I had a nickname in school, crybaby, because I cried all the time. But the new me that was like a little more aggressive, I was like, "I'm not wasting my time. I'm gonna move to New York City." (laughs) I'm getting out of here. And like essentially shut it down, shut down the conversation. And now I look back and I feel kind of bad, because he meant well (laughs). But yeah, I remember that being like monumental in my mind, was like I stood up to my teacher.

LIZA ZAPOL: (laughs) Talk to me about the strain of, of becoming an artist, you know, becoming a dancer. When did you discover, you know, discover dance?

CAROLINE FERMIN: I was dancing when I was three. My mom just stuck me in it, because little girls do dance. And but I actually liked it, and my parents actually were really good about um, letting us do whatever we wanted in terms of extra-curriculars. We didn't have to do anything, but they wanted us to be doing something. So, you know, my sister was like, "I don't want to do anything," they're like you have to pick one thing at least. But my, every year, when they asked me like what do you want to do this year, I was like dance, dance, dance, dance. And then for a while it was girl scouts, girl scouts, girl scouts (laughs). And then it got too hard to do both and my mom made me choose. She was like, "You have to choose one or the other because I can't drive you around everywhere." I remember like mulling it over for like hours in my room, like really choosing dance (laughs) over girl scouts. Isn't that funny.

LIZA ZAPOL: Probably a hard decision at that moment, you know.

CAROLINE FERMIN: It was so hard.

LIZA ZAPOL: Because it's like peer, the peer --

CAROLINE FERMIN: The peer group, exactly, and that's where all the pretty ponytails lived. Um, although in the south, or at least in this area, dance was very cool, I mean it

was OK to be a dancer and people were like, oh, how many turns can you do. The dance team at school or the cheerleaders at school be like, can you show us how to do a whatever step? I'd be like sure (laughs). But um, but I think what happened, what happened to me when I started doing art is I just started getting like another perspective of like how the world could function. And I felt like my friends were not doing that. And what the result was, was that I had very little social life. I had my friends at dance. But like I can't tell you the name of a friend. I can tell you one, Stephanie Geauthreaux (laughs) that I had in school that I still have today. But the rest were like I couldn't be fr-- I felt like I couldn't, I had nothing in common with them. I never dated anyone in school, ever, I didn't have one date. I like couldn't abide the boys, I was just like, what? You know, like drinking beer and playing football and it just wasn't my style. And there was no other alternative. So it was really suffocating for me, and like I often felt really lonely. Um, I just wasn't interested in the same things everyone else. And again, because it was such a homogenous place, yeah. But it wasn't all sad, like I had my friends at dance.

LIZA ZAPOL: Right, yeah, so talk to me about, I mean that sounds like, that's also the time of like puberty and everything.

CAROLINE FERMIN: Oh my God (laughs) oh my God, exactly.

LIZA ZAPOL: So like what was that like also being as, a, a dancer at that time too?

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah, good Lord (laughs).

LIZA ZAPOL: Any stories about that.

CAROLINE FERMIN: I, I was trained mostly in ballet, like strict ballet. And um, Russian Bolshoi, this guy from the Bolshoi was my teacher, Mr. Constantin Apetrei. And he was a wonderful inspiring teacher. He like made dancing fun and it was about like what you were feeling and like if you could jump higher and -- it was just like so wonderful to go to class. I mean if you danced for him and you didn't enjoy yourself I don't know what was wrong with you (laughs). Um, gonna say something about his wife but I don't want to (laughs). She was the opposite, let's just say that.

LIZA ZAPOL: And she was also a teacher.

CAROLINE FERMIN: She was also a teacher. And she actually contributed for me at the time, I don't know what she's like now, me feeling bad about my body in the stereotypical dancer kind of way. I was always very skinny, but my [00:35:00] but also like athletic. And dancers are often willowy and I was like athletic, like a big knees, big bones and sharp elbows and I was kind of like a stick figure and you wanted to be more of the shape of an S, you know, like ugh. And my feet, my feet were like a constant source of anguish, feet and hair. My feet were like kind of like big fishes, like flappin' around (laughs). And um, in dance you want to have like these really supple archy feet, which I did not have. And I would get constantly, like they would tell you things like put your feet under the couch at night and like let the weight push your feet down to make an arch. And like sleep in a split. Awful, awful thing. When you're watching TV, have someone put a dictionary on your like knees to like, like --

LIZA ZAPOL: And did everyone get this or they were particularly --

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yup, everyone, but I got a lot, I got a lot bombarded at me, um, because I think they saw a lot of potential in me and wanted me to like succeed. But like my body just like not made for that, for that level of ballet. I can do ballet just fine, but I'm not gonna get hired to be in a, a company that's looking for a certain aesthetic that my body just doesn't have. I also interestingly became more aware of my Dominican heritage when I would look at my body in the mirror. My calves, I was like obsessed with the fact that my calves were really high on the back of my legs. And my muscles were like, like rounder shaped rather than elongated. Like my butt was really high and like I had like a more barrel-chested ribs. And I, n-- none of the other girls looked like that. They had like um, smaller ribcages and you just like stare at yourself in the mirror all day and you start to notice that like everyone has similarities that like you don't have. And I remember one time um, an African-American girl came to class, and I was like, oh! We have a similar body type, and it was like, eye-opening. And then again when I went to school in New Orleans and started dancing with other types of girls and guys, I realized like where my body type comes from. Because the truth is like very different body types. (clears throat) And not everyone, but I always struggled with, and was like weirdly obsessed with wanting to have a more European body.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm.

CAROLINE FERMIN: More European-style body. But I remained like the best jumper and the fastest runner in school and in dance class. Like I had a lot of stamina and I was like, could jump really high. Um, but I didn't have those pretty feet (laughs).

LIZA ZAPOL: You mentioned before, you can jump high because you have your father's legs.

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yes, exactly, exactly. Which he was always very proud of (laughs). And yeah, and then, you know, I'm now doing modern dance, which is better suited for my body, and I feel more comfortable. But at the time, just like I was obsessed with trying to make it as a ballet dancer. And often, ballet dancers make it very young. A lot of them are like dancing professionally in high school, or don't go to college and go right into a company. I was like really wanting that to be my path in life. So I had this like crazy focus um, that other students didn't have. Like there was a prom, and I literally could've cared less about prom. I didn't go to any of my proms, um, or I never went to a school dance. I went to maybe one or two and never went back, because no one danced (laughs). It's like no one's dancing.

LIZA ZAPOL: Right, right. Like I'm a dancer, this isn't dancing (laughs).

CAROLINE FERMIN: Um, I was always, I always felt so at odds with, with school and I felt, I like would have fantasies of me dancing and then having all the kids from school come and watch and be like, wow, she's so good. Like that was my fantasy when I was going through puberty.

LIZA ZAPOL: Were there other moments where you could share that?

CAROLINE FERMIN: No, unless they like sought out coming to the Nutcracker, which like none of them did. Maybe occasionally I would see people drug there by their families, be like, hi Caroline. But I would [00:40:00] say like for me, it started my dedication started paying off in high school, when it was clear that I was having these opportunities and experiences that other people weren't, like getting to go into the city everyday and um, applying for schools far away, like literally I wish I had a statistic for you, I feel like 75% of the kids went to school in state.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mmm, mm-hmm.

CAROLINE FERMIN: And I was like, I think I'm going to New York City. I was like an immediate, you know, curiosity, like everyone was like, wow, she's leaving the small town. And then I got into Juilliard and it was just like then everyone wanted to talk to me, then everyone wanted to like (laughing) be my friend and, yeah --

LIZA ZAPOL: How did that feel?

CAROLINE FERMIN: At that point I think I was older, so I didn't really care. I was like, sure, I'll talk to you, but I didn't make any pretenses that they were my friends all of the sudden. And a lot of these people um, try to find me on Facebook now and (laughs) they're all like, wow, what are you doing and um, I guess yeah, for the time there was a little bitterness, but not really. I was just happy to be leaving.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

CAROLINE FERMIN: That area.

LIZA ZAPOL: And, you know, in terms of dance, did you have a sense of other dance traditions in, you know, in New Orleans or anything?

CAROLINE FERMIN: Oy, yeah, not really.

LIZA ZAPOL: I mean you grew up in ballet.

CAROLINE FERMIN: It was like ballet, ballet, and it was either ballet or dance team, you know, competition, like miniskirts and sparkles, which was like so not, I don't think my parents would've let me dress like that (laughing). I also wasn't interested, so conservative and like disciplined. But, but I guess when I started spending more time in the city and meeting friends, um, going to see Mardi Gras parades, they have these people called the Mardi Gras Indians, it's this incredible tradition where you, these "tribes" quote-unquote um, dress in these elaborate costumes that they spend all year creating with feathers and sequins, always very bright, humungous headdresses, like think like a human peacock, like incredible, just so beautiful. And they have battles, they have like dance battles. Incredible, they have dance battles, like that's when I was like wow, other kind of dance. Um, and then at the high school we had to take um, African dance and we would have to take, think we took some like ballroom type dance and we would have um, traveling shows, like whoever was in town performing with New Orleans Ballet, they would come and do a master class, so we were exposed to like tons of different kinds of

dance, so I'm eternally grateful for that experience. But it really didn't happen, other dance styles, until -- no, there was one time, actually, and this was the time I realized I didn't want to do ballet anymore. There was this um, little theatre in a neighboring town, and a traveling Russian group was coming to perform like a Russian dance company. And they did like traditional folkloric Russian dance.

LIZA ZAPOL: What did it look like?

CAROLINE FERMIN: The men were just doing those like barrel turns and circles all across the stage, like super athletic, there was lots of like, *huh!* and clapping and like it was like so fiery and exciting. And then the women were just as fiery as the men, which was what got my attention, because I always wanted to do the men's variations in ballet, because they get to jump and that's what I was good at. Um, and I was like, ah, here's a dance style where the women are doing just as much fun stuff as the men. And it kind of planted the seed that like maybe ballet is not the only way. But I remember that show vividly, the Russian dance troupe.

LIZA ZAPOL: That was like in middle school at some point.

CAROLINE FERMIN: I think it was like junior high, I was probably like 13 or 14. I was just like blown away, like my jaw was on my chest (laughs) so incredible.

LIZA ZAPOL: That's interesting, in terms of like there's another way or some other kind of --

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah, yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: -- thing for me.

CAROLINE FERMIN: And my dad too was, he's very like into culture. He especially likes classical [00:45:00] art forms, so he was very supportive of like my ballet training and um, he never had the like you need to be a doctor or you need to make more money. The message that was always driven home was, are you happy, then keep doing it. If you're not happy, change to something else. So he really encouraged me and once he found out I was listening to classical music obviously for ballet, he would take me to like string quartets in the city or orchestra concerts. That also, I mean I have very vivid memories of these cultural outings, because they were so much what I wanted (laughs) they were so much what I wanted.

LIZA ZAPOL: And how did that feel going to those kind of events with your dad?

CAROLINE FERMIN: Oh man, I felt so cool (laughs) I felt so cool. That was like probably some of the only times I let him like, I, I feigned friendship with him, because I was so embarrassed of him basically, as most kids are, but I, we had a special aversion to him because he represented the otherness that's so dangerous when you're a kid. Like he would pick us up from school in a very cheap car, because we had not that much money, and um, it would be blasting salsa music, the windows down. And he's wearing some like crazy getup and we would like ashen-faced, just like get into the car, so embarrassed. We literally ride through town, my sister and I, slouched under the windows, so no one would see us with him. So embarrassed of my dad for a period of time.

LIZA ZAPOL: And how did that change, so these moments when you would go out to the --

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah, yeah, I don't know, because then he, no one was watching I guess. And we were in the city. Really made a big difference. I, I've been really interested as to like, I've always had this like dream of living in a city. But even just talking to you right now, it's starting to make more (laughing) sense, like I see why. It's always represented like freedom and equality and just like a chance to be yourself. There's too many people around for them to care about you. You can just do your own thing and um, yeah, I just loved going there. I loved watching the, the city lights go by as we drove home. I was like ah, just represented like space, yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: And then so now you're, you know, you're on your way to New York (laughs).

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: And you've made this commitment to be a dancer and um, so talk to me about that transition, life on your own.

CAROLINE FERMIN: Oh my God, so hard. Was so not ready for it. Yeah, so I wanted to be like in a city. I wanted to be a dancer. And then I got here and I was so overwhelmed by like the homeless population and the obvious poverty that in my country club town was like hidden away in back streets that no one ever had to go down. But here you were forced to look at it. You know, a lot more people with disabilities that

were visible for you to see. It was like literally coming out of Pleasantville. And even though my dad tried to like prepare us by, you know, anecdotally talking about the way things were in the Dominican Republic and talking about what it's like to live under a dictatorship, and he always was trying to give us reality checks. But like it doesn't sink in until you live it, it really doesn't. And so once there, I realized how close-minded I actually was and how difficult the transition was going to be and how much prejudice I had built up just by nature of like living where I lived.

LIZA ZAPOL: Talk to me about your first day in New York.

CAROLINE FERMIN: (laughs) Well my dad, this is actually great because my dad's family lives in Queens, some brothers and sisters. And so we flew into New York and -- this was after I had like auditioned for Juilliard. I had been here a couple times but in a very like closed circumstance for a summer program. But this was my first time here, grown up ready to be alone. So we flew into New York and we went to my uncle's house, which is in Jamaica, Queens. Um, it was like a neighborhood unlike any I had ever walked through before. But my dad was in heaven, because all the stores were selling like food and stuff that he loved, was like [00:50:00] buying stuff and everyone was speaking Spanish on the street. I suddenly felt out of place for the first time as like a white person. I was like, suddenly aware that I was really white. (laughs) Was like the first time ever that I experienced that. And then being with my family, also feeling like a gringa, like I couldn't speak Spanish to them and they were very nice, like they didn't make a big deal out of it, but I could understand some of their Spanish and they would just be like tisk-tisking the fact that I didn't speak Spanish. (makes frustrated noise) *Ugh*, so hard. So I felt like that very first day I was like, wow, I also am gonna have a hard time fitting in here. And I would say my first -- well, I'll get to that in a second, but my dad and (clears throat) my uncle drove me into the city. And my dad was just so excited to see his brother. And they were gonna go out drinking and they were gonna like have a barbecue and do music and blah, blah, blah, roast a whole pig or something crazy, I'm not sure (laughs). And I was gonna get settled and do orientation activities. So my uncle waited downstairs with the van because he didn't want to park it, and my dad helped me bring all my stuff upstairs. And then I started to cry. He was like, "You're gonna be

OK," and like clapped me on the back was like, "Have a great day," and like left (laughs, makes sound like crying). I was like, no! So I, I called home a lot and good cry and both of my parents are very empathetic and would offer a lot of advice and, try to make me feel better and, yeah, and I, as I was gonna say, I feel like the first couple of years in New York I, you know, while I was at Juilliard, whatever, I was just a student. But I would see my extended family often, and just became aware that like I also wasn't totally Hispanic either. And they would say things about, you know, Southerners or white people and I would be like, that's my family. And I, I went into like a really deep depression my second year of Juilliard. I don't know what triggered it, but I think it was just dealing with all this -- and I didn't actually know what was wrong. I wasn't like, I'm dealing with my identity. I was like (laughs) I'm so depressed, I want to quit, I want to leave, I want to like hurt myself, I want to go away. So I saw the counselor there at Juilliard, they have a few. And I just ended up with someone, basically through the course of a few months what we came down to was like biracial, what does it mean feeling, feeling like I had to choose one or the other. And remembering stories, this is a story from childhood, I was in first grade, remembering things like this. I was in first grade and we had to do a standardized test. And you had to fill out black, white, and next to white they have non-Hispanic, and then they have Hispanic. And I was like panicking, like I was five and I really didn't know what to do. And I called the teacher over and she was like, "Oh, just fill in white." And it felt, I felt really bad, I felt really bad. I felt bad for my dad when I filled it in. And I went home and told my mom, and she was like, yeah, that sucks, basically (laughs) like I don't know. And when we did the census a few times, she would be on the phone with him and they'd be like, well, whatever language you speak at home is what race you are. And I, my mom would be furious, and we would be in the back like, no! (laughs) Uhh, yeah, having to choose I felt like was the hardest part.

LIZA ZAPOL: Uh-huh.

CAROLINE FERMIN: And now thank God someone wised up and they have all those lovely like multicolored boxes you can choose, but, I'm sure someone somewhere is

getting left out. But it was like, it was like a crisis, a childhood crisis, like which box to fill in.

LIZA ZAPOL: And in that, in the choice, it's like, like you were saying, the choice of allegiance or like --

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah, felt like was picking sides, mom or dad. And often like I feel like that's something that came up a lot that I had to kind of deal with once I got to New York was the idea of integration rather than war. And [00:55:00] I just felt, I think throughout my whole childhood that like if I sided with my dad's culture, it's like naturally antagonistic to like the cowboys in the south. And like to this day, my family in the south will say racist things, my extended family, some of my uncles. Like, and will, and like will, some of my cousins will say things like about Hispanics, and my sister and I will be like, that's us, that's my dad. They'll be like, "Oh, but not your dad, not Hispanics like your dad. Like the ones that are like jumping the border." This kind of like --

LIZA ZAPOL: So what do you do?

CAROLINE FERMIN: I, I'm still figuring it out. I, sometimes I speak up and sometimes I'm like, they're not ready to hear this anyway, they're not gonna listen to me and we're very like loving family and I'd rather keep the peace sometimes. It's more important in a way that I maintain connections to my relatives than ostracize them over what some things that they're feeling or that they said. Yeah. I don't think we notice it when you're little. Obviously you're not listening to adult conversation. But um.

LIZA ZAPOL: And when, when you say we, do you mean yourself and your sister?

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah, myself, my sister, and my brother. Now my brother, I don't talk about my brother a lot, because when I left for school, he was still like a little kid. But now that he's older, he's like 19, 20, he's very politically aware um, and very sick of the hypo-- hypocritical nature of our family and my, my extended family. Um, and he really, he's also going through this period. Again, my sister didn't have as much trouble with it. She, she's now married to the high school quarterback. Um, she really enjoyed that culture. She fit right in. She still is very, she's a teacher and she um, really tries to teach like an honest history of both sides, black and white, Hispanic as well. Like often

doesn't get taught in the south. She definitely, you know, stands up for herself and for her culture. And she waves the Dominican flag proudly and she speaks more Spanish than I do. She's really good at Spanish and she's been to the DR multiple times. So she's really owned her culture. But she also fits in really well where she lives. But my brother and I are a little bit more artsy and have trouble with that and since growing up, the group of us have just realized what a middle ground we always are in. And that we can -- I just hate hearing people talk nasty about other people, from either side. And I always have to like pipe up and be like, talking about my mom and my dad to me. You're talking about both sides of my family.

LIZA ZAPOL: So um, when those kinds of things happen, do you um, do you also talk about it with your siblings --

CAROLINE FERMIN: Oh yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: -- afterwards?

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: How does that happen, can you give me an example?

CAROLINE FERMIN: Well we'll often just like go in the other room, and Juliana will be like, my sister's name is Juliana, Juliana will say, "Oh did you hear what so-and-so said, that's so annoying." I'll be like, "I know, I can't believe it." You know, we'll just rehash it. Or my brother will come in and be like, "They're at it again." We'll be like, yeah. And then we'll talk kind of about how to approach it. Be like, let's just let it go. It's like Christmas Eve. We don't want to start a family feud. Just like, you know, walk away maybe or I don't know. In the future, maybe I would be more, I don't know, I don't know if I would. It's different with your family, it really is, it's so hard. Something we talk about. Juliana, my sister, is like extremely fiery, she's just like my dad, da, da, da! And if something says like anything negative or like racially tinted, she'll like go off on like a tangent. Strangers, like policemen (laughs) she's fire, fire, fire. Um, but with the family, we, she doesn't do it, we don't [01:00:00], but I don't know. Maybe more so with the cousins, the people our own age. When we hear them like parroting things that their parents have said, we're like, OK, new generation, it's time for you to like realize what you're saying and that it's offensive to us. We'll tell them, we'll be like, "That's offensive

to me. You're hurting my feelings." And often that's enough. They'll be like, "Oh sorry." We've had, I've had to like um, they've posted things on Facebook using dirty language about Blacks or Hispanics, especially when like um, elections roll around. Talking about immigrants or -- and I've made the mistake of multiple times going off on them on Facebook (laughs) which I'll never do again. But now we, we have a protocol where we like call them and tell them that it's really offensive and if my dad was looking at this, like how do you think he would feel. And usually they take it down, apologize. (laughs)

LIZA ZAPOL: What happened the first time that you, why you would never do it again?

CAROLINE FERMIN: Because Facebook is not the medium for like fighting. Um, or even just trying to get someone to see your point of view, because you can just be really nasty when you don't have to look at someone in the face. Again, like what I was saying before, even me, who like struggles so much with feeling like an outsider, feeling racially different, had so many racial stereotypes that my friends here in New York kept like telling me, being like, "You know what you just said was -- or you know how you treated that person was --"

LIZA ZAPOL: Can you give an example, that you're comfortable sharing?

CAROLINE FERMIN: Um, well yeah, I think in the south, the black and white tension is so palpable and real that people often make fun of it to deal with it, and like over-exaggerate like white honkies and, you know, make fun of, you know, like black people, so poor, like not working hard. And then the black people will talk about the white people, white people, like always holding us back and they think we're awful. Uh, it's just like constant. It's really present still in the south. And um, I kind of still talked that way when I, when I moved here. And my Northern friends were like, whoa, you can't do that! It doesn't matter like what race you are, you can't talk about that, even about your own race. And I was like, oh my God, was so embarrassed, so embarrassed.

LIZA ZAPOL: What happened? Like what happened after that?

CAROLINE FERMIN: Oh it was just, I think we were walking to a party or like a bar.

And I said something my friend Shamel was like, "That's really racist." And I was like,

(gasps) me? No! But it totally was. And I was like chastened and we just, we went to the party. But it stuck with me and I like journaled about it when I got home and like (laughs). Just realized my own prejudices against myself even.

LIZA ZAPOL: Have you always kept a journal?

CAROLINE FERMIN: Always. I love journals. I have a journal I kept in the year 2000 and I journaled a little bit like every single day. So I could see like what the year of the new millennium was like. And I had a journal when I was like five when I had just learned to write and entries including, "I hate my mom. I want to like kill my sister. I wish I had a bike." Things like that (laughs). Often, often I turn to the journal when I wanted to um, vent about my sister, fighting with my sister, my mom (laughs). But yeah, the journaling, the journaling helps, and interestingly, like something that really helped was becoming an RA at Juilliard. You had to go through a lot of diversity training, and a lot of um, conflict mediation training as an RA. And it was wonderful. Um, we also took a course on um, uh, what is it called? For, for immigrants, for kids who are coming to the school, goodness, culture shock (laughs). Culture shock.

LIZA ZAPOL: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

CAROLINE FERMIN: Like taking courses on that and what that manifests as and, you know, we have a lot of kids coming from very different types of, of cultures. And just like being given the chance and the safe space [01:05:00] to like talk about it, and they would ask questions, like what are your prejudices and we would tell them and get it out in the open, learn ways to deal with your inherent prejudices. And we had books that were recommended to read about like tolerance and diversity. Tolerance was not the word, acceptance and diversity. Very politically correct, and actually really helpful giving you a framework for how to deal with the very complex as I've learned, extremely complex issue. So after that deep depression I had at Juilliard, I became an RA. And it, it really helped, I was able to talk about things with a framework that I had learned and explore things and um, work through them through activities and through writing journaling and stuff like that. Was kind of the beginning of some good, good uncovering for myself.

LIZA ZAPOL: And when you were an RA, were there examples of you kind of helping other people through changes that you had --

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: -- gone through yourself, can you tell me a story about something like that?

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah. There was this kid um, from China. And I said, "You know, any time my door is cracked," you have like open door hours, so "Any time the door is cracked open, you're welcome to come in and just talk about whatever." And so no one usually takes you up on this offer. But at this time, this young boy came in. What can I help you with? He was just like looked so scared. He was like, "What are you reading?" and I said, "Oh this book." He said, "Do you have to read it for school?" And I said no. He looked at me, like what? He said, "Why would you read something that's not for school?" I was like, "Oh, because it's really interesting and I love reading." And he was like processing that. And then he was like, "Well, you're telling us we have to clean," because there's like a cleaning rotation um, for the suites and the bathrooms. He's like, "I don't know how to clean." And I wish he said it that easily. It took him three minutes to tell me he couldn't do it. He like didn't actually know. Um, he's like, "My mom cleans, like men don't clean. I don't clean. I don't know anyone that cleans." And I was like, all right. So I grabbed like the bucket, and I was like, this is for the toilet and (laughs) like this is for the shower. There's just like a relief once he had learned and, and he just stuck around for like two hours just talking to me about why was I an RA? Did my parents want me to be an RA, and I said no. Why was I at school, did my parents want me to be a dancer? I said no. He just told me about his, you know, you do everything for your parents he said, and it's like honor for my parents. We just shared our backgrounds and I kind of shared with him that I came from a mixed-race background and currently I was working through my thoughts about that. He was really interested about -- and then he left with like a smile on his face and I don't think I ever talked to him again that year. But yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: Giving someone else the tools to kind of literally.

CAROLINE FERMIN: Literally, the toilet brush (laughs).

LIZA ZAPOL: I saw someone out there I think maybe, maybe transition time.
Time is it now?

CAROLINE FERMIN: I have here.

LIZA ZAPOL: It's OK.

CAROLINE FERMIN: Three-fifty.

LIZA ZAPOL: OK great. Well I'm gonna stop us for now. Um, thank you for, I was so worried to like, it's we're in a perfect spot too, for this transition turning point in your life.

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: Hopefully we can continue this conversation. Thank you so much.

CAROLINE FERMIN: Thank you.

[01:09:14]

Oral History interview with Caroline Fermin**Crossing Borders, Bridging Generations, 2011.019.042****Interview conducted by Liza Zapol on March 17th, 2013 in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn.**

LIZA ZAPOL: [00:00:00] So um, this is Liza Zapol, it's for the *Crossing Borders Bridging Generations* Oral History Project. It's March 17th, 2013. And um, I'm here uh, with --

CAROLINE FERMIN: This is Caroline Fermin.

LIZA ZAPOL: And this is our second time talking together. Um, so yeah, so we were, last time we finished up, we were um, still talking about your time at Juilliard, and um, we just brought up this idea of like talking about your relationship um, with Max and maybe your, I don't know, was this like your first relationship?

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: So tell me, tell me about that story.

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah. Um, boys were always I think I kind of mentioned this last time, boys were always um, a difficult thing for me, um, they often didn't think I was pretty or like tell me I was pretty. Um, I never had any like kind of silly crushes or like play dating growing up. Um, they would always go for like the blonde girls. Um, and I, I really like took it to heart, was like uh, not, this is not um, I'm not what they're looking for. I don't look like what they're looking for. Um, and it made me so, so upset. And then I went to NOCCA where there was like more mixed-race population.

LIZA ZAPOL: NOCCA is the --

CAROLINE FERMIN: The New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts, the high school that I would drive to for half the day. So would get to leave my, my homogenous like academic school and go to this crazy art school for half the day. And there was the first time people started to like show interest in me, and it was always the Black kids, which I found like I was so surprised by, and they, they always had like lovely compliments for me that I had never received up to that point and there was no questions about like why my hair looked the way it did. It was just like, "Your hair is really pretty," or like I like that your skin is dark but your eyes are light. And I was like, oh, I guess I do too. Like it

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was this nice reassurance and despite what people say, when you're like 17 you definitely need external approval to feel good (laughs) about yourself. Um, so I, you know, that kind of bolstered my self-esteem I guess. But I still didn't have any like real dates or boyfriends. Um, and then I went to Juilliard. And I felt very free to kind of start over, be myself, and not apologize for like how I looked. And it didn't matter anyway, because no one was asking questions. So it wasn't an issue. So around my second year, I met an actor named Maxwell DePaula. We were in the same year, but he was a few years older than me. And he was like the antithesis of a boyfriend I would be looking for. (laughs) He was like crazy and he hosted like parties, giant parties at bars, and you know, would charge people a little bit of money and he would DJ and pocket all the money. He was like an event promoter. He would hand out flyers on the street, like yo, yo, come to this party, like (laughs) stuff that I like never did. Um, but he was very like clean cut. He didn't smoke, he didn't drink, he was very clean in that way. But he loved to party. And I found out, like yes, he was Brazilian. He loves to party (laughs). He also like loved women and he was known around campus for like having dated like almost everyone. (clears throat) So but there was this like exuberant quality to him that reminded me of like the Latin culture, I mean it was Latin culture. But I was like drawn to it for sure. It felt safe in a way. He like felt safe in a way that other guys hadn't to that point. Um, and that he like got this part of me that for so long other guys hadn't gotten, where I lived. Um, that I would be like, oh yeah, you know, like let's have rice and beans tonight. Even something as simple as like choosing what to eat for dinner, we would like agree on, and have different recipes for the same [00:05:00] kind of food or we both liked to listen to salsa music and we both knew how to dance salsa and like could go out and do, you know, Latin social dancing together. Like all of these things were so affirming for me. Um, and the fact that he was so exuberant, he like pulled me out of my shell. And I really like started to appreciate my Dominican culture through his love of his Brazilian culture. Um, it was like a perfect relationship for that time in my life. And we stayed together for the, the remaining three years um, that I was at Juilliard, like learning about each other, learning about myself. Um, yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: What was um, what was your, your relationship also to his family and --

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah, yeah. So interestingly, um, I think another reason I felt really comfortable with him is his family behaved in a way that I understood, um, (laughs) his -- so OK, his mother, his father, OK, his father was um, he worked at the Pillsbury factory and had worked there for, you know, as long as they had been in the United States, which was since Max was five. And his mother had come to the United States cleaning houses and, you know, I think nannying. Although in Brazil, I think she was a nurse. But she couldn't practice here without her license, her American license. So she had to start all over. And then eventually at this point in time was working at like a nursing home I think. So I had this picture of both of them as being like oh a guy that works at a bakery and woman that works at a nursing home. They must be so sweet (laughs). And they showed up at Juilliard one day um, to see Max in a play. And I met them in the cafeteria. And his mom immediately like sized me up and told me I had small boobs and a big butt, and that I, I could almost be Brazilian. And I was like mortified. And (laughs) and, you know, but also kind of understood what she was doing, because this like teasing thing was something my, my aunts did to me, um, kind of talk about your body and, and you know, you being a woman and so I kind of let her tease me, played along with her. And um, she was very like challenging always to me, but then would turn around and like laugh. It was hard to like read her, what she was doing. Um, she warned me vocally in front of everyone not to make babies with her son (laughs). Um, when the whole cafeteria was like staring at me (laughs). I was like, OK. Um, and then at other times, you know, we would visit her home and she would yeah like read my palm and tell me, you know, that she saw um, how I was connected to everyone in the room, like there was a group of us that went to visit Max's house in Boston. And um, she was like, "Oh, anyone that you're friends with in this lifetime, you've had a past life connection with them. So look at your friend, your girlfriend over here. You guys, she was your like daughter in the past," or you know this person like, she kind of told us how we were related to each other in past lives. And she also could tell how people were going to die, apparently. But she didn't, she never told anyone. She didn't want to tell

you. But she could kind of look at your palm and tell you these things, and she was very like mystical in this way, in a way that like my dad always had been. He used to um, wake up from dreams and be like, "Someone is going to die today." My mom would roll her eyes. But I was always really interested, because I had um, growing up I would have really strong feelings in my dreams, or I would be able to like tell the future in my dreams and, and he, my dad would take me um, under his wing and say like, "Yes, this runs in my side of the family. Like my mother also can tell the future in her dreams," or, you know, can feel ghosts. Your grandmother can feel ghosts and I was really scared as a kid of this idea. So um, I was like intrigued but also kind of put it aside. And my [00:10:00] dad um, would tell me um, you know, you have to protect your, your mind from like psychic influences. I mean I was like six. I was like a little kid. And he'd be like, you know, I would come to him crying and say like, I think someone's in my room. OK, and a normal parent would be like, "No, no one's in the room. Let's turn on the light. See, look, no one is here, OK goodnight." But he'd be like, "Yes, there are evil spirits, and (laughing) you have to learn how to close your mind to them." And he would like teach me about meditation and like energy-type work. And I grew up thinking this was like completely real and normal and it runs in the family and my, my grandma, his mother would visit us and be like, oh, you know, the reason you guys are seeing ghosts right here in the hallway is because this is a portal to um, the spirit world. And so the spirits don't stay in the house, but they're like moving through this area. Like all kinds of stuff. Um, and so when I met Max's mother and she was just like corroborating this idea that yes, there are, there are spirits, and yes you tap into them, and it's totally normal, um, something kind of clicked for me. And I was like, this is also like a cultural thing, this like superstitious semi-Catholic, semi-um, you know, voodoo feeling. My dad, you know, the Dominican Republic being right next to Haiti and then the African influence also Brazil, there was this pseudo-Catholic, superstitious religion um, that I totally to this day still buy into. Um, having had a, having had experiences with it from multiple people. So Max's mother definitely became a really interesting um, uh, catalyst for me to start like researching my intuition again. And then Maxwell was very respectful of this, like I don't know, maybe another boyfriend would be like, "You're crazy," (laughs). But

he was, you know, he totally respected his mom and believed in this stuff also, and like encouraged me to write my dreams down and study them, to like learn more about these things. So they also had this weird effect on my spiritual beliefs, in a very like distinctly non-American way.

LIZA ZAPOL: Um, when you talk about, it's like this pseudo-Catholic or, you know, can you, what was, what is your religious background? Like what was your mother -- and you say your mother was like rolled her eyes, it was a little skeptical. So can you just tell me a bit more about that.

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah. So we grew up um, going to Catholic church. My mom is Catholic, but like southern um, Texas um, 1950s Catholic, you know. My grandma has pictures of the pope, like a calendar of the pope. And my great-aunt prayed the novenas for us so we didn't burn in hell um, (laughs) when we did our first communion, to confession, got confirmed. We were very like by the book Catholics and I can tell you all about the dogma. I went to a Catholic school until I was in eighth grade. Um, but luckily, or, or oddly, depending on your viewpoint, my mom also would bring me like books on witchcraft to like read, or um, she was, she was very like free thinker, my mom. She was like, "I think this is really interesting." At one point she got a job at a Jewish synagogue working as a, their secretary, learned all about like the Jewish religion and come home and tell us about it. So we were very open with our religion, yet at the same time very like practicing. Um, and then at a certain point in high school I was like, I really don't agree with much of the Catholic church, so stopped going or even thinking about it. Um, and then on the flipside growing up, my dad being extremely Catholic, but in this way that like my friends at school and at church were not. He um, like OK, my grandma came, his mother came to our church, and she was like, "Why are there so many statues everywhere?" She's like, "They can see you," and there's this like pagan thing if you have too many statues in a space. So apparently like where she practices her Catholic [00:15:00] faith, you don't have all the statues in the space. Um, and you also pray um, like my dad would also tell us to pray to like break, like that we had a curse (laughs) OK this sounds really crazy. But have you read the *Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Diaz? OK, you know how he feels that he has a curse, right? That's

so Dominican. Like everyone feels that they've been like cursed and my dad always calls it the cross to bear. Like we have our crosses to bear. And it, it's by different than like what my friends' parents were telling them, like (laughs) everything's gonna be great. Don't worry about it. It's just like less deep and less dramatic than like, I mean I had a very dramatic spiritual upbringing. So I have a curse. I can see ghosts. I'm like going to Catholic church. Like you have to close your mind off to like evil forces and um, remember that like, you know, the spirit world is, is all that matters. And he was very much against um, like buying a lot of stuff, which is so anti-American. Like we never bought new stuff because he felt like that was also just um, a temptation to have you focus on the material world instead of your spiritual inner world. And we'd be like, ugh, please I just want a new bike (laughs). And eventually he would cave in, I mean he wasn't completely non-American. He definitely would buy a new golf club sometimes (laughs) you know what I mean. But there was definitely like a different value system I guess is what I'm saying. Um, and one that was dictated by this, the spiritual, his belief in the spiritual karma place where there was like a set of laws that were above, that were above regular humans, in a very palpable way. Like not in just like a theoretical way, but in a way that would affect you on a daily basis. Um --

LIZA ZAPOL: And that your actions could in some sense affect where, what, what your interactions would be --

CAROLINE FERMIN: Exactly, that you had a lot of --

LIZA ZAPOL: You could open up portals or you could allow your mind to be --

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah, it was like all up to you, you had to learn how to, how to deal with it. Like, I mean when I was very young, I had a lot of weird experiences where one was um, I felt like someone was in my closet. And my sister fell asleep and I went out and told my dad, and my mom was like, "It's gonna be fine. You can go back to bed." And my dad was like, "No, no, she can stay out here." My mom was like, don't make her more upset (laughs). And my dad was like, "No, you can stay here, because I believe her, like something's probably there." Because I had come out multiple times saying I really couldn't go to sleep. And my mom again was just like, OK whatever, they're gonna do their weird thing. And I stayed there and then he went back with me and he was like,

"Do you think it's gone?" And I was like, "Yeah, I think it's gone now." And I went to sleep. And in the morning, my mom was sitting at the breakfast table looking really stone-faced. And I don't know, I can't remember if they told me then or my dad told me a few days later, but he was like, "Remember that woman you were playing with," because we were playing with a friend of his, a work friend of his at, at the pool. "Remember that woman you were playing with at the pool? She was very depressed and she hung herself in her closet last night," on the night I had this feeling. And my mom, she was just I think that was the moment where she was, OK, something's weird with you guys but I'm not gonna question it (laughs). And that was the moment I was like, oh, I think this is real. Um, and, and then after that, there were multiple other things that would happen or tell them I think this is gonna happen tomorrow, and my dad would like completely encourage me and be like, "OK, what did they say to you? What do you think this means?" He would totally encourage it, or, or you know, I would be like, "I didn't sleep last night," and he'd be like, "I didn't either. Did you see someone going back and forth?" And be like, "I saw it too, I saw it too." You know like he totally encouraged us to like open up our minds this way. And again, depending on your viewpoint, we could be like absolutely insane, or absolutely insane (laughs) really crazy, because it, it's very not, none of my other friends' parents would talk to them like that.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm.

CAROLINE FERMIN: [00:20:00] I remember that always being really different.

LIZA ZAPOL: When you were a child, but now you talk about Max's --

CAROLINE FERMIN: And then yeah when I met this person, who I would be with for three years, again having a, another culture, like no one related to my family, like feel and, and speak about things, almost the exact same way. I was like, oh, OK, this is definitely a larger cultural thing. It's not just like one weird isolated, weird group of people. It kind of -- and then I started researching, you know, like I read a lot about Haitian voodoo also being from New Orleans, like seeing where that comes in. And I read it from a scientific point of view, like what is actually happening like obviously zombies don't really exist. Like what's actually happening and how that relates to their belief system. And I started reading about like meditation. I started reading about chakra

systems. I just, I really -- and to this day, I'm still interested in and still applies to my dance work.

LIZA ZAPOL: How so?

CAROLINE FERMIN: Because as a dancer, we talk a lot about energy. OK, feel this energy, or move your energy out towards the audience. And, you know, if I'm, if I'm teaching a group of people who are non-dancers and I tell them to move their energy out, everyone looks at me with a blank face. So there is like this energy vocabulary you build up as a dancer, and I started to realize that it was very similar to what my dad and what Max's mother Eufrazia had been telling me all along. Um, and so to kind of realize that the two are combined, um, has just changed the way I like look at my dancing, it's become more spiritual I guess. But not in a, in a more practical way, like not in a floaty way. In a very real way. I can literally change how I move when I think about like spiritual or energetic qualities. Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: Can you give me example of how the thinking works in your mind when you're thinking about the spiritual or energetic qualities of --

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah, well for instance, um, OK, for instance, we can be asked to do um, a series of movements. And I can execute them and they are right, like I am good at and highly trained to execute what you've told me to do. But um, I can, the choreographer will often say like, um, that's not what I wanted. And so some of it is intention, like I think like OK, what do I want to think about in this moment. And sometimes it's about like thinking about like a story. But I've found something that works better is for me to think about like how I'm energetically giving off information. So I'll think like do I want to give off spiky energy, do I want to give off like smoother energy, do I want to give off like, like a beckoning energy. Um, and I can like feel it change my whole uh, even my muscle quality. Um, I, I started seeing an acupuncturist, which I like did not think was going to do anything, again because despite the fact that I have this very like voodoo spiritual inclination, I am still very much a scientist. I don't really believe in it (laughing) until I see it. So I had this horrible injury, spasm. And I called a massage guy, and he wasn't available. So I called acupuncturist, I'd never had it before. She came over, and I was like, oh please like, but I was ready to try anything. I was like

desperate, my neck hurt so bad. And it, it worked. And I, I was surprised. I just said like over and over, "Oh my God, it worked. Oh my God, it worked." And she was like, yes (laughs). I was like, "Oh my God, it worked, it's like magic." And then that also realizing like the subtleties of energy, that it doesn't have to be something as big as, as like intention. It could even be just like a subtle energy shift. [00:25:00] Um, is, is useful as well. And, and has like huge impact on your relationships with people, on the group dynamic, because dancers are often working in a group, so I can feel when my energy has changed. People read into that um, and group dynamic can either suffer from it or be improved by even one person's slight energy change. Becoming like very sensitive to these things. And again, like I think if you're not um, interested or like have experience in this language, this all sounds really heady. But it's, what I realized is it's actually, extremely practical. It's like extremely tangible and practical, yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: Felt in a way.

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah, very much so, with, with your five senses, absolutely, so.

LIZA ZAPOL: And then this other aspect of like sleep, sleeplessness, dreams, like visions, um, has that continued in a way your adult life or?

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah, there was definitely a period of time when I moved to New York and the pace and like input, I stopped having access to this part of me. I can only describe it as being like, like turned off, light turned off. It doesn't mean, I wasn't depressed or, I was having a great time, going to parties and learning a lot. But I could not, I could not access my intuition in the same way I had before. And even through Max's mom talking to me, it helped me intellectually understand what I had experienced as a child. Um, but I didn't, it didn't open anything up at the present moment. It was actually a relief, like life was way simpler (laughs). I was able to just like function normally and just make decisions and have the outcomes happen and not make connections and just sleep normally. Um, and then, something happened, um, where I had a dream -- I was feeling something and I had a dream that Maxwell cheated on me. And it was so vivid and strong and I told him. And he was like, "Oh that's weird." And six months later, he went on a like meditation retreat and came back and um, throughout the six months up to that point, I had been saying like I keep having this dream that like I

walk in and cheating on me. But again, I had not, I had not touched this part of my brain in a long time. And he sat down after this meditation retreat and was like, "I wanted to tell you I cheated on you." And I was like so mad, "That was so selfish. Why would you tell me, you just want to clear your consciousness -- conscience." Um, and oh, I was so obviously angry and upset and this is like the first person I, you know, had a long-term relationship with. Um, was devastating as it is for everyone who goes through this. But, he was like, you know, "I, I wanted you -- I told you because I wanted you, I felt bad that you weren't trusting your instincts, you weren't trusting your intuition. So I felt I had to tell you." And I was like, oh that's bullshit (laughs). But then I started thinking about it and, and he laid like no other demands or we didn't really speak about anything after that. But I think it was true and I think he probably talked to his mom and there was probably some communication there about like validating, like yes, what you had envisioned all along and what you kept telling me is in fact true. He's like, I didn't want you, like I'd rather you break up with me than you not know that what you were imagining or what you were dreaming is real. And um, and then from then on kind of have started, I started to really listen [00:30:00] to myself and to like whatever images or, or dream states I receive. I mean, it repeated again, um, I moved to Minnesota to dance in a ballet company. I was making like a great salary for a starting dancer. Um, I had a nice apartment. I wasn't totally happy with the choreography, but it wasn't horrible. I was enjoying, I had started to make friends. And then I, I had this like horrible pain in my stomach. And it started up um, when it was about time to sign contracts again, although I didn't put two and two together until later. And I couldn't eat, and I'm naturally a small person, and so losing five pounds was a lot on my frame. But I, I literally could not eat. And I would like lay on the floor of the dressing room and cry. It hurt so bad I went to the doctor, I went, they gave me um, prescription medicine for heartburn and antacids, and like nothing worked. Like nothing, it was just so much pain. And I, at that -- oh my God, this is so crazy. I'm just realizing a pattern (laughs) oh my God. At that point, I had met my current boyfriend's mother, who also dabbles in, dabbles, is very much a believer in like intuition and spiritual thinking, except she is very much um, American, white, blonde hair, blue eyes, um, (laughs) and is from the other end of the spectrum in terms of

culture. Lutheran, Minnesotan, quiet, like the opposite of Maxwell's mother. But also like completely guided me -- oh my gosh, this is so crazy to realize this -- also completely guided me into trusting my intuition. So basically had met this woman because I had known my friend um, Seth and he was like, "My family lives in Minnesota. Get to know them. They'll make sure you're taken care of." And so I did, and they became like second parents to me. And so while this like stomach problem was happening, she came to my house one day, I was just like completely over it, I was like, I need some relief. I don't know what to do. I called her. She was like, "Stop crying, I'll come over in a second." She just sat with me and she told me to ask my body questions and like wait for my body to give me answers, and like we kind of did a little meditation together. It was so easy, I did what she suggested, and I was like, oh, I should move back to New York. And I had like no job and no reason to move back to New York. But as soon as I thought of that, like the pain went away and she made, I remember, macaroni and cheese for me and I ate it, and I felt so much better to like be able to eat something. And I sadly told my director I wasn't coming back. He was very supportive of me. And he goes down on the record as being like one of the most supportive directors I've ever met. Um, and I moved back to New York, like with no job and no reason and no apartment and I left behind this like life, only because I had talked to this woman who told me to listen to my body. And I made this weird choice. And after that, I started dating my current boyfriend, who was the son of this woman. Weird (laughs) so crazy. These boyfriend mothers.

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah. That's really interesting. Um, so tell me, um, tell me, then tell me about Seth, tell me about the beginning of this relationship as much as you want to share or talk about.

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah. So Seth was like the opposite of Maxwell. Um, he was like the boy that I would have wanted to like me while I was in um, you know, high school, blonde hair, blue eyes, like popular, very American in terms of you know, I think he played basketball growing up, did a lot of athletics, like pretty much your, your average like suburban guy, I would've like killed to go out with when I was [00:35:00] younger. And um, and we had been friends all throughout Juilliard, he also went to Juilliard, as an actor. Um, and then like I said, I, I basically fell in love with his family first. Um, and

his mother, you know, I made a connection with, this energetic spiritual way. And then when I moved back to New York on a whim, literally like on a gut instinct, literally gut instinct (laughs) I moved in with him and his roommate until I found an apartment. And we just started hitting it off more and more and like less as friends and more as something else. And we started to date um, and his mom was like so excited, I think she had always like kind of hoped for that. Um, and, and I, I had a very interesting -- when I hang out with Seth and Seth's family, they remind me of my mom's side of the family. It feels very, I feel very understood in that way. Oh my gosh, I just realized this (laughs).

LIZA ZAPOL: What do you mean when you say that?

CAROLINE FERMIN: Well as much as Maxwell helped me feel understood in my Latin side, the side that you know, felt very quote-unquote "non American" in the way that I had been brought up to think Americans behaved, this suburban way, very anti-suburban, very anti white Catholic, Protestant, just like this crazy different way of living. You stay up till very late. You call everyone your cousin. You know, like yeah I have that too on my dad's side. I have a thousand "cousins," quote-unquote (laughs). I don't think I've ever met them, but apparently my cousin. And Max as well had all these cousins, this giant family, and they would do anything for each other, like there's very little caution, you just throw everything to the wind and it's very passionate, like you, you someone says, you know, I want you to be here, like 25 people come and they're cheering for you. Everything is not in halves, everything is in quadruples. So if that's what that relationship did for me, made me really embrace that and see that there was like good things to be learned from this culture, from this way of living, Latin culture, Seth's family and way of living helped me see perspective from my mom's point of view. Much more quiet, they don't want to like have everyone look at them while they give a monologue in the middle of the cafeteria (laughs) you know. Like very happy to stay at home, very happy to talk in small groups instead of, you know, groups of 50. Um, parties are planned for in advance (laughs). They are not hosted on a Wednesday evening before work the next morning, like (laughs) you know, these, these just slight differences. They're very slight, but they change the way you experience life. They really change the way you, you deal with and experience life. And, and I could not have dated two more

different people, one after the other, but two people that helped me connect more to like either my father or my mother. I feel like this is the first time I'm realizing this, speaking to you about it.

LIZA ZAPOL: (laughs) Yeah.

CAROLINE FERMIN: Very interesting.

LIZA ZAPOL: And um, what is, you know, on the other side, how has your family also been, you know, receptive to Seth and --

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: -- the, that relationship.

CAROLINE FERMIN: I think, well interestingly, I think, they're receptive to, to both of these different men in different ways. Um, yeah, it, I think um, my, my um, extended family on my dad's side, the one that speaks Spanish, I was really excited to introduce them to Maxwell. And he was able to like charm them and speak Spanish with them, because again, I cannot.

LIZA ZAPOL: This is your family in Queens.

LIZA ZAPOL: Queens, yup, my dad's brother and his sisters at the time [00:40:00] too. Excuse me. Um, and I was, I was actually kind of anxious, I was wondering how they would respond to Seth, um, because none of my cousins on that side have married or are in a relationship with a non-Dominican or a non-Hispanic. I think one cousin's dating Ecuadorian guy. But they all are like very much Latin American. Um, and I was bringing home this like white kid from like the Midwest (laughs). So I was actually really nervous, I wondered how they would respond to him. But of course, true to form, he was like completely swallowed up in like hugs and food dumped on his face (laughs). I was like, oh, no difference. They were very, just happy that I'm happy. And then my mom's side, um, it was the reverse, I was anxious and wondering how they would respond to Maxwell, given that some of that side of the family still say racist things. Um, some uncles, but they like loved him and were happy that I was happy and thought he was hilarious and the crazy guy. And all the cousins loved him, because he played games with them. And likewise the family really loves Seth. My grandma is obsessed with Seth because he sent her flowers on Christmas. Um, so I feel like I've learned that both sides

of the family, despite their personal racial hang-ups, and both sides have them, when it comes to the actual person, me, not like a theoretical group of people, but actual people, where you see them and meet them, their tolerance goes up 100%. It's the generalizations that are the harder, they speak in generalizations but then when they meet the people, they behave in their gracious, kind way, they are.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm. And at, at the end of our conversation last time, like after we stopped recording, you were talking about like feeling like you had to decide, like you know, especially at that specific point in your life, like freshman or sophomore year --

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: -- or first or second year at Juilliard, you were really feeling like you had to decide. Where, you know, and you were talking about like one side of your family reacting this way, expecting certain things. Like how, how do you feel right now in terms of this like feeling split or --

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: -- that, how do you conceive of your identity?

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah. A good question. I now just I think I've become more selfish and I just think about myself (laughs). I consider myself me. Occasionally depending on where I am, like I was teaching at a Brooklyn public school, I can pull out my Dominican side and be like, listen, you know, like I know what you're doing or like I can understand what you're saying, or um, or a perfect example where I used both sides of me were, was I was teaching at this Brooklyn public high school. And the kids started, oh God, someone said something nasty about one of the Muslim kids. And then they said something nasty about one of the like Latin American kids. And I was like, whoa, listen to me, and I like laid down the law. And I was like, I am mixed and what you, you know, what you say about one side offends me either way. And that did it, that totally did it for them. It was like my street cred. Like I played both cards, and it was a turning point in the class. I was like, never again talk nasty about each other, because either way, you offend me. And I think they had maybe thought I was more Black or Hispanic, and I think one of the kids said something about white people and just like that's my mom.

Like no. And likewise if someone says something nasty about immigrants, no, [00:45:00] that's my dad. So I'm able to kind of identify, I identify like one or the other when I feel like I'm making a point. But when I'm like walking through the street or like sitting around, I, it is weird. I just think of myself as myself and I, I also just, I kind of feel like I have a palette to choose from, where I can be like, I was telling you before we started talking --

(sirens in background)

LIZA ZAPOL: Hang on for a second.

CAROLINE FERMIN: I was telling you before we started talking that, I was thinking about where I want to be living right now. And I kind of can pick from this range of experiences and ways of living that I've been introduced to, knowing um, what it's like to live um, in like a very rural community, what it's like to live in like an urban city, what it's like to live in a laid-back kind of Caribbean town, what it's like to live on a farm, what it's like to live in a suburb. And having experienced all those different cultures, I can make an assessment about what I want at this time in my life, and choose kind of where to go from there. The same is true about like even how I choose to dress. Like some days I want to dress more um, uh, like preppie, like put together and like crisp and clean. I feel like I'm channeling my mom's side of the family, or wearing my like cowboy boots, my mom's side of the family, I feel like I can wear my jean skirt and, you know. And then other times I feel like I totally have the authority and feel good and want to bring out my dad's side and I'll wear my like big earrings and my like headscarf and yeah, I feel like I have a very dual natured (laughs) even dressing style, depending on what I want. I don't think I've really smashed the two together yet. Think I just like pick and choose depending on how I feel the day (laughs).

LIZA ZAPOL: Like this, as you say, this palette.

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah, yeah, I guess I do sometimes combine, I don't know, it depends on how I'm feeling.

LIZA ZAPOL: You were saying, you know, about choosing, just gonna look at time really quickly. It's 1:22 now. Um, so I'm, I'm gonna, I'll ask this one question. So in terms of where, living, where you were living, and this um, this is for of the Brooklyn

Historical Society, we've talked before, also last time I think you were saying like, and I've chosen to live in Fort Greene, like this -- so talk to me about that choice. Talk to me about living in Fort Greene and why you've chosen to live there and what's it like to be in that space.

CAROLINE FERMIN: Well, interestingly, I used to live in Washington Heights, which has got a very large Dominican population. I felt very comfortable there. There were some aspects of my life that were not represented, you know, but I also felt really comfortable, it'd be like hanging out with my dad's family the whole day. But I was living with Seth at the time, and that did not fully represent his cultural experience. And I think without identifying that as such, we were just looking for a place where we both felt there was like a meeting of multiple cultures to be involved with. And (clears throat) we were looking in, in Brooklyn because it is such a, unlike Manhattan, it's not I don't feel as pocketed. I mean definitely there are some areas, but it just seemed more blended, even block to block of different cultures. And the apartment came about by chance, and it was another one of those gut instinct things, where a friend of ours was moving out of the apartment um, on Fulton. And we were looking maybe to move out of our apartment in Washington Heights. We had talked about it. And then this came up and I had a dream and I was like, we have to take the apartment (laughs). And he was very nervous um, but we did. And [00:50:00] so happy with the space. It's um, I would say not as many Hispanics, but definitely a mix of Black and white um, multiple cultures, I see a lot of mixed-race children running around which is I always look at them, like I wonder, I bet that's what I looked like when I was little. You know, like seeing all these light-skinned but like crazy-haired babies running around (laughs). Is, feels kind of like full circle in some ways to me. I feel very like comfortable in the neighborhood. There's, there's a certain pride also that people carry with them, with their respective heritage. There's lots of, you know, African art shops and, you know, different types of food, like there's this Ethiopian place right around the corner. And then there's also like a beer garden. It, it almost feels like race is not even part of the like question, it's just the answer, it's just like what it is. Like people are both celebrating it and using it like (clears throat) like commenting on their race in different ways, and also just living in it. I feel

like I'm learning a lot from, from the neighborhood and how people invite their neighbors in and as it becomes, it is becoming more gentrified as, as the population changes. Seeing how people are dealing with it, it's, it's a big version of what my family does. It's like an expanded version of what my mom and dad did.

LIZA ZAPOL: How do you see the gentrification, how does it, you know, any stories around gentrification in your neighborhood.

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah. Well, when I moved in even just a few years ago, I think there was less, I definitely saw less um, young, like families with strollers. And there's a lot more -- and it's a lot more transient I think. Like I meet a lot of people and they're like, "Oh, I just moved in a few months ago." And then I don't see them again. Um, there also seems to be like a lot of young, young people that are like, I mean I'm, I consider myself young too (laughs) but that are kind of like in and out. Um, and I've talked to a lot of the business owners around, who at this point I've like become, you know, friendly with. And they say it's really hard for them, because they, they don't have, they don't have a regular population, people coming. They have different people here and there, and that's one of the reasons I really loved living in Fort Greene or in a small um, area within a bigger one, like in a neighborhood I guess that's way you call them a neighborhood. Because I can go downstairs to my pizza guys and they'll like give me a free slice if I bring them like cookies next week. And I can go to the hardware store and he can come over and like help me free of charge, because I, you know, we look out for each other as neighbors, or you know, if someone is, is in front of my door, we live across the street from Habana Outpost so it can get really crazy in the summer. Usually there were some guys that run a barber shop and they'll come and make sure I get into my house OK. And I'll just like waving to people and knowing them and talking to them. And I hope that the gentrification doesn't change that (clears throat) but I definitely see it as a challenge for the neighborhood.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Um, and you were saying it's like a version of what your parents sort of did --

CAROLINE FERMIN: I do feel that way. It feels so comfortable in the neighborhood, because I can seek out multiple cultures. And even if they're not specifically Dominican

and specifically like Texan (laughs) it's nice to like literally on the same street go to a German beer garden and then like a Mexican cantina and then, you know, ah, yes, that's what I want. I don't even have to like make it a drawn out like self-searching philosophical question. I can just live it. I can just like live the, the dual cultures. I can just live picking and choosing. I don't have to think about it. I can just do it. Just relief (laughs).

LIZA ZAPOL: Um, so I know um, I know we [00:55:00] were, we're, we need to come to a close now. But I wonder if there's something that I haven't asked you about today that you wanted to talk about. Was there a question that you wish I'd asked?

CAROLINE FERMIN: No, I feel like today I was surprised at like how much we were able to cover in a short period of time, and how I feel like this interview like could not have come at a better time. I'm definitely of the age where I'm starting to think about how I want to progress with my career as like a dancer, you don't have a huge career window. Um, like where I want to live and what I want to do and I feel like this has helped me kind of solidify my values and what I, and realize that like a lot of the decisions in my life have been based on this like identity search. I did not realize, but I think a ton of them, I think it's been a bigger driving force in the choices I've made than I've realized up to this point. It's good to know moving forward.

LIZA ZAPOL: Well, um, thank you for sharing this, this journey, and this search that you have been going on. And it's ongoing.

CAROLINE FERMIN: (laughs)

LIZA ZAPOL: Or like you know, discoveries that you've made really along the way that have been ongoing.

CAROLINE FERMIN: Hmm. Thank you, thank you so much. What a treat. I so appreciate it, so much to chew on and think about.

LIZA ZAPOL: Well I look forward to, I'll share these recordings with you, stop it now.
Um --

[00:56:50]

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CAROLINE FERMIN: [00:00:00] (laughs)

LIZA ZAPOL: Helps if it's recording. Yeah.

CAROLINE FERMIN: So the conversation that we've been having has helped me realize that I do have a lot of like a foundation of experiences and, and choice-making to draw on, when I make new choices in my life going forward. Because something that was hard for me personally growing up was that I didn't feel like I had a lot of role models. And I had role models in the fact of people, adults who were leading healthy lives and had good relationships. My parents had a good relationship with one another. They were great role models in that way. But no one like living the life that I wanted to live. That was also, also looked like me or came from a culture like me. Like I, like who is the mixed-race woman who like left a small town in the south to like do a big career, or where was like the dancer that had a family that, you know, was culturally had huge impact on her life. Like I, I just didn't know anyone, couldn't talk to anyone. I couldn't get advice from anyone. And I, I talked to older people often, and they'd be like, you know, "I see where you're coming from, but like I don't, I didn't live through that. I don't know anyone that's lived through this. I can't help you." And so often in my life, I've, I just crave a role model to be like, they can do it, I can do it. And that, that didn't exist for a long time and maybe now you're starting to see more mixed race people in prominent positions, like the President. Like that is a big deal. Like if I would've seen that in like, I don't know, I never thought -- and I was never told that I couldn't do things because I was, but nonetheless, you feel it. If you don't see it, then you feel it. If you don't see any like people of color in prominent positions, even if people are telling you, you can do anything you want to, you don't see it, so you're like, well someone's lying somewhere. You really feel that way as a kid. And it definitely has stuck with me growing up. And now as I'm in this place where I really have to start making my own choices about how I want my life to look, I have maybe a few role models now, but more importantly I, I have a very rich history I've realized that I can draw upon when making my future decisions.

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah, and it sounds like, I mean when we first started talking last time you were talking about this journey into understanding the lineage of women in your family history too --

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: - - which is, you know, another layer of like a well of stories to --

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: -- draw upon in terms of female strength.

CAROLINE FERMIN: And especially as I've noticed today, like the females even within my masculine relationships, that's so crazy. So I feel like I have a lot to chew on. And I feel just like a little bit stronger and braver for having had this conversation.

LIZA ZAPOL: That's [inaudible].

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah, (laughs) I do. I do. Like yeah, maybe I, I don't see anyone having done this particular lifestyle um, trying to incorporate their particular cultures, but I'm happy to serve as that role model for like students that I would like to teach.

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah, like the story you were talking about.

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah, I'm happy to be that person.

LIZA ZAPOL: Brooklyn public school kids.

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: Well cool, I'll stop here --

CAROLINE FERMIN: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: -- but thanks.

CAROLINE FERMIN: Thank you.

[00:04:00]

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