

Ariela Garcia interviewed by Isael Perez
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Washington Heights, Manhattan

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, train, New York City, neighborhood, Dominican Republic, protest, community, transportation, safe, Washington Heights, office, learn, COVID-19, NYPD, school.

Isael Perez: My name is Isael Perez, and I am interviewing Ariela Garcia in upper Manhattan, Washington Heights on May 17, 2022. Do you give me permission to record and make public this oral history presentation?

Ariela Garcia: Yes, I do.

IP: Please be mindful that you don't have to answer any other questions that make you uncomfortable. We will start with your name.

AG: Ariela Garcia

IP: What is your age?

AG: 31?

IP: What is your occupation?

AG: I work for a health insurance company.

IP: What is your neighborhood?

AG: So currently, my neighborhood is in Jersey, but I just moved recently. But my original neighborhood is Washington Heights.

IP: What is your place of origin?

AG: Dominican Republic

IP: What is your ethnicity?

AG: I'm Latina.

IP: First language?

AG: Spanish

IP: Gender identification?

AG: Female

IP: And your sexual orientation?

AG: Straight.

IP: Are you and your family from New York City? If not tell me how you and your family ended up in New York, in New York City.

AG: So, we are from the Dominican Republic. I came here when I was eight to live with my mother. And I came here for a better education.

IP: How do you get around in the city?

AG: So, I moved to Jersey, so over there is my car. But since I work in New York, specifically in Manhattan, when I come here, I don't drive because of transportation, I mean, parking. But when I get around, before and now I mostly use the train or the bus.

IP: Okay. Would you please describe your experience with the transportation system in New York City?

AG: I mean, what can I tell you? I think we all know that transportation in New York, this system is a headache. But it gets me to where I need to be. I never had any issues. I always keep to myself. When I was younger, I used to take it every day to go to high school. So far, no issues. And I have had a good experience with it.

IP: Have you felt safe in the New York City public transportation system?

AG: Yes and no. I mean, before, when I was younger, and I used to take it to go to high school, I felt safer. I think now, it's more of like being aware of your surroundings and making sure that you don't have your headphones on. So, you can listen to anything if something happens, that you know who you sit next to. I think for me, it's kind of like, if I know where I'm going, and I know the trains that I'm taking, I know nothing's going to happen, because usually those trains are safe. But when I go to a new place where I have to take a new train or go to a new stop, I don't usually feel safe. And I can tell you that I was on the train when the attack happened in Brooklyn a month ago. And when I was coming, when I was going to the office, I went to the office, and I found out at the office that that was happening. But then, I was a little bit scared. So, I decided not to stay in the office for long. So, I went back [to] town and I was taking the train and I didn't see any cops or any police. And I'm like, "we just had an attack on the train." So, at that point, I'm like, "okay, it's not safe anymore." And the things that are happening now... Sometimes I feel safe, sometimes I don't.

IP: Thank you for sharing your personal opinion, and a story. Do you have any other wild stories from being on the public transportation system?

AG: So, when I was younger, I was in high school. I used to take the train every Saturday to go to Brooklyn to go to my cousin's hair salon to get my hair blown out for free. I took the A train one time and I remember I was gonna get off on West Fourth Street because I was gonna take the

F to Brooklyn, where this guy just out of nowhere, started screaming at me right on my face. And I'm like, "what is going on?" And all I remember is that there was a guy next to me who just grabbed my hand and like, pushed me out of the train because he felt that I was going to be [safer] if I was on the platform. Not on the train because there was this guy in front of us who was screaming at me for no reason. And he was screaming at other people. When he started screaming, I looked at him, and that's when I think he just noticed me. He just came to me and started screaming at me. And I think the other guy was kind [keeping me] safe. [He] grabbed my hand and pushed me out of the train onto the platform. And I thanked him for that, because I don't know what the other guy was going to do. So now, I don't look at anybody when they're screaming on the train. I just look straight down, my head and my face [are] not going up. So that was my only wild story on the train and nothing else had happened. I don't take it often. I only take it when I go to the office. And I already know my route and everything. So, I don't have anything. I've seen crazy stuff, but not nothing happened to me.

IP: I can relate to that. Carrying on, do you feel safe in your community?

AG: In here, Washington Heights? Not anymore. There is a lot going on now in New York, you see a lot more people that you didn't used to see before. I can tell you that before, I could go outside at any time and be okay. But now, I think whenever I stay here in Washington Heights [in] my brother's house, I don't feel safe. I don't go out. I will rather just order in if I need to order anything, or if I need to go out rather go with someone because it is not safe. I don't know if you have the citizens app, but every time it rings, and when I'm in Washington Heights, it tells me that something is happening here. So no, I do not feel safe anymore in this community.

IP: What would or does make your community safe in a way?

AG: So, I know that we are trying to help people that have issues with drugs, and now we have these safe places where they can go and get drugs and you know, and safely take them. I think that that has corrupted this neighborhood because we've seen a lot more people who come here for that, and then they just stay. I also think that the government needs to help the homeless, not just give them a place to live, but kind of like a plan for them to kind of get back on their feet because if you just give them a place to live, to sleep... You know, they have to leave in the morning and then come back in the night. During that time is when they do whatever. So, I feel like the government definitely needs to set that up correctly. And those places where they can get safely drug, I should definitely be rethink and they shouldn't have that so close to schools. Around here [there are] like four schools and then this thing is like in 180th. So, I think definitely not having that will help a lot, but also helping those people putting them in [places] like hospitals where they need to be. As well as getting the homeless [individuals] a plan for them to get back on their feet, not just a bed for them to sleep.

IP: You have very good points of view. Very good points. How does the law enforcement fit into your vision of safety in New York City?

AG: I mean, I have a soft spot when it comes to law enforcement because something [that] happened when I was little, and they helped. But I think that they need to be trained better how to deal with people, especially people of color, people with mental health... Not just to think about, "Oh, I'm going to shoot because I see you with a knife or whatever." I think in order for

this community to get better, they need to be better trained. And they need to relate more to the community in order to understand their pain and to understand what's going on in the neighborhood.

IP: Agreed. How those your concern for safety in your community shift how that community functions?

AG: I think it [has changed] a lot. I noticed that, for example, the stores are closing earlier. Some people don't go out because of how unsafe it is. So, it's not fun to me like it shouldn't be [like that] it limits people when there's so many concerns about safety.

IP: That's very true. I see that myself. What is it like living in a city that has people from all over the world?

AG: I love that. I think that the best part about New York [is] that we're so diverse and you can meet people from all over the world and learn from them. So, I think that's one of the best, if not the best quality of New York City.

IP: Have you ever benefited from New York City's diversity?

AG: Oh, yeah, I think everybody has at some point. You learn about other people's cultures, you form friendships. You learn other languages. So, it definitely has benefited me at work, in school, [and] raising my daughter has helped because I can teach her about diversity. So, it has been very beneficial.

IP: Would you consider New York City, generally and your neighborhood specifically to be racially separated?

AG: You mean that it's not that diverse? No, I think Washington Heights is very diverse. I think is predominantly Dominicans, but now you see people from all over the place. You see Jewish, Italians, Chinese, Korean... Different Latin Americans countries live in this neighborhood. So, I think this part of Manhattan is just very diverse.

IP: Very true. There's been definitely some gender identification going on. What has been your experience with New York City's public education system, as a student, parent and/or observer?

AG: As a student, elementary school wasn't what I thought it would be. I think, coming from the Dominican Republic, and knowing school for a few years there, and then coming here, was kind of a change, because here you have kind of more freedom. And even though the days aren't longer here, I feel like you learn more even if the days are shorter. But there was a lot of freedom when it [came] to school. And I was in a class where the kids would be screaming at the teacher and I'm like, "what is going on!?" But when I went to high school, I went to a new high school, kind of like a charter school, everybody communicated great. And everybody was, you know, very aware of each other, and the teachers and they knew your parents, like they were best friends. So that was a really good change for me. When I went to college, I went to BMCC and then I went to City College. Again, it was very diverse. There [were] a lot of people. And it was a good education. When it comes to me as a parent, having my daughter in a charter school, like

tap equity school. There is a lot of communication with the teachers. So that's what I like. I think it's a very unique school. I don't know if I will feel the same about having her in a regular public school. Just because I see how kids struggle. And I see my friends and their kids and I'm like, "you might need to change schools because it's not really working for the kids to go to public school." So, I had a different experience because I went to a charter high school, and then my daughter is in a charter school. So, it's a lot different than when I went to elementary school.

IP: I agree with that. That's definitely a very crucial point in the education systems [of] New York City and all over the place. Can I ask you another question?

AG: Uh-huh

IP: Since you told me that you like the fact that your daughter is in that charter school, would you also like for her to learn about the culture of the Dominican Republic? For example, more specifically, like the history, and the language. Would you want that to be carried on in the family legacy when she has children, and her children have children? Like, do you see that like the Dominican/Spanish influence?

AG: Oh, yeah, definitely. She speaks Spanish. Her Spanish is not the greatest. But I think that's because before she started school, it was a lot better. But I think, when she went to school, they only speak English in her class. So, her Spanish is not where it's supposed to be. But she speaks Spanish to her grandparents and to us. And in school, she does learn about other cultures. I know, we did a project with her, where she had to talk about the Dominican Republic, where her parents were from. And she learned a lot, she knows where it is, she wants to go... So, I like it when they teach her about her culture, and when they teach about other people, because that also gets her to be diverse. She gets to learn more about other people. If you look at her, she looks white. My husband is Dominican, but if you look at him, you're gonna think he's white. So, her skin color might make it seem like she'll have more opportunities in life. But I want her to know where she comes from, to be open-minded, and to know that everybody is the same. Her skin color is white, mine is a little darker. It doesn't mean anything. She has a friend who's a little darker. You know, you're all the same. So, I like her school teaches her to be open-minded and to learn about other people and their culture and to appreciate that as well.

IP: You're doing a great job raising Camila. Okay. Following question: Have you experienced segregation either in one ethnic group or having an ethnic group missing in a school system?

AG: No, not at all. I think New York City schools are very diverse. You have a very large group of Hispanics, Latinos, and then you have a small group of like Asians, Chinese, Korean, and then you have like a few whites. And then you also have like a large group of African Americans. So that was always my school experience, even like going to elementary school in Washington Heights. It was very diverse. We had people from all over the place. So no, no segregation at all.

IP: Okay. What are some personality traits of New Yorkers?

AG: I think it just depends on the person. Some are loud... You can say that New Yorkers are a little bit antisocial, [and] little bit problematic at times. But again, that's just depends on the person. I think if you're from New York, you have to be tough, because people think of New

York [as] tough people. We have been through a lot. I don't think there is personality traits for a New Yorker. I think New Yorker is a personality trait. If you [ask] anybody, "What's that person's personality," they will be like, "they're from New York," then you don't have to tell them anything else, because they know how that person is. On the other hand, even though I have spent more time in New York than in any other place even though I was born in the Dominican Republic. You can say I'm a true New Yorker because I've been here longer than I have been anywhere else. I'm not loud. I'm very calm and collected. So, when I tell people, "I was born in DR, but I'm from New York because I lived there my entire life." And they're like, "you don't sound like a New Yorker." I think when you say [you are a] New Yorker [people think New Yorkers] are loud, [and] not friendly. Well, we are friendly. It's just our way of being friendly.

IP: Yeah, I definitely agree with that. It's a personality itself. Following question: How do you alter your social interaction to survive and thrive in the city?

AG: I mean, I think everybody does that. When I don't think I've behaved the same way I behave with my family, when I'm at work it's different because it's professional. I mean, when you're at work, you have to be professional. Even though like I said before, I'm very calm and collected. So, I'm always like that some people think I'm shy or quiet, but it's just the way I am. But I think everybody, at some point, would change their personality or alter their personality because of where they are at that moment. And because of the social interaction, I'm definitely not gonna be, you know, like, "What's up, hey, hello..." Like at work, I'm gonna be a little more professional. So, it helps [me] get by. It definitely helps.

IP: Okay, following question: How well do you know your neighborhood and the people in your community?

AG: Oh, how do I know my neighbors? I moved to Jersey, I have seen my neighbors probably once or twice, and I've been there for a long time now. But New York, here, where I grew up in this building, where I live with my parents, I pretty much know everybody that [has been] here since I was small, since I was eight, [and] that still lives here. Even when you go to a restaurant here, I still know the people because it's usually the same person. It is very different, I can tell you, because I know more people from New York than I know from where I live now. I think this is more of a close kind of community in New York, because you get to see Jews not only is that you see them every day, but you know, you help them bring their groceries up, or if they need help translating or if they need help filling out an application. I was kind of that person. So, I know my neighbor's pretty well.

IP: What public support system have you experienced in your community?

AG: Support Systems? No, I haven't experienced any.

IP: Are there others you know about that aren't available to your community?

AG: No.

IP: Okay. What does good housing mean to you in terms of neighborhood, space in the apartment, like public space in the area, food in the area, safety, [and] transportation?

AG: Good housing means to me a safe neighborhood. Somewhere that you can go outside, and you don't have to be scared that someone's gonna either rob you or something's going to happen to you. Space in the apartment? I mean, I think we know how New York City apartments are. Public spaces? A good neighborhood and good housing have to have a park or some kind of recreation facility where children can go and play and be safe. Again, safety is number one for me. Somewhere that you can go out and not be scared that something might happen to you. When it comes to transportation, good reliable, safe transportation, and then also places where people can go and learn about their identity and learn about other people's diversity. That also will be a good part of good housing.

IP: Okay. Have you ever been worried about not being able to afford the rent?

AG: No.

IP: What has been the impact of gentrification and community dislocation in your neighborhood?

AG: I feel like this neighborhood has not gone through gentrification or any of that. I mean, I think it's still pretty much Dominicans, Latin Americans. And it still looks the same [as] when I moved here. Back in like 2002.

IP: Okay, how do you feel about the homelessness crisis in a huge city? I know you mentioned it, but can you elaborate? What do you see as the cause? And what should our society and the government do to curb the crisis?

AG: It's a big problem. I think it always has been a problem but now it's a lot worse because a lot of people lost their jobs. A lot of people have lost their jobs and they don't have a place. Other people lost their homes. So, I think now it's a lot worse, I think it's leading for people to go into the wrong directions like using drugs. So, I think it's getting to the point where it's like a crisis that New York City cannot handle. I think they need to have more programs for people to not lose their homes, to get certified in some kind of job. As well as try to not just find them a bed to sleep [in], but kind of set a plan for them. So [that] they can get out of their situation. Because if you find someone a bed, they know they're always gonna have that bed and they're not going to do much. So going above that would definitely help.

IP: Okay, following question: How do you feel about the BLM protest; the Black Lives Matter protest? So,

AG: I think everybody has the right to protest for a good cause. And I think this is a great class to go for because a lot of our African American brothers are getting killed not only African Americans, Latinos as well, are getting killed for no reason when it comes to the police. So, I have a lot of respect for them. I think it's a great cause. And even though we don't see it, it definitely is changing the system, little by little, because I think it's gonna take a lot for the

system to change. But I'm a supporter of it.

IP: Explain to me why you think these anti racist protests erupted particularly strongly in New York City.

AG: I think the events, things that happen. George Floyd, all of that stuff... The people that had been killed. New York has a large community of African Americans and not [only] African Americans. We are a good city where we fight for one another. So, seeing all these injustices, even if even though they weren't directly in your city, we wanted to get out there and show our support and protest [to] make a difference. Even though it might not be in the news, it happens in New York all the time.

IP: What do you think activator protests, black Americans and nonblack allies to challenge the structural racism in the United States?

AG: I do not. I'm confused.

IP: Well, like what do you think happened? Like what action happened?

AG: So again, George Floyd, Eric Garner... All those deaths that happened just because someone was not trained properly. And lives changed because of it. So all of that happened. And also, what's happening in New York City, where you get stopped and frisk for just walking and being black. So, I think all of that and all the events that led to it, activated in New York and activated the country as well.

IP: Totally agree. Do you have any stories you're willing to share about encounters you have had with racism?

AG: No, I don't have any.

IP: Have you had a negative encounter with the police?

AG: No, not at all. Again, I don't have a soft spot because they did save me when I was small. But I never had a negative experience with them.

IP: Have you learned about an experience of someone close to you that you didn't know before?

AG: No.

IP: How has your opinion on the NYPD changed over time? Or it hasn't?

AG: So, It hasn't. I mean, I feel like there are some good NYPD out there who are willing to save the community, serve and help us and make us safe. But then there's are some bad apples who are not properly trained or are not meant to be or not mentally capable of being an NYPD. So, I can tell you that whenever I see these videos of things like, the George Floyd and Eric Garner, it gets me really upset. We could do a lot better, and you are here to protect and serve the

community, but you're not doing it when you decide to put your knee on top of someone's neck. I think there are some good cops out there, but I definitely think we have a lot of bad apples. And definitely my opinion changes every time I see a story like that, because it gets me really upset. I know there [are] good ones, but you know, we see them as a whole because of what's happening now.

IP: How about the way racist/racism/policing is covered in the media?

AG: I don't really watch TV. I try to stay away just because there is a lot happening daily, and it's a lot for someone's mental health. But I think, you know, whenever something happens, the media is very good at showing exactly what happened between this cop and a civilian. Some portray them as heroes. Some portray them as the worst kind of people because of what's happening at the moment.

IP: I get that. Do you think any changes should be made with the way the NYPD operates given the events of the last two years?

AG: Definitely.

IP: What kind of challenges?

AG: More training when it comes to mental health. The way people handle when they're caught, the way that cops handle when they call for a mental health crisis. I think that before they're even trained to handle a gun, they need to be trained. You know, check their mental health and be trained in how to deal with people, and how every situation is different.

IP: Were you active in the protests at all and digital or in person over the last two years?

AG: So not in person because we were in a pandemic. I have a child. My immune system is not the greatest to be out there. But I was posting on Facebook, Instagram, I was reposting. I was making sure I was reading what I was reposting. I was donating, [and] sharing information about events.

IP: Okay. Are there any memorable experiences from your activism that you were willing to share?

AG: I'm just getting to know people from all over the world and hearing their opinions and how this has affected them.

IP: Okay, with genuine talk. How has your life changed financially since COVID-19?

AG: Not much. I mean, not at all. I think I was very fortunate that my company is a very stable company. And you know, it was health insurance. So, we were actually making money. And in the same time, we were helping our communities. So, it didn't change at all. I think it gave me more of a sense of stability so I can help others.

IP: How were the working conditions [at] your workplace before COVID?

AG: So, I used to go to the office Monday through Friday, before COVID. I went home March 17 of 2020. Thinking that I was going to be back in like a week or so. I [was] like, “they’re probably not gonna close for long. We’re gonna be back.” So, when a year passed and we ran back, I mean, we were you know, we were in an office there [were] about 20 something people. We used to see members. It was normal.

IP: How was your pleshifted since March 22?

AG: We started working from home until almost a year and then when we went back into the office, it was not as busy. There [were] a lot of restrictions. We couldn't use our kitchen. We have to wear masks, we still have to wear masks all the time when we're in the office, unless you're by yourself [or] eating. We were not allowed to let our members use the bathroom. We had to [use] sanitizers. I didn't see members, but my team [did]. So, every time someone [came] and see one of my team members, someone [came] into the office and cleaned the area. So, it was something.

IP: How has your life changed personally since COVID-19?

AG: I think everybody's life has changed since we were inside for two years. So, you got to know your husband, your kids a lot more. If you were like me, you took on a hobby, which was crafting. I think everybody bought a Cricut machine at that time, and I was one of those. So, it gave me a new hobby. I definitely [watched] a lot more TV than I used to before. But I got me closer to my family.

IP: Good. Are there any new hobbies you've taken [or old hobbies that you lost interest in]?

AG: Crafting was something I took during the pandemic. Something that I lost interest in is going out. I mean, I was scared. I'm still scared. I think I went back out for the first time to like a restaurant at the beginning of January of [that] year, and then we got COVID. So, I was like, “I'm never going again.” Going to the movies I lost interest in. But I can say that I went recently, and it was a better experience. I was a little bit less nervous, and I didn't have a panic attack, which I thought I was going to. Yeah, kind of like just going into public places. It's not something that I enjoy anymore.

IP: Okay, I understand. Have you had your relationship change with your friends, neighbors, and families?

AG: I'm closer to my family. My neighbors still the same. When it comes to my friends, I think everybody just gotten to the point of talking more, not texting. So definitely got closer to my friends more. But I haven't seen them, some of them in like over two years. So that has not helped. But I can tell you that I do feel a lot more closer to my family now than before.

IP: How has COVID-19 impacted your health and the health of your family?

AG: So, I went two years without getting it. My husband and my daughter as well. And then come 2022 January, we got it. My husband was sick, but it wasn't that bad. I was okay. I was

sick, but I was okay, I think. The mother in me [was] kind of just sad, you know, even though I don't feel well, I have to be okay for my daughter. It was worse for my daughter, my five-year-old. She was really sick for about three weeks to the point where she lost over like 15 pounds. So, it impacted her health when it came to that. But after we got over it, we were okay. I mean, I think mentally it has been worse. But physically, just when we had it. It was bad.

IP: I understand your pain. What if any, were the benefits of your life from two years in quarantine?

AG: Well, saving because you didn't have to do transportation and as no trains. It was time that I spent with my daughter and my husband. So that is definitely beneficial.

IP: Is there anything you learned about yourself or your family?

AG: To kind of put more emphasis on mental health and kind of take care of that part of my life more. Because we still go through a tough time with everything that comes to the pandemic. So that's something I learned.

IP: Yeah, that's true. A lot of people currently. We're finishing up. Is there anything I should have asked or anything you would like to add?

AG: No, this was very nice.

IP: Are you still comfortable with making this oral history public?

AG: Yeah. That's fine, no worries.

IP: Well, it was great interviewing you and thank you so much for your time and for your efforts.

AG: No, thank you for selecting me.

IP: No problem. Thank you.