

Juan Riojas transcript

- Speaker 1: [00:00](#) I'm now recording, the date is November 13th and we are conducting research and interview for my thesis, project title, the Latino South: Race and Racialization. So to start off, are you 18 years or older? And can you state and spell your first and last name for the record?
- Speaker 2: [00:20](#) Juan Riojas
- Speaker 1: [00:27](#) And uh, when were you born?
- Speaker 2: [00:29](#) Um, September 25th, 1998.
- Speaker 1: [00:33](#) And uh, where are you from and where did you grow up?
- Speaker 2: [00:36](#) Okay. So, um, I was born in Texas. My Dad's in the military, so I've lived in San Antonio. I've lived in Washington, DC area, then I graduated high school in the Gulf coast of Mississippi.
- Speaker 1: [00:50](#) Okay. And, um, were those all of the places you've lived in or
- Speaker 2: [00:55](#) Those are the places I went to school and yeah.
- Speaker 1: [00:58](#) And which place would you say had the most impact on how you were raised or which place do you kind of, I guess considered home more than the rest or.
- Speaker 2: [01:07](#) Sure. So most of my family is in San Antonio. My Dad's family's in San Antonio, so that had a special place. Um, but honestly now, especially because I ended up going to ole miss, I consider Mississippi probably my home.
- Speaker 1: [01:20](#) Okay. And you said you moved to the Gulf coast, right? Yep. What part?
- Speaker 2: [01:23](#) Um, north Gulf coast area. Uh, just north of Biloxi has got one market.
- Speaker 1: [01:29](#) Okay, cool. And um, why did you decide to move from the coast to Oxford to attend Ole Miss?
- Speaker 2: [01:37](#) Well, it was funny because I thought, you know, as a junior and senior I thought, well, I'm not going to go to ole miss,

whatever I do, I'm going to find somewhere else to go. And so I was going to go to either UT Austin or rice. Um, but then I visited their campuses and sat in on their classes and was not super impressed, but when I came to ole miss and sat in on both honors classes and a lot ppo, I just absolutely fell in love with the way that things were taught here. Um, and then of course I got a pretty good scholarship so that those two things coupled

Speaker 1: [02:11](#) and um, is race and important part of your identity? Why or why not?

Speaker 2: [02:20](#) Yes. Um, sometimes more than others. You know, I went to Catholic school on the Gulf coast, so over there I feel like that part of that identity was kind of forgotten, but when I lived in San Antonio, um, you know, growing up as a Mexican American was part of everyday life.

Speaker 1: [02:38](#) And um, how has your experience been as a student at Ole miss and living in Oxford

Speaker 2: [02:45](#) overall? I've enjoyed it. It's kind of a, you know, a small town. It's Mississippi but it pretty much does everything I needed to do and I get to travel a lot so I'm not here too much on the weekends. Right.

Speaker 1: [03:00](#) And uh, what is your major classification and some notable involvement that you get this?

Speaker 2: [03:05](#) Sure. So right now I'm doing public policy leadership in Arabic, Arabic flagship program and um, the Trent Lott leadership institute. I'm a sophomore and I'm ASB senator. I'm on the debate team and I helped start the quiz bowl team this year, so I do quiz, bowl and chess. So pretty much anything nerdy.

Speaker 1: [03:25](#) And uh, what are the most important aspects of your life right now and why?

Speaker 2: [03:30](#) Um, well, this semester in particular, being on the debate team has been huge because I've traveled already five weekends and we're going to South Africa this December. So for me that's huge. I'm also, um, being Roman Catholic is pretty integral, takes up lots of lots of Sundays. Um, so I guess, yeah, those are two of the things, you know, my spiritual life and academic competing

Speaker 1: [03:57](#) and the US Census Bureau considers race and ethnicity is two different concepts. What is your ethnicity?

Speaker 2: [04:04](#) Uh, my ethnicity on the census, I believe would say Hispanic or Latino.

Speaker 1: [04:08](#) Okay. And um, what are your parent's nationality and do you identify with their nationality?

Speaker 2: [04:16](#) Um, in terms of like their citizenship or.

Speaker 1: [04:19](#) No, like just where they're from. Like what country they're from, not saying sure. If they are immigrants that's fine. If they are not immigrants, maybe just aware of their appearance or their grandparents come from just kind of like the nation basically.

Speaker 2: [04:32](#) Right. So, um, my dad is Mexican, his family is Mexican and then my mom is like half native American and half white.

Speaker 1: [04:42](#) And do you identify with either of those groups or what would

Speaker 2: [04:48](#) I generally identify most as Mexican American because that's the, I know my dad's family the best.

Speaker 1: [04:53](#) And um, how do you identify racially and why do you identify this way?

Speaker 2: [04:58](#) Um, I identify as white in terms of race because I looked pretty good in terms of least that's what I've always been told, kind of just been, if nothing else, condition to check that box.

Speaker 1: [05:11](#) And um, so you said that's what you've always been told by my appearance friends or how was that created? Basically.

Speaker 2: [05:22](#) Sure. So definitely not by parents. Parents honestly don't talk about it that much. Um, but especially after the move from San Antonio to Maryland, you know, until people hear my name, they generally will say, oh yeah, you know, you're white. And so just, you know, starting in second grade that was just kind of told to me I guess like, yeah, probably my friends the most.

Speaker 1: [05:46](#) And how has that been because you're the first person that I've interviewed who, well as a few other people and you're the first person I've interviewed who you identify as a different race than your ethnicity. Most people will say Hispanic is they're raised. So this is, this is like a key part of what I'm trying to figure out. Okay. Why did you decide to separate the two? Why? What's that difference for you? Or have you

Speaker 2: [06:14](#) never thought about that or. Yeah, I guess mainly just because when I, when I'm taking the sat and the act, Hispanic isn't generally a race option. So in terms of, uh, in my brain, they're kind of two separate entities.

Speaker 1: [06:30](#) Okay. And do you identify as Hispanic or Latino?

Speaker 2: [06:38](#) Either one is fine. I generally say Latino though. When people ask

Speaker 1: [06:42](#) is there a reason why or

Speaker 2: [06:44](#) I don't know. My grandparents say that Hispanic was treated by the government. So just from a young age, I was told to say you're Latino

Speaker 1: [06:54](#) and so studies show that the Latino population is growing in the US. How do you think

Speaker 2: [06:58](#) this will affect the way race relations is viewed in this country? Well, yeah, I feel like it, you know, it's definitely growing and it's kind of interesting to see how I feel like maybe in 2016 for the first time it was kind of an integral part of the political scene at least, you know, immigration which a lot of people conflate with. I'm Latino Americans. So yeah, the, the, the increase is rising quite a bit. So at least I think conversation is going to be needed, needed to be had pretty soon in terms of like who are we and what is our role here

Speaker 1: [07:40](#) and how do you maintain your Latino culture while the while being a student here,

Speaker 2: [07:45](#) it's very difficult. Um, there, there really isn't that much of a, like probably even less so than the Gulf coast. So I'm in the Gulf coast. I could at least go to Spanish mass, um, on Sunday without having to drive to far. But here not so

much, um, and there aren't, I don't even have, I don't think I have hardly any friends who can, um, you know, speak Spanish or even really talk about culture at all. So it's been pretty difficult. Um, there's a few weekends ago I actually went to north Georgia and judged a debate tournament in Spanish even though I'm not proficient in Spanish, I'm all right, but I'm definitely not that good. But being around they were all first generation Americans, all the debaters and so being there kind of sparked more of like a desire for me to like, uh, a little bit of a longing. So I haven't really found it yet. I tried to kind of, there was a, a table and business row for a lasso and I tried to say like, hey, how can I get involved in stuff? And the people at the table did not have any idea really how I could get involved. So that kind of died quick. But it's something that I'm not really participating in, but I would like to be involved in somehow.

Speaker 1: [08:59](#) And what are some challenges you face? And as a student here and as a Latino,

Speaker 2: [09:06](#) well I think that they're just not being that many like outlets, I guess to kind of participate in the culture like you have Latin night once a semester put on by by Alexa, which is a lot of fun. Um, but a lot of the students who go here also aren't used to being around, um, Latin American culture at all. They're much more used to being around either black culture, even Vietnamese culture is more familiar to them. So I guess just not, not really having outlets or having people who are familiar with it and comfortable with it.

Speaker 1: [09:50](#) And has anyone ever asked you about your race and your ethnicity and how do you typically respond to these questions?

Speaker 2: [09:57](#) Yeah. People ask me a lot when, when they, because I generally go by Jr instead of Juan Ramon. Um, but when people ask what J R stands for it, I say Juan Ramon, they go, Whoa, you know, what are you? And so I say, I'm Mexican American. And they're like, but you look so white. And I'm like, yeah, my dad's, my dad's first generation American. Um, what, what's it say and what to say to that? And it becomes uncomfortable sometimes. I can generally shrug it off though.

- Speaker 1: [10:30](#) And um, has that been something that you've grown to, I guess cope with or understand in the fact that, you know, people have this perception of what Latinos are supposed to look like and if you don't look like that stereotypical image, then people tend to ask you what are you going to. And so is that something that you've grown to understand or think about on a deeper level at all or.
- Speaker 2: [10:57](#) Yeah, definitely. Especially because like in San Antonio, people wouldn't, wouldn't even think twice about it, you know, they, they know, you know, Latino American comes in all shapes, sizes and colors. Um, but being here you don't have people who are around any type of Latin American. And I understand that, you know, I know that I have, I'm sure, you know, biases unknown to me and kind of stereotypical ideas of other types of people. So I've been, and you know, there are some times, you know, people will just say something that's particularly ignorant. No kind of like take me off, but for the most part I feel like I've kind of grown to be understanding.
- Speaker 1: [11:37](#) And have you ever experienced any assumptions about your character because of your perceived race?
- Speaker 2: [11:45](#) You know, that's interesting. I'm honestly not sure if I can think of a of an example right off the top of my head can, can you say that one more time?
- Speaker 1: [11:52](#) Um, have you ever experienced any assumptions or stereotypes more on your character because of your perceived waves?
- Speaker 2: [12:02](#) Yeah. And I guess this probably isn't quite the question that you're asking, but I mean there's definitely times when people, um, you know, who knows that my name is Juan Ramon and know that I'm Mexican American. They'll make, they'll make stereo typical like assumptions about what I like to do that, you know, they'll even say, you know, do you play soccer? And I might say yes, like, oh, of course. Um, and things like that, I know that's not quite character necessarily.
- Speaker 1: [12:25](#) That's fine. That's it. It's really, it's a broad, open ended question just about you know, who you are as a person.

- Speaker 2: [12:31](#) Yeah, sure. Of course. Of course there's, there's plenty of assumptions of that when they find out I'm Mexican American and I'm sure there's plenty unknown assumptions happening when they just look at me and they kind of see my, my beaver s care and no, and they're like, oh, you know, he's just another white guy.
- Speaker 1: [12:50](#) Is that something that you've, that you make a point to have people understand that you're not. I guess in a way just another white guy, not that being white is something negative, but I'm sure you're obviously proud of your Mexican heritage. So is that something you try to make a point of or are you just kinda wait until maybe someone asks or how do you handle that?
- Speaker 2: [13:12](#) Yeah, so it often kind of depends. I guess, like in the setting that I'm in when I'm talking to these people, if it's someone who I'm already friends with, then I'll then I'll definitely talk about it. I really do. I enjoy talking about my family, especially because, you know, being in the military, even though we haven't moved as much as some military families, it's kind of easy to lose an identity. So I do like, um, you know, talking about it and trying to form an identity, um, you know, but if I'm just at like a party or something and you know, someone's asking, then I'll probably just, just let it slide because I don't see much of a purpose and getting into it.
- Speaker 1: [13:46](#) Alright. And uh, do you speak Spanish? If yes, how did you learn?
- Speaker 2: [13:51](#) So growing up in San Antonio, my grandparents would speak Spanish to me pretty much exclusively. They're, you know, they're fine in English as well. Um, so until I was about eight years old, I was more or less fluent in Spanish and things regarding, you know, family and house and things like that. But when I moved to DC, my father who's also fluent in Spanish would not speak any Spanish to me. Now there are people in the DC area. Of course you spoke Spanish, so it kind of was able to keep it up a little bit. But when I moved to Mississippi when I was 13, I pretty much lost all, all grounding and Spanish. I know when to speak to. My father wouldn't speak to me in Spanish and so now cut, um, I can still speak it and I go, I've been to what Haka like every September for the last three years, not this year, but the three years before that. And so when I go there and

I start speaking it after about a week, it can kind of come back to me. Um, but like as of right now, I would not want to have to be a translator for someone.

- Speaker 1: [14:56](#) And um, is your family from what happened?
- Speaker 2: [14:59](#) Um, some of my families, I think it's a little bit more, more distant than my grandparents would like to think because I know my, I think my, my grandfather's father was from
- Speaker 3: [15:14](#) um,
- Speaker 2: [15:16](#) Mexico City, the LFA and then they came over when my grandfather was super young. Um, and so yeah, but we, we definitely have family roots that will haka, but of course it's also super hard because when I go there and they'll say, oh, this is your tia and I cannot tell you if it's actually my deal or not. I have no idea.
- Speaker 1: [15:36](#) And um, I know you said growing up until about how you were eight, your, your grandparents spoke exclusively Spanish to you. Which language would you say you learned first?
- Speaker 2: [15:49](#) It's kind of interesting because probably, and of course this is probably stretching my memory a little bit, but I feel like there were definitely some words I learned them concurrently. Definitely not Spanish first, but I feel like there were definitely some words were I didn't know them, I knew them in Spanish first, but I feel like I guess I probably learned the morphology of sentences and stuff in English, but like even though the school I went to for kindergarten, first grade we had English and Spanish and it wasn't Spanish in the sense of when most people think of the class, it was more of like learning basic basic grammar and in learning how to read in Spanish. So I really did learn them at the same time.
- Speaker 1: [16:29](#) Okay. And you said your father didn't speak Spanish to you growing up. Is there a reason why?
- Speaker 2: [16:36](#) I honestly don't know. He's not the most talkative of people and I've confronted him about it a couple times, so I'm pretty confrontational. But, um, he, he's, you know, and his response has been like, oh, you don't need to know Spanish, you can just, you can just speak English or know the, the

more typical one is like, oh, I'm not good enough to be speaking to you. You need to speak to someone who's better than me at Spanish and, you know, when I've gone places with him, you know, I can tell he's completely fluent and everyone else says so, but I really don't know what his motivations are, but that's what he says.

Speaker 1: [17:12](#) And um, how important is the ability to speak Spanish to the feudal culture?

Speaker 2: [17:17](#) I think it's really important, honestly, especially like, you know, an integral part of, at least my family's culture, you know, is, is going to mass and my, one of my cousins got married and to be able to have all of the songs be in Spanish because both the bride and the groom were Latino American. You know, that's something that does invoke another side of emotion that I, I really like to be able to be in touch with and I think that being able to speak allows you to participate more fully in the culture because honestly, a lot of people, a lot of Latin Americans, I feel like that I've talked to. Um, well honestly a little bit. Look down on you. If you don't speak Spanish, you're trying to, to claim your Latin American heritage. So if nothing else in a practical sense, it's kind of good to know, to be able to, to get those outlets

Speaker 1: [18:16](#) something that you agree or disagree with as people who may

Speaker 2: [18:20](#) looked down upon

Speaker 1: [18:23](#) those who are not fluent in Spanish or who don't speak Spanish.

Speaker 2: [18:27](#) I, I definitely don't like that at all. Especially because when you look at other cultures like on the Gulf coast, um, there's a huge Vietnamese population and, you know, I would go to some of their student organizations, church organizations and um, you know, less than half of them could speak Vietnamese yet that did not stop them from fully participating in a lot of the culture. So I feel like that is something that kind of hinders the Latin American population from maybe being united with people who could be within their culture and would like to identify but are maybe either too scared to or scared away. I don't think that that's a good thing. That being said, I still do appreciate the

idea of learning Spanish and I wish people who could speak Spanish would speak to their children in Spanish to be able to pass it along. And

- Speaker 1: [19:15](#) um, how does the university and the community catered to the lesbian population?
- Speaker 2: [19:22](#) It's difficult. Um, you know, and I don't know the numbers. I'm sure you do, but I don't feel like there's a very big, uh, Latin American population. So as of right now, I feel like it's pretty difficult to even just get their ear, the university's ear on these issues. I feel like a good way to do it is through the honors college. I feel like the, you know, the honors college is a good place to start some of this dialogue and getting students that identify with the Latin American culture really like fired up and passionate about wanting to do something is probably the best thing because I can't foresee the university saying no, but I also can't foresee the university really taking much initiative to do something to create or foster an environment that is conducive to that. And how does
- Speaker 1: [20:16](#) the university and the community omit the Latino families?
- Speaker 2: [20:23](#) Well, I think in a, maybe it's just the time and place right now that I'm in, but you know, so much of the dialogue when you hear about, um, race relations really is, you know, black or white and those conversations are definitely important. Especially the history of Ole miss in particular. Um, you know, but there really aren't any conversations at all about um, relations with Latin American people and I feel like, you know, and in 2016 and the election and again during the midterms, you know, I'm being in La, I feel like I'm pretty politically involved in. I try and go to a bunch of different things and not necessarily in law, uh, this happens, but where people who say to be politically involved, one of their big things is like immigration and they talk about all of these, you know, undocumented immigrants and all these Mexicans they say and there's just such a lack of education when they're talking that that really is frustrating and there's no conversation about it at the university and the community both kind of just let that happen and I don't, I don't know what they're supposed to do about it, but that definitely has an admitted conversation.

- Speaker 2: [21:34](#) And um, how do you, how do you view race in the US in the south and here in Knoxville? Interesting. So
- Speaker 2: [21:50](#) living in DC I was, I was definitely spoiled where, um, I had, there was people from all different nations where they were first generation Americans or just on visas. And so I just had this absolute amazing exposure and I kind of, you know, this is second to fifth grade I was there. And so for my elementary school years, I kind of had this falsified sense of there being this perfect race relations in America or at least in the American north. Um, now I'm not so sure if that's actually the case. Um, but in the deep south
- Speaker 2: [22:33](#) it's hard because especially, you know, just with all of the segregation that's happened with, with red lining in the south, there's been like this forced literal separation of the races. And so there are definitely lots of things that needed, need to be amended. And I'm talking about, you know, of course I like the deep south of San Antonio I feel like is again, super different. And even the Gulf coast is a little bit different from the rest of the Mississippi. And then now in Oxford, I guess there are some amazing people who are having amazing conversations on campus and stuff. But I think the best maybe like a pit immigration, I don't think it's a word, but now it is of it is when you look in the Grove on Saturdays, I love football. It's always something I've been a huge fan of. But when you see all these people trying to wrap the Mississippi flag or just the blatant confederate flag and Colonel Reb, it served as a reminder to me that things are not well in Oxford and things are not well, uh, in the deep south. Hope that answered the. I got a little bit off track.
- Speaker 1: [23:46](#) No, that's fine. That was great. And how do you perceive the Latino population effecting the idea of race here in the south?
- Speaker 2: [23:59](#) Well, as you know, the Latino population begins to grow. There are going to definitely just necessarily have to be conversations about our role in society and especially our role in the deep south and I think it's going to be difficult to break stereotypes, um, because, you know, people here just have not been here, meaning the Mississippian and warm market have not really been confronted with any Latin Americans, Latinos at all. And so in their mind, they're still

this kind of myth or legend of what it should look like of what one should look like. So the way Latina,

Speaker 4: [24:46](#)

um,

Speaker 2: [24:50](#)

and it's, it's hard, it's, it's, it's an internal debate too. And it's a debate we had actually when we went to, um, when I was at Yale the other weekend and you know, you have the kind of like the idea of, oh well you should just try your best to break those stereotypes and fit in and culture, but then like the rebel and he absolutely hates that idea. And I'm like, no, no, you should be super proud and just, you know, if people in deep south don't want to accept you, then they shouldn't have you. But that doesn't work. That's not very practical either. So it's an internal dilemma.

Speaker 1: [25:25](#)

And that's my last question. Are there any other points or topics that you'd like to discuss that I didn't ask you?

Speaker 2: [25:34](#)

I think we covered it pretty well. I'm looking forward to hearing what you, what you come up with. But yeah, I there, there is definitely that, that internal dilemma they kinda just drives me crazy of. It's like I don't want there to be violence against Latinos at all. Um, I don't want there to be prejudice against Latinos and things of like, oh, and here's maybe an interesting anecdote I can share with you. Um, you know, and people all the time we'll say things that I guess they probably don't mean, you know, say, Oh, you're fake Mexican and things like that. Um, that don't sting anymore. They used to. And it is true that I generally don't face as many prejudices as a lot of people would because of the way I look. Um, that being said, one story in one market when I was getting my driver's license, I go to with my, you know, to get my driver's license and they say, Oh, you need to get another social security card.

Speaker 2: [26:31](#)

You know, they just took one look at the name and like, what do you mean? Is it just the only social security card I've ever had? They're like, oh no, that one's not legitimate. So I had to order another social security card for some reason it looked the exact same. I'm a little bit more crisp than my old one. You know, I go take that in. They go, oh no, you need a new birth certificate. This isn't a real birth certificate. I'm like, what do you mean? Is it literally the only burst of they gave me, you know, that's what my mom was saying. And they were like, no, this is from the county

of Texas. We need it to be from the state of Texas, you know, which again, I don't know, they might've been just trying to do their job, but it was the same old woman each and every time I went in there and there were about five times I went in there and I got denied by the same person and it was curious because all it took was me showing up that six time and there being a different woman working the desk.

Speaker 2:

[27:23](#)

Uh, she was a young black woman and things were easy enough. Got My driver's license within minutes. Uh, so I don't know, I guess that was an anecdote to share of just how people can just look at a name. I feel like in just feel, feel things because in the deep south they're not being. They're not used to actually having to to talk to or meet any Latinos and yeah, that's all I got for you. I think.