

The Museum at FIT FASHION CULTURE Podcast

Diasporic Design in Colombia | Lia Samantha Lozano and Dr. Tamara J Walker

Event held on October 25, 2024 and edited for this podcast in November 2025.

[UPBEAT MUSIC FADES IN]

[DR. VALERIE STEELE]

Hi, I'm Valerie Steele, Director and Chief Curator of The Museum at FIT, the most fashionable museum in New York City.

[UPBEAT MUSIC CONTINUES]

[DR. VALERIE STEELE]

Welcome to our Fashion Culture Podcast Series, featuring lectures and conversations about fashion.

[MUSIC CONTINUES]

[DR. VALERIE STEELE]

If you like what you hear, please share your thoughts on social media using the hashtag, #FashionCulture.

[MUSIC CONTINUES FADES OUT]

[DR. VALERIE STEELE]

It's now my pleasure to introduce Ben Barry, who is dean of the School of Fashion at Parsons School of Design and was named to *Vogue Business's* Inaugural 100 Innovators in 2022. He's leading the Parsons fashion community, and today he's going to be talking about transforming fashion education: possibilities and limits of equity, inclusion and decolonization. Please join me in welcoming Ben Barry.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]

[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]

We're very excited to have our first of two designer conversations. Our first is with Lia Samantha Lozano, who is a fashion designer and pioneer of AfroColombian fashion. She was inspired by her community aesthetics to create her eponymous brand, Lia Samantha, which translates the power of Black and Indigenous people's cosmovisions, traditions, wisdom, spirituality and beauty into contemporary design. She will be in conversation with Dr. Tamara J. Walker, an

associate professor of Africana studies at Barnard College, Columbia University. Her research interests focus on slavery, gender, and racial formation in Latin America; their legacies in the modern era; and global Black mobility. Walker is the author most recently of *Beyond the Shores: A History of African-Americans Abroad*. Her first book, *Exquisite Slaves: Race, Clothing, and Status in Colonial Lima*, won the 2018 Harriet Tubman Prize. She is currently working on a book about whiteness and Latin American visual culture. Please join me in welcoming Lia Samantha and Dr. Walker.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

Uno. Uno. Hello.

[AUDIENCE MEMBERS]

Hello!

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

How are you? I'm Lia Samanta. I'm really really happy to stay here to share my... all the work with my brand. And hello, Tamara. How are you?

[DR. TAMARA WALKER]

I'm good. Thank you so much for being here. And thank you, Elizabeth, for creating space for us today, for including me in your beautiful book, and for making this conversation possible. It's such an honor to meet you and to speak with you today. I wrote my chapter in the book on Lia and her place and her importance within the history of fashion in Colombia. And so that's what we will be talking about today.

And I want to just get us started by a really important moment in your history, in Colombian fashion history, and it's from your debut at Colombia Fashion Week. But before we talk about that, because that in itself is an important story and it's really central, but there's a story that precedes it that I'd like to talk about, which is your time in the music industry. And I wonder if you can just tell us about that time in your life and the place of fashion and design in that time in your life.

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

Yes, I can say that my first school was hip-hop like when I started to sing hip-hop when I was 11 years. I have the um reach to know about the hip hop because in the school and in my house, never talk about Black culture, never talk about our leaders or heroes, Black heroes. And when I listen the first music, hip hop talking about the slaves and our our culture that after the slaves, we were queens and kings and it was so important for me because it was the first time that I listen something important about my people because when we go to the school, the first thing that the people say about the Black people is just slaves in the in the school.

“Oh, the Black people is come from Africa” and all the people look at me and not no tell anything important like, we have intelligent, smart people and knowledgeable people. Nobody say nothing about the Black people in Colombia. Uh if you see the soap operas, in the medias, you can see the Black people. And forty years ago when you arrived to Colombia and you can see the pictures, “Welcome to Colombia” and you can see the Indigenous people and white people but no Black people. And it's like, “Where, where is my culture?” And I started to make an investigation. And the first was hip-hop like I told you.

But after, I know that my Black people is knowledge, a lot of knowledge. All the people think, “Eh, they are dancing and making music and entertainment.” But we have a big, big reach to share with the world. And this knowledge is the most important in my investigation because if we talk about colors in our culture, it is good, it's present. But the color is... esta?

[DR. TAMARA MUMBLES]

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

Yes, the color is connected. The color is connected with the culture. No, we don't use color just for pay attention. Yes? It's for the culture.

And when I arrived to Colombia Moda in dos mil catorce, in 2014, it was incredible because I designed this collection just to know, to show my people with dignity and respect. And when I write this to this Colombia Moda, all the people told me, “Lia, this is not from the Black people. This is from all Colombia because we are diversity and colorful. This is our culture too.” And in the same year I work to the Miss Universe, that she was from Colombia and it was the first time that the people talk about the Black people in fashion. And it's the first time that fashion designers go to Colombia Moda inspired in African and use African fabrics and yes, after my life changed after this... [LIA CHUCKLES] from this presentation.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

Thank you. I don't have perfect English, but thank you!

[LIA LAUGHS]

[DR. TAMARA WALKER]

No, that was... that was perfect. And it really captures just how major this moment was for you to appear on stage at Colombia Fashion Week in 2014 as a headliner, right? The first AfroColombian to headline a show at Colombia Fashion Week. And this is a stage that was really... I mean it was a moment that put Colombia and you on the global stage and I wonder if you can describe that moment when you sent your models and your designs on stage when you came out on stage in this particular place, what that was like for you and what it represented to you.

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

Yes. Um, I was talking with the agency of models that I want to have Black girls with afro hairs, natural. And I want to pay, have models with Indigenous risks, risks? Yes. And blondie, like the girls like in different conditions. And when um I wear these models with my clothes, it was like they are queens! I can't see if he's Black or blondie. I don't know. Just queens. And it was incredible when the people say, "Lia, I thought that this African fabric just looks good with the Black people, but wow, there is Indigena too!"

And I think the prints, patterns in the prints are not talking about the Black culture or African culture. I discovered that these symbols is talking about the language from the universe and the universe is talking in symbols all time. Our ancestors talk about talking in symbols and these symbols are printed in...

[DR. TAMARA WALKER]

The pattern?

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

Yes. And I think the most important from this collection was the the knowledge, the investigation. Because the people say, "Yeah, the color is beautiful" and yeah, yeah it's like the superficial but when I talk about the chakras and emotions that... green, red, talking about our emotions and connection with the planets... and before that our ancestors can write in this way, they write on this way and this way to to write is like the history was talking, yes? And I was talking about these patterns, signs. It's like the Black people have an a lot of knowledge to share with the fashion in Colombia and we are working in the politics, and fashion, photography.

In fashion, we don't have Black designers. And when I arrived, there was talk about not just not just fashion, and talk about culture. And I think it was important that the people connect with my work.

[DR. TAMARA WALKER]

Yeah. I want to come back to the designs themselves. Um, but before that, I just want to take a moment to share with the audience just how um significant this moment was as far as you being on stage, but also these models, as you mentioned, these models of African descent, these models of Indigenous descent in this context that had typically venerated and celebrated whiteness. And that meant whiteness as far as designers were concerned and also as far as the models that graced the stage were concerned. So this moment that had your designs, the models that you chose on stage and then you coming out at the end of the show was really a sea change moment in Colombia. And there was a widespread response in Colombian media but also in international media. And I wonder if you can tell us about that experience of getting that kind of media attention after the fashion show.

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

The media was talking about it, "Lia Samanta is the most secret fashion in Colombia" and the media told that I'm the first designer working with ethnics, with the communities. And they talk about the the way that I mix the the fabrics the colors, because when when we talk about

tendencies, yes, it's like this color with this color or this form and we can mix. And when I started to mix these fabrics, it's like it's good! Different colors and different text textures and patterns, it's like a a good way to to mix the colors that in Colombia the people were thinking that the Black... that fashion wears black, so elegant if we wear black. But when I show this collection with color and talking about culture it's like a new view of fashion.

[DR. TAMARA WALKER]

And one thing that struck me when I was researching you for my chapter is that in interviews that you've given, you've talked about this idea of your work as representing Moda AfroColombiana. And I wonder if you can share with the audience what that means to you.

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

Yes. Moda AfroColombiana, for Colombian fashion is inspired in our own aesthetics, in the way that we use the turbans, the skirts... all the elements, the accessories! Because when a Black girl use accessories, it's connected with the culture. And I was explaining about the turbans, the the what it means that when you use a turban because the people say, "Ah if you have the hair, a bad hair, you can cover it with a turban" and when I was talking about the turban's history, that our hair is spiritual. It's a spiritual connection with the universe and when you use a turban, you are putting this energy in a spiritual... proposito?

[DR. TAMARA WALKER]

Purpose, yeah.

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

Purpose. Yes. And AfroColombian fashion it's inspiring in our women the way that we wear in our towns in Colombia. And yes, it was inspiring in this, in our own aesthetics.

[DR. TAMARA WALKER]

Yeah. And I think what it also communicates is that Colombia itself is part of the African diaspora, which may be obvious but even within Colombia, that's not been something that has been acknowledged until recently. And really until that moment in 2014, because for so much of the – and I talk about this in my chapter – for so much of the the 20th century, Colombia had presented itself to itself and on the world stage as a mestizo nation, a European and Indigenous nation and tried in as many ways as possible to erase its African heritage. And that's reflected in media, in culture, and its exportations—its exports, and what it communicated to the world about itself. And so this fashion show and your work really challenges those narratives about Colombia and who Colombians are. And so... one thing that also struck me during my research arch into your work and your career is that you had the opportunity to dress the vice president of Colombia.

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

Yes.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS AND CHEERS]

[DR. TAMARA WALKER]

And for those who don't know, um Colombia recently elected its first AfroColombian vice president. And that in itself is an important moment in Colombian history, African diaspora history, fashion history, your personal history. And so I wonder if you can talk about what that was like to have the vice president wear your clothing, how that happened, and what it means to you.

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

Yes. I went to Cali, this other city in Colombia, to talk about my brand. And this event was organized for the vice president. After it's like, "Lia we need to talk with you." It's like, okay, because he have another designer and she have other designer. And she told me, "Lia the Duke is coming to Colombia. And we need that you design for the vice president."

It's like, "Wow! The first time! It's good." And I went to her house to show some fabrics and talk about the event, the hour, what do you want to... what do you feel and what do you reflect in this day?

And she told me, "Lia, I want a different form and try a different... I want to look different for this event." And we designed a skirt and a shirt. And it was special because it's important to have a vice pres – a Black vice president. Because all the people always seem like... "You are cleaning my house..." And when we have a vice president, it's like a strong woman. And I know that Francia Marquez is working all her life for this moment. And she's coming for the towns, working for the people and for the rights. And when she arrived to be the vice president, I was crying like, "Wow, it's incredible." My grandmother... I love to live this moment and for me it is so special that she used my clothes because she represents the strong of the Black women in Colombia.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]

[DR. TAMARA WALKER]

That's beautiful.

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

Thank you.

[DR. TAMARA WALKER]

Well, now you're making me think about just the sense of community that she represents. And I wonder what kind of community of designers you are able to help build or participate in. What's the community of AfroColombian designers like right now?

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

What is..

[DR. TAMARA SPEAKS TO LIA IN SPANISH]

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

We are the 30% of Black people in Colombia. We have Black people in Choco, the Pacific coast. It's a big, big space for **con asentamiento**— with Black people. And Cali, Cartahena too, have a lot of Black people. But I think the talk about the Black culture is new in Colombia, to include the Black people too. It's new to know about the heroes of the... yes! What's happening in the slaves is new for us too.

[DR. TAMARA WALKER]

And.. so and I could ask a better question because what you're talking about is the history of AfroColombians and the idea of an AfroColombian community. Um I was just wondering if you see the beginnings or the formation of a community of designers that are AfroColombian?

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

Yes, in Colombia we have hand crafters, **artesanos**. Yes. And now after Leia Samanta in Colombia Moda, we have a lot of fashion designers. And now in Colombia Moda this year, **Mar de Ejea, Kelly**, is a fashion designer from the Choco, from the Pacific coast. And her collection was inspired in the jungle and the weather because the Choco is the second place with the most rain in the world and it was so special to see this collection in Colombia Moda too. It's like, "Lia, you open the door for us" and the fashion in Colombia now is inspiring in Black people and inspiring Indigenous people too. And I think it's important because now that we have identity, we have a space and a place in the fashion, in the world.

I think when you talk about your own story, you have a place in the fashion. And the fashion, the Black fashion designers I think like 10 in at this moment working with the celebrities with the vice president too, yes. The industry is growing and growing and growing and in **Petronial Alvarez** that is the most important festival of Black music in Colombia. Yeah, we can see different designers with accessories and yes, all everything inspired in the Black people in the Black culture.

[DR. TAMARA WALKER]

And can you talk more about some of the collaborations that you've been able to do as a designer who has your own vision for what sort of fashions you want to put out into the world? What sort of opportunities have you had to collaborate with brands and to get your vision out in the world?

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

Yes, I had the opportunity to work with Nike and I had the history of love with my grand-grandmother and grand-grandfather. My grandfather was Indigenous and my grandmother was Black from the Pacific coast and they were in love! And my grand-grandfather... from his community.

[DR. TAMARA WALKER]

He was kicked out of his community?

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

Yes. Because he was in love with a Black girl and he went to Choco and they got married and when I know that they took this decision to marry, being from different cultures it was like, "Wow it's so revolutionary this year!" And when I started to work with Nike, it was the inspiration.

Like it was the way, like I designed the clothes for them in the wedding. And it was a pair but different. The left and right were different. And this one was this inspiring in the Indigenous aesthetics for my grand-grandfather and the other inspiring in the Black people from the Choco for my grand-grandmother. He was working with the gold working with **Masamoreo** technique from the ancestors. And I took these elements for designing these couple of sneakers and it has gold, and something flowers. Like my way to celebrate this union, because for this union I'm here and the first daughter from my grand-grandfather and grand-grandmother who was the first fashion designer in my family. And always that I'm going to inspire to start to design a collection, to look my own story, my African story to and the nature y tambien is so important, it's so so so important and always is my inspiration, my family, my own stories, my Black culture, and the music, too. Because the music was the first vehicle to start to work in the art.

[DR. TAMARA WALKER]

Yes, that's beautiful. Um, I think we have time for me to ask uh one last question and you've talked a lot about your past and how that has shaped your designs and you just now have told this beautiful story about your family. Um, and I wonder what you see in your future, what your dream is for the future of your brand and your designs and what sort of legacy you hope to leave.

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

Yes, last year I was working with Artisanas de Colombia. It's a big... [SPANISH]

[DR. TAMARA WALKER]

Entity?

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

Entity that works for.... working for the culture and in years, I see Lia Samantha working with these communities. Because I think the most important thing in Colombia now is culture. We don't have bad weather, nature is bad. The planet is sick and Colombia, with [SPANISH]

[DR. TAMARA WALKER]

Naturals.

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

With the naturals are finishing. And I think the most important thing that we have in Colombia is the culture. If we talk about a lot of years when the colonization went to Colombia for gold, for... *recurso los...*

[DR. TAMARA WALKER]

Natural resources.

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

Yes. And now they are going and going to Colombia. It's like what do you want from Colombia? If you have my gold what do you want?

[DR. TAMARA AND THE AUDIENCE LAUGH]

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

And it's the culture, the people, the love, the... how you say like.... we have a big heart to hug all the people that come to Colombia. And I think when you work with the culture and in the communities and towns with the people *en el territorio*, in town. When you work with the people in town, you are working for all the country you are working for the capital because we can see the consequences in the capital and it's important to work with this community that still work with the... *recurso naturales*. Yes.

[DR. TAMARA WALKER]

And like metals...

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

... matter. Yes. I think it is important because this is Colombia. Our culture is Colombia. And as silly as a manta traveling for my country in looking at the techniques because I think the most gift from Colombia to the fashion in the world is our own techniques from our ancestors. And this is the element that... we have the Colombian fashion in the eye of the world, the identity, the culture.

[DR. TAMARA WALKER]

Yeah. Well, and I think you're such a gift to the global fashion community and such a role model for not just AfroColombian designers, but designers around the African diaspora and scholars of fashion in the African diaspora. So, it's been such an honor to talk to you and I've learned so much from your career and your example and just appreciate the chance to talk with you today. Thank you.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

Thanks for you. Thank you very much.

[AUDIENCE CONTINUES TO APPLAUD]

[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]

Teleica, join us on stage for audience questions. We have microphones here on the other side and up there as well. So please, we welcome your questions.

[AUDIENCE MURMURS]

[ANNETTE]

Hello, my name is Annette. I'm Colombian. I'm **Afro[??]** actually. So, I'm going to switch into Spanish, so forgive me, but I have to do it. Lia, gracias por que...

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

Gracias por hablar en Espanol.

[AUDIENCE AND ANNETTE LAUGH]

[ANNETTE]

[SPANISH]

Yeah. Um, the way this is like I just want to explain. [SPANISH] how she has redefined femininity in Colombia.

[SPANISH]

It's unprecedented, it's [SPANISH]. Usually when we think about women especially Colombian women we have that idea of Shakira, Sofia Vergara, which is amazing

[SPANISH]

but still the fact that you embraced all of these patterns

[SPANISH]

as part not only your identity [SPANISH] but the heart of the continent. The way you have weaved [SPANISH]

The reason it's revolutionary, [SPANISH] it's because most people or most white colombians that you see probably tend to be mestizo or white. So when you try to get out of the box that you said [SPANISH].

Suddenly you see that the box is also very white. So thank you so much. Gracias, to weave this and also to [SPANISH]

My question goes into that. The reason I'm spanglising right now,

[ANNETTE LAUGHS]

It's s because her designs and her work, it's so remarkable because the dialogue about race in Colombia, not only is pretty much non-existent because there's the idea of, "Oh, we're all mixed." [SPANISH]

So now we're embracing the fact that this hybrid

[SPANISH]

makes us not only better but connects the world. Colombia currently and speaking to the Caribbean part of it is the Pacific coast and Caribbean coast. And for some reason and that's where my question is going, these two parts of the ocean apparently do not speak. So the Caribbean sometimes, los costenos, where my dad is from. "I'm not Black. I'm not Black. I'm not Black."

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

"I'm costeno," They say. "My race is costeno." Yes.

[ANNETTE]

"Yo soy costeno. I'm not Black. I'm not Black," like we clearly are Black.

[SPANISH]

So how do you connect within your designs those two codes that apparently do not speak but are also Black and that deserve to be highlighted? Thank you.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

Thank you.

In the Pacific coast, my family is from the Pacific coast, the Choco. And in the Choco we have emberas, Indigenous community, and the Black people is working together and I think this is the reason because the Choco have a big big culture in medicine and food because the mix of these two cultures is great. And I think it's...

Bueno, I'm going to talk in Spanish a little.

[AUDIENCE CHEERS]

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

And thank you.

[SPANISH]

[DR. TAMARA WALKER]

Two communities in Colombia both live near nature and are connected to nature.

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

[SPANISH]

[DR. TAMARA WALKER]

So before the emergence of what we now call the fashion industry, these communities were already creating artisanal fashions.

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]
[SPANISH]

[DR. TAMARA WALKER]
So when we think about the ancestors of Lia and these communities, they were dressed to cover their souls?

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]
Yes.

[DR. TAMARA WALKER]
Okay, and rather than their bodies...

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]
Because the the bad energies, vibes in direct line and when these vibes see these colors and patterns, it's like... [SPANISH]

[DR. TAMARA WALKER]
So these early designs were intended to um disperse or to to reject the bad energy that would come from the cosmos.

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]
And in our communities, we have elements that are so important to protect our souls. And when I inspire in our culture, I took some elements that mean something spiritual and you can use these elements in contemporary clothes. If you feel proud to wear with Black women in a festival to celebrate our culture, you can celebrate your culture in your office, in your work, in or in your life. No use..... [SPANISH]

[DR. TAMARA WALKER]
Disguise or costume.

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]
Yes. No use the clothes like a...

[DR. TAMARA WALKER]
Disguise.

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]
Disguise, yes.

[DR. TAMARA WALKER]
Or a costume.

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

Yes, this is the way I designed it. It's inspired in these aesthetics, and the way that we use the these elements that are so important for our culture and...

[SPANISH]

[DR. TAMARA WALKER]

So these elements that emerged in the ancestral past have translated into the present into the designs and those meanings have been translated into the designs.

[LIA SAMANTHA LOZANO]

[SPANISH]

[DR. TAMARA WALKER]

So, um these these connections between the past and the present are reflected in these these religious symbols that mean something that have always meant something and continue to mean something and that emerge from an AfroColombian community and perspective.

[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]

Thank you, all of you for joining us today. I know that there's gonna be lots of great conversations that are going to come out of it, thank you for joining us today.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS AND MURMURS]