



What Bianca Kea Learned by Listening to Her Yo Soy Afro Latina Community

Growing up in Detroit, she wondered why her peers recognized her as Black, but not Mexican. Now, the Yo Soy Afro Latina founder is building the community she always yearned for.

Alicia Menendez:

Bianca Kea originally envisioned Yo Soy Afro Latina as a sorority, a group bound together by the experience of being Afro Latina, something that eluded her as a kid growing up outside Detroit. Since she launched Yo Soy in 2017, the vision has evolved. And we talk about what Bianca's learned from her audience, how the experience of exploring her queer identity informed her experience of building community around Afro-Latinidad, and how she's going to know when it is time for her passion project to become her full-time focus.

Menendez: Bianca, thank you so much for doing this.

Bianca Kea: Yes, thank you for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Menendez: Take me back to the MySpace poll that you put up as a kid growing up in Detroit. What was the poll, and what was the impetus for the poll?

Kea: Okay. So I had to be seventh or eighth grade on MySpace, early Y2K days. And, I guess I was just curious how people perceived me at that time. A lot of kids in my school were having bat mitzvahs and bar mitzvahs, so they were celebrating their culture. And, I had talked with my mom about having a quince, but I was 12 or 13 at the time, so it was years away. And obviously, my close friends knew I was mixed, or I didn't claim Afro-Latinidad at the time, but I just said I was mixed. So I thought they were aware that I was both Black and Mexican. So, I put up this poll and it had five options. I think I said, "What do you think I am? What do you think I'm mixed with?" or something like that. And I put white, Jewish, Black, Latina, and then I chose something really random. I think I put Asian or something. And, the poll was up for, I think, 24 hours, not even. And I came back and I saw the majority of the people have voted that they just thought I was Black.

Kea: And, it wasn't disheartening, but it was more shock to me, because I was just like, "Oh, that's how you guys perceive me? That's what you thought?" Especially because I feel like, again, I'm so proud and just vocal with my heritage and my culture. And if you're a close friend, you know that my mom's Mexican, my dad's Black. My parents are both from the city. So my mom's from Southwest Detroit, which is predominantly Mexican-American. You have some Puerto Ricans there too. And my dad is from the west side of Detroit, which is predominantly Black neighborhood. So, for me, it was just trying to navigate all these different communities and environments, and I still didn't see myself in any of them. Yes, I saw my family and my cousins, but nobody really looked like me, and nobody was at the

intersection of being Latina and Black. I didn't really have any guidance, and nobody talked about race in my household. That just was not a topic that we touched on. So, trying to navigate that as a kid was just... I just feel like I was all over the place.

Menendez: You moved to New York, and New York provides a different sense of community when it comes to this question of race and ethnicity than Detroit had. Why?

Kea: I think it's just because New York is a melting pot. The one thing I did notice when I moved there is, there was a ton of Latinos, but I didn't really see a ton of Mexicans. I'm seeing brown skinned and dark skinned Latinas that are maybe Peruvian or Dominican or Puerto Rican. But nonetheless, I'm still seeing people that are my color that look like me, that have my texture, that are curvy like me. It was just so reassuring. So, I loved it, and I just feel like it was a catalyst to me, really walking into my identity.

Menendez: Because when you start Yo Soy Afro Latina, what you really are looking to do is build community. What did you see as the opportunity or the gap in the market?

Kea: In the Midwest, I really felt like I was the only Afro-Latina, and I knew that couldn't be true. And so when I moved to New York, I was like, "Okay, wow, there's a ton of us." But I still just felt like my world was really small, and I was just like, "There has to be more of us." That's what I kept thinking, there has to be more. So I just started an Instagram page, in hopes of connecting with other girls all around the world, just to hear their experience, hear how they grew up and how they're just embracing their identity. And it really helped when I moved to LA. In LA, there was a ton of Blacks, Mexicans and whites. So, it almost felt like I was back in Detroit. So that was another push to be like, "Okay, you should really create something."

Menendez: As you began having those conversations online, as you begin building the community, what are the themes that you begin hearing over and over again?

Kea: A lot of themes, and this is relevant to this day, a lot of themes that I hear are people who feel like they're slow to embrace their Afro-Latinidad, because maybe they grew up with their parent who identifies as Black, and they don't speak the language. Or they're not too familiar with their Latina culture. There's just so many things where they're like, "Yeah, I didn't know I could identify as Afro-Latina." Or they have the opposite experience where they're like, "I am Afro-Latina, but I'm really light skinned and my hair is really loose, so I've always felt like... I can't really identify as Afro-Latina." So, there's a lot of vulnerability and being like, "Thank you so much for creating this space. I'm still navigating it, but I just appreciate that I can come to your page," or "I appreciate that I can share your page with my kids who are trying to learn how to embrace their identity," which is very important to me because that's all I ever wanted as a child. I just wanted to feel like I was not the only one.

Menendez: Part of what's interesting about what you have built with Yo Soy Afro Latina is, it comes from actual expertise. And by that, I mean you are a social media maven, guru. Can you sort of walk us through the work that you were doing to really make it a living thing?

Kea: Yeah. It definitely has been a time commitment. I've been so consistent, truly, day in, day out. Maybe there's a couple of weeks where I'm trying to figure out a strategy or content pillars. But no, I definitely have invested a lot of time, a lot of waking up every day, checking the page, engaging with people, responding to messages, also bringing people on my team, because I also have a nine to five, so I can't always do this 24/7. So, I've been able to bring people on to really help me engage with the community. But my biggest thing

is just making sure that the content we push out feels like it's representing, not only myself, but my community.

Kea: I want my community sharing resources within. If there's an article that I feel is really insightful, whether it's mental health resources for the Latinx community or how to negotiate your salary, I just try to share resources, engage with people, uplift them as well. If there's a project going on that I feel our community would love, there's one project, it was Afro-Latina Festival. I don't know if it's happening anymore because of the pandemic. But, I think this is before 2019. They had the festival yearly. And I would like to share that to our page, just so people know, if you're in the New York area, come show out, enjoy yourself, have a good time, meet people that are like us. So I try to just do little things that I can from afar, especially remotely, to bridge community, and, like I said, make people feel like you're not alone, like we're in this together.

Menendez: When you talk about content pillars, what does that look like?

Kea: That looks like a lot of audience research, looking at my audience to see what it is that they like, what do they want to see. I feel like the brand is really reflective of me and who I am, but there's also a lot of things that the brand does outside of me, that I know this is a Yo Soy Afro Latina thing. They love sharing stories. They love when we highlight women, especially Latinx women, Black women who are impacting the community.

Kea: One time I shared this video, it was a TikTok actually, it was just like I had regrammed it on Instagram. But it was a TikTok video talking about this famous dancer, this backup dancer for Celia Cruz. And I didn't realize that other people were looking at her. It was in the famous video, La Negra Tiene Tumbao. And I didn't realize that other girls, like myself, had related to her, because as a child, I'm just like, "Wow, she's so fly. She's so pretty. She's this Black girl. She's Latina." So I put it out there, and there was just this conversation about her and Celia Cruz and the music.

Kea: Same with nails, I'm a nail girl. I love nails. But when I came out with our recent collection of mugs, and I really leaned into nail art to bring a little razzle dazzle to the product photography, and the girls loved it. But the audience will tell me when they like something and when they don't like something, and that's what I really appreciate about our audience.

Menendez: Could you tell me about a time they didn't like something?

Kea: Oh my gosh. Yes. So many times. It was this one time, I had put out a post. It was just recognizing, I think, it was Black History month. And I was just recognizing Afro-Latinas, in particular Latinx and Black people, that I felt, in the entertainment industry, who were taking up space and just doing their thing. And, I just put out a little carousel, and there happened to be one person who, technically, was not Afro-Latino. It was a guy. I think I put out Tyrese. It was literally the last slide of this carousel post. But nope, the comments went crazy. "I don't think he's Afro-Latino." "No, you got it wrong." They were literally just dragging me, and I literally was like, "Okay, guys, I get it." But I just appreciate that they're really vocal. They'll have these conversations. And I won't even chime in sometimes. I'll just let them have it.

Kea: Cardi B is a really touchy subject for us. In the beginning, people loved her. But I also recognize that there's a lot of colorism within the Latinx community and the Black community, so just being mindful of how people are not necessarily a fan of putting her on the pedestal of saying like, "Yes, she is the golden child for Afro-Latinidad," or something

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like that. Just being mindful of how she is perceived, how my audience perceives her. Because again, they'll be vocal. If they don't like something, they will let me know. Those sort of hiccups, where it's, you put something out there and it's a learning lesson nonetheless.

Menendez: Is there sort of a moment where you realized that, even though you think you're building a sorority, in reality, the greater monetizable element of all of this is merchandise and swag?

Kea: Originally, and I use this loosely, I thought I was just building maybe an Instagram appreciation page. I didn't want it to be that, but that's all that was out there. So I was like, "Okay, maybe it's just going to be this." Then I came out with merch, because I wanted to create stuff that I personally liked wearing. I like t-shirts. I'm a graphics tee type of girl. I love mugs. Also, coffee is just such a staple in our culture, our community. So it's just like, "All right. I'm just going to create pieces that I like." I wanted something that just allowed me to express myself creatively. So, that's when I just started to create merch. And slowly, it kind of caught on. They really like the hats. They really like the t-shirts and the mugs. So I was like, "All right. Let me create a little more."

Menendez: I think about you as a kid, doing the MySpace poll and being curious about how other people saw you, even though you were very clear about how you saw yourself. As it relates to being a queer woman, was there that same clarity on your part of knowing who you were?

Kea: Oh my God, no. Definitely not. I didn't really recognize that I was queer until probably high school. I had a girlfriend in high school, a long-term girlfriend. Things did not end the best. And then I ended up moving to New York. So it's this big old city, with tons of people, a huge queer community. So, I just explored that. I took that as an opportunity to go to gay bars, to get on Tinder, to talk to people, to go on dates with all types of people.

Kea: Before I had my first girlfriend in high school, I was dating guys. So I really didn't know that I was queer. I just thought maybe I like this person because she was pretty, she was cool, she was nice. I didn't know that it's because I was actually attracted to her, or to women at the time. So, I think it was really interesting and beautiful that I was able to, as a baby gay, I like to call it, to explore that side, especially in New York in your early twenties and being a baby gay, and just going out and just having a good time, and just seeing what's out there. I really enjoyed it. It was a wild time. But, it was beautiful because I feel like I was able to really come into my identity, without feeling shame or nervousness or judgment. It was really liberating.

Menendez: Has that ever been a consideration for you around Yo Soy Afro Latina, and whether or not that was an element that you wanted to layer on to the brand?

Kea: I haven't thought about that yet, because I definitely want to incorporate that. I think there are ways to always expand your brand, to ensure that, as the times change and progress, that you are being inclusive as you can be. That was something I learned at the very beginning of Yo Soy Afro Latina. Our sizing wasn't that inclusive. I just had sizes small to, I think, extra large, and I only carried a handful extra larges. But that's just because, at the time, people were not asking for more sizes. They were asking for a 2X or extra small. But I recognize, "Okay. My audience wants that, so let me give it to them."

Kea: And it's hard. I want to add that layer of queerness to this space. But I recognize that just because Yo Soy Afro Latina came from me, doesn't necessarily mean that that brand is me. I recognize that that is my baby. I'm going to nourish her, but she has a whole identity

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outside of me. And the thing that is also really interesting is, because I still feel like there's a lot of work to be done with representation and advocating for Black Latinas and just the intersectionality of Latinx and Black community, I really want to continue to carve that space out, and to cultivate it and to have conversations around it, while also uplifting and bringing awareness to our queer community, and even other people who are outside of our race.

Kea: I remember when there was a lot of Asian hate that was going on. And obviously, we're not Asian, but I was like, "Yo, they're like us. They're our cousins basically, and I want to support them. And I want people to know that, yes, we may not identify as Asian-American, but we still support them. We uplift them, and we are here for of them." So I think that's something that I'm currently doing, in terms of LGBTQIA and crafting that community. But, I'm still trying to navigate that, because I'm just mindful of who she is, Yo Soy Afro Latina is, outside of Bianca. Bianca created Yo Soy Afro Latina, but we're not the same, if that makes sense.

Kea: But then I also have to remember, at the end of the day, the goal for Yo Soy Afro Latina when I started this page, was to bring representation to Black Latinas like myself. So that is always going to be the goal. We're always going to go back to that. You could be Black Latina and gay like myself, but at the end of the day, if I walk into the room, you don't know I'm a queer woman, but you recognize I am Black. You know what I mean? So I'm just very mindful of, again, perception, especially in the US, and navigating that, and also being mindful that this page was created for representation and to bridge the gap between cultures and communities, and to just create a space for us to feel safe. Everything else, whether we're gay, whether we like tech, whether we like nails, that is secondary. But what is the focus are Black Latinas and representation for us.

Menendez: In preparing for this conversation with you, I realized that we've spoken with a lot of Latinas who had something like Yo Soy Afro Latina, and by that, I don't know if you would... Feel free to disprove me, I'd call it a side hustle, right? It is not your main source of income. It is not the thing you are doing from nine to five, even if you might dip into it here and there. And, there always is an inflection point where someone decides that their baby, that their side project, has become big enough to become their full-time project.

Kea: Yeah.

Menendez: What do you see as the future for yourself?

Kea: That's a good question. It definitely started as my side hustle. I like to call it my passion project. So yes, it very much was that, even to this day. I would love to eventually leave corporate life and really focus on Yo Soy Afro Latina full-term. And, my biggest thing is, I always say I want to build an empire. I recognize that, what started as literally a passion project on my heart, that I feel God really just placed there, you know what I mean? I recognize that there's opportunity for everybody. I can create jobs. I can create merch. I can host things and bring people on, and have conversations and uplift our community. It doesn't just have to be about me and my brand. I really want it to be bigger than that. But, it does take time, and it takes a lot of resources. So, I'm just trying to keep my head down, stay focused and build this foundation brick by brick, until I feel comfortable enough leaving corporate and focusing on Yo Soy full-time. That's definitely the goal, but it just takes some time.

Menendez: It does take time, but I wonder, do you have a clear marker in your own mind, of when you will know it is right? Or are you still feeling your way through that?

Kea: I definitely have a marker when I know is the time, but it's not, oh, when I save up X amount. Yeah, saving up X amount is really helpful, but you also recognize that it's life. So you're going to save up this amount of money, and in about a couple of months, it's going to be gone, you know what I mean? Money comes as quickly as it goes. So, I think it's bigger than that. I think it's also when I recognize that there is a need for my audience. They need me. I feel that a lot more now, than I did back in 2017. But I also recognize that I am doing a lot of work that I feel is changing the corporate structure where I'm at right now. And I enjoy that. And, I'm trying to nourish that, while also building Yo Soy Afro Latina. So, it's a hard sort of balance, and I feel like, definitely in the future, the near future, I feel it coming. But, I'm just trying to stay focused and prayed up. And until then, we doing what we doing.

Menendez: And we're all going to be rooting for you. Thank you so much.

Kea: Thank you.

Menendez: Thank you, as always, for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Manuela Bedoya is our marketing lead. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer and mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. It makes our day. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram, tweet us at @latinatolatina. Check out our merchandise that is on our website, latinatolatina.com/shop. And remember, please subscribe or follow us on Radio Public, Apple Podcast, Google Podcast, Good Pods, wherever you are listening right now. Every time you share this podcast, every time you share an episode, every time you leave a review, it helps us to grow as a community.

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