

Phillips Academy Andover

**Clouded Intersections:
Contributors to Ethnoracial Dissonance in Afro-Latine Individuals**

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Personal Statement

Over the last few years, I've increasingly heard the terms Afro-Latino/a, Afro-Latinx, and Afro-Latine. It's the term that best describes my ethnoracial identity and captures the intersection of Blackness and Latinidad that I stand upon. With the recognition of my racial and ethnic identities, I get a sense of comfort, security, and belonging. But when I was little, I didn't have it. I didn't know that I was Black, or that Latines could be Black at all.

If you're anything like I was when I was little, if you think Latine is a race, if you don't know of Blackness's significant presence in Latin America, if you see Black-looking people and are shocked to hear that they're Latine, if you're Latine and see your brown skin and curly hair and body type and still tell yourself that you're not Black, if you're Latine and everyone tells you that we Latines are a racial mixture beyond classification, I suggest you keep reading.

Introduction

Afro-Latines are individuals of Black and Latine descent whose largest U.S. numbers come from Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Panama, as well

as the Colombian and Venezuelan coasts (Rivera 156; Flores and Jiménez Román 322). In Latin America, the Afro-Latine population is anywhere from 130–150 million, and about 15 times as many enslaved Africans were brought to Ibero-American colonies than to the United States (Adams and Busey 13; López and Gonzalez-Barrera). The African presence in Latin America dates back to the year 1528, and Afro-Latine communities have been present in the U.S. since 1870 at the latest — whether it be Afro-Cubans in Florida or Afro-Puerto Ricans and -Dominicans in New York City (Jiménez Román and Flores 5–9). Today, according to a 2016 Pew Research study, about 24 percent of Latines in the United States self-identify as Afro-Latine (López and Gonzalez-Barrera).

If Afro-Latines are so prominent across the Americas, where are they? If such a large share of Latines are Black, why does Census data from 2017 state that only 2.14 percent of U.S. Latines identify as Black or African American alone (Godoy Peñas 11)?

This isn't a case of Afro-Latine Census submissions being repressed. As was the case for me, Afro-Latinidad has been erased so thoroughly that many of us are unaware of our own identities. As scholars Elizabeth

Hordge-Freeman and Edlin Veras put it, “Afro-Latinx’s early racial socialization is marked by *ethnoracial dissonance*: a feeling of disidentification with, and from, racial schemas made available to them.” (Hordge-Freeman and Veras 146). Initially, this idea may seem absurd. Afro-Latinidad seems simple enough — being a descendant of the African diaspora in Latin America. However, ethnoracial identification is much more complicated than that. Racial and ethnic identities are “socially constructed and amenable to change” and can be determined by factors such as family structures, larger communities, physical appearance, and individual motives (Foner et al. 2 & 4). Specifically in the U.S. Latine context, racial identification is a product of personal preferences, the racial constructs available in the U.S., social dynamics, and ancestry (Godoy Peñas 13; Stokes-Brown 310). In this essay, I will explore the individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors that hinder the development of Afro-Latine identity that acknowledges both Blackness and Latinidad. In my research, I have found that, due to the United States’ rigid ethnoracial classification, the perceived mutual exclusivity between Latinidad and Blackness, and dominant

narratives of *mestizaje* across Latin America, embracing or even acknowledging one’s Afro-Latinidad presents a convoluted challenge from both the Black and Latine sides of the story.¹

Negotiating Ethnoracial Classification Systems

Often, an Afro-Latine’s first obstacle to finding a comfortable identity in the United States is simply the transition to new racial constructs — or, more specifically, from Latin America’s fluid racial hierarchy to the United States’ more rigid racial categories. Latin American nations’ racial systems are deeply rooted in their histories of racial mixing (*mestizaje*) between Spanish colonizers, Indigenous Americans, (often enslaved) Africans, and occasionally Asians, both by marriage and by rape (López and

¹ *Note: Whether people of mixed non-Black Latine and non-Latine Black ancestry (for example, the child of an African American and a Latine mestizo) are Afro-Latine is debated. I will primarily focus on the experiences of those whose Blackness has cultural origins in Latin Americans; however, I may on occasion mention individuals of those mixed backgrounds. Moreover, because of limited research on it, I was not able to fully explore Latines from non-Iberian American nations, especially Haitians. Haitians typically have a different experience in identity development, as they typically embrace Black identity while most other Latin American countries do not (Cruz-Jansen 175). However, they are excluded from conversations of Latinidad — another way in which the perceived mutual exclusivity of Blackness and Latinidad persists.*

Gonzalez-Barrera; Garcia 59). Within this setting of racial mixing emerged complex caste systems that are based on phenotypes and center around Spanish, Indigenous, and African identities (Hodge-Freeman and Veras 148). Across Latin America, various castes emerged as distinct racial identities: the Brazilian-Portuguese *pardo* (brown) and *preto* (Black); dark-skinned *negros*, *prietos*, and *morenos*; mixed brown-skinned *cholas* and *mulatas*; “wheat-colored” *trigueños*, lighter-skinned *jabás* with Black features and *grifas* with curly hair, and *zambas* with Black and Indigenous ancestry (Telles and Garcia 138; Cruz-Jansen 168). Although this system upheld racism by placing Spaniards at the top of the hierarchy and Africans at the bottom, at least it works alongside the way race has developed in many Latin American nations, and therefore accommodates the racial identities of Latin Americans (Garcia 59).

When Latin American immigrants reach the United States, however, they are forced to adjust to a new classification system — one that makes ethnoracial identification difficult for all Latines. During this transition, Latines are forced to “shed,” or at least adjust, many of their original identities to assimilate to the United States’ racial

order (“Edlin Veras” 00:56:32–56). To use an ethnicity-based example, the majority of Latin American newcomers in the U.S. do not identify as Hispanic/Latino and prefer to identify based on their nation of origin, highlighting the extent to which Latin American constructs of ethnic identity differ from those in the United States and how much Latin Americans need to adjust to new systems (Cobas et al. 25). However, these adjustments span beyond shifting from a nation-specific identity to the broader Latine panethnicity. Latin American immigrants must also adjust from their multi-layered racial classifications to the United States’ rigid system, which principally revolves around a Black/white binary (Busey and Cruz 295). The difficulties that accompany this stark transition are reflected in Latines’ responses to the U.S. Census. Questions on the Census may genuinely confuse Latines, preventing them from finding a clear ethnoracial identity on the U.S.’s terms (Busey and Cruz 299). Alternatively, Latines may not wish to assimilate to this system in the first place, as a “hesitancy to adopt U.S. racial and ethnic categories” was a primary contributing factor to the approximately 775,000 Latines in America who were not counted in the

2010 U.S. Census (García-Louis “Ni Latino, Ni Negro” 97). Whether out of reluctance to assimilate or confusion while doing so, adjusting to an entirely new ethnoracial system can impede a Latine of any race from comfortably identifying within the constraints of the U.S.’s ethnoracial rigidity.

“Perhaps they didn’t yet understand that America thrusts black or white upon you quickly, you have to decide, you have to know who and what you are.”
(García, *black/Maybe: An Afro Lyric* 62)

More specifically in this transition to a new ethnoracial classification system, Afro-Latines’ adjustment to a new definition of Blackness makes identifying as Black difficult. In many Latin American countries, the caste system has created a more fluid racial hierarchy where mixed individuals may be categorized as a unique race between Black and white, or even socially white, while only those who look unambiguously Black — *negros* or *prietos* — are considered “really” Black (García-Louis and Cortes 8; Cruz-Jansen 172; Jiménez Román and Flores 271–272). As a result, many mixed-race Latines “escape” being assigned as Black or distance themselves from their Blackness to scale the Latin American racial hierarchy (García-Louis and Cortes 8; García 59). When Afro–Latin Americans arrive in the

U.S., however, they find themselves in a system where a drop of Black blood makes an individual completely nonwhite, and as a result, are often assumed to be either Black, white, or Hispanic rather than a specific race on a Black-white-Indigenous trinary (Cruz-Jansen 172; Stokes-Brown 311; Jiménez Román and Flores 263). Consequently, when Afro–Latin Americans arrive in the United States, they must work to reconcile the fluid Latin American and rigid U.S. constructs of Blackness.

The conflict of adjusting to a new definition of Blackness can be seen in a survey of immigrants from the Dominican Republic — a Hispanic Caribbean nation with a significant African-descended population. When answering the first two questions, which ask about their self-identification, responses were more interspersed between Black, white, Hispanic/Latino, and multiple Latin American castes (i.e. *mestizo/a*, *trigueño/a*, *moreno/a*, *mulato/a*, *indio/a*, etc.). Meanwhile, answers to the last question, which asked how they think other Americans perceive them racially, showed much higher preferences to Hispanic, Black, and white, while specific caste terms were neglected (Cobas et al. 31). This survey

reflects the internal conflict between the attachment to Latin American and U.S. racial constructs. Although these individuals are aware of how Americans classify them racially, Latin American constructs often remain significant in their self-identification processes, indicating their reluctance to embrace their status as Black in the U.S. racial context. Due to the complexity of the shifting definitions of Blackness, Afro-Latin Americans often struggle in their self-identification with Blackness during their transitions from their home countries to the United States.

As shown above, whether out of confusion about unfamiliar racial constructs, hesitation to assimilate to a new country's systems, or remaining caught between the racial parameters of different nations, many Latin American immigrants – Black Latines in particular – struggle to translate their racial identities in their shift from Latin American racial fluidity to U.S. American rigidity.

The Perceived Mutual Exclusivity between Blackness and Latinidad

*“To paraphrase those unforgettable lines from *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), in studying the historical and contemporary experience of the United States Afro-Latin@, one ever feels his three-ness,—a Latin@, a Negro, an American; three souls, three thoughts, three unreconciled*

strivings; three warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

(Jiménez Román and Flores 14–15)

To even begin to acknowledge the complexity of the Afro-Latine identity, the concept of triple consciousness must be understood. This idea expands upon W.E.B. Du Bois's idea of double consciousness, which emphasizes the duality of Blackness and Americanness in African American identity. Triple consciousness applies this logic to Afro-Latinidad, identifying Blackness, Americanness, and Latinidad as the key aspects of Afro-Latine identity in the U.S. Within this concept, Afro-Latines function culturally (or ethnically) as Latine, but socially (or racially) as Black (Rodriguez 10–11). It must be noted that the idea of triple consciousness does not intend to “compete” with African Americans' role in the United States; on the contrary, it works to highlight the experiences of Afro-Latines in the U.S. context that maintains Blackness and Latinidad as mutually exclusive (Rivera 159).² Expanding upon triple consciousness is the “fact of Afro-Latinidad,” which establishes Afro-Latines as distinct from

² Based on the terms that multiple of my sources have used, here I use the term “African American” to describe a Black individual affiliated with Black U.S. American culture, especially descendants of enslaved Africans in the U.S. (Cruz-Jansen; Rivera; Jiménez Román and Flores; García-Louis; Godoy Peñas).

both non-Black Latines and non-Latine Black people (Jiménez Román and Flores 14). However, the United States' racial structure refuses to acknowledge the intersections between Blackness and Latinidad, effectively rendering Afro-Latinidad invisible: "a population and identity field that falls between the classificatory cracks" (Flores and Jiménez Román 326). It is this perceived mutual exclusivity, perpetuated by the strict association between African Americanness and Blackness in the U.S. and the perception of Latinidad/Hispanicity as a distinct race, that keeps Afro-Latinidad invisible and prevents Afro-Latines from fully reconciling the Black and Latine prongs of their triple identity within the United States.

Afro-Latines and Blackness

"Who is black? Can a Puerto Rican be black? Are African Americans the only ones who are black in the United States? These questions seek to interrogate the notion that blackness can only be expressed through a singular lens."
(Eaton-Martínez 5)

Due to the erasure of the Latine presence in the African diaspora, Afro-Latines are disregarded in the United States, leading to their difficulty identifying as Black. In the U.S., an "African American and English-speaking monopoly" on Blackness exists that sidelines other Black

identities, especially Latin American ones, in constructions of America Blackness and discussions of the African diaspora (Flores and Jiménez Román 320; Laó-Montes 120). As a result, visibly Black people in the United States, including Afro-Latines, will often be viewed as African American, while their actual ethnic origins go neglected (Cruz-Jansen 172; Jiménez Román and Flores 447). For example, prominent figures of both Black and Latin American origin — in this case, labor activist Lucy González Parsons and New York Yankees baseball player Reggie Jackson — are often exclusively labeled as African American, demonstrating how Black people are viewed as African American by default (Eaton-Martínez 5). Furthermore, because of this dominant narrative on African American ownership of Blackness, Afro-Latines may believe that they do not qualify as Black in the U.S. context. In her essay in the *Afro-Latin@ Reader*, Vielka Cecilia Hoy provides an example of this phenomenon in an anecdote about her Black Nicaraguan-born cousins filling out her race and ethnicity in the Census. Hoy's cousin, who was raised in Costa Rica, elects to choose "Costa Rican" and "Other" respectively as her ethnicity and race

because she believes that Black in the U.S. meant African American, or U.S.-born (Jiménez Román 427–428). Therefore, because Blackness in the U.S. is so often restricted to African Americanness, U.S. Afro-Latines feel excluded from the Black umbrella, leading many of them to disregard that aspect of their identity.

Other Latines may refrain from identifying as Black in fear of appropriating African Americans' history and culture. Although Afro-Latines may share histories of enslavement in their respective countries similar to that of African Americans in the U.S., these histories must still be recognized as distinct, and although Afro-Latines and African Americans may share a similar phenotype, that appearance does not capture their distinct cultures (Godoy Peñas 24; García-Louis 113). A participant in a study on Afro-Latino males on a college campus shared the following quote:

“[Being] AfroLatino on campus it’s almost like you can’t really call yourself Black because African-Americans have their own history that is separate...and you have to understand that there is a separation and...you can’t claim something that is not necessarily yours. It’s like saying yes we are all Black. Yeah,

the Diaspora aspect is there but not the history” (García-Louis 112–113).

Here, this individual is not outright rejecting his Blackness as Hoy’s cousins do on the Census; rather, he is recognizing how, in the United States, the term “Black” connotes “African American.” By outwardly identifying as Black, he fears that he may co-opt the experiences and histories of African Americans. In this case, it is not disidentification from Blackness as a whole that impedes an Afro-Latine’s self-identification with their Blackness, but rather an attempt to recognize the distinctions between Afro-Latinidad and African Americanness — another example of how the perceived African American monopoly over U.S. Blackness can prevent Afro-Latines from outwardly embracing their Black identities.

Afro-Latines may avoid identifying as Black because of the oppressed position of African Americans in the United States. Likely, many Afro-Latines may not identify as Black or distance themselves from African Americans because of the general stigmatization of non-Hispanic Black Americans, sometimes due to their own anti-African American sentiments (Stokes-Brown 321; “Edlin Veras”

1:02:22–1:03:55). In fact, experiencing discrimination based on one's phenotype is correlated with higher rates of self-identification with Blackness. This suggests that facing oppression in the United States can make Afro-Latines aware of their own Blackness and emphasizes the association of Blackness with lower social status in identity development (Stokes-Brown 312 & 319). This phenomenon is another example of how struggle can spark self-identification with Afro-Latinidad. However, in some cases, these experiences of discrimination may cause an Afro-Latine to resent any potential identification with Blackness. For example, Piri Thomas, an Afro–Puerto Rican, recalls a statement he once made in an argument with his African American friend:

"...I'm beginning to hate the black man, too, 'cause I can feel his pain and I don't know that it oughtta be mine. Shit, man, Puerto Ricans got social problems, too. Why the fuck we gotta take on Negroes', too?" (Jiménez Román and Flores 223).

In Thomas' situation, it is not explicit anti–African American prejudice, but rather a frustration about how Afro-Latines will face discrimination rooted in other groups' histories that turned him away from

identification with Blackness. In either case, it is the overarching oppression against African Americans — and, by extension, all Black people in the United States — that can further complicate Afro-Latine identity development.

Another contributing factor to Afro-Latines' struggle to identify as Black is rejection from African Americans as authentic Black people. Just like non-Latine White Americans, most African Americans do not know the extent of the African diaspora of Latin America or that the diaspora exists at all (Vargas and Kuhl 338). With the cultural and linguistic differences between the two groups, younger African Americans may not understand their and Afro-Latines' relative social standings, and consequently "regard [Afro-Latines] with suspicion, fear, and at times with hostility" (Vargas and Kuhl 338). This magnification of cultural differences can also result in African Americans viewing Afro-Latines as a separate, non-Black race due to their Latinidad — another signal of how Blackness is often seen as the "property" of African Americans in the United States (Jiménez Román and Flores 431; Rivera 159). A prominent example was when Torii Hunter, African American center fielder for

the Los Angeles Angels, made a statement about Afro-Latine baseball players: “People see dark faces out [on the baseball field] and the perception is that they’re African American. They’re not us. They’re impostors” (Rivera 156). Statements like these can invalidate the Blackness of Afro-Latines, which, as previously stated, can already be difficult to claim. In one of his works, poet Roberto Carlos Garcia tells the story of the effect this sort of rejection had on him: when an African American poet tells him, “Oh, you’re not Black black?”, Garcia reflects upon the histories of enslavement that African Americans and Afro-Latines share. That poet negates Garcia’s Black heritage and the oppression that accompanies it (Garcia 20). This invalidation by African Americans widens the schism between Afro-Latines and Blackness that was created by a U.S.-centric definition of Blackness and exacerbates the difficulty of identification with Blackness that Afro-Latines face.

*In “Back to School: (the B side)” in **black**/Maybe: An Afro Lyric by Roberto Carlos Garcia:*

*“You ain’t Black You
think you Black but you ain’t,
you Spanish*

I guess you English

...I know nothing ‘bout no England

*My grandpappy’s massa was from Spain
Your grandpappy’s massa was from
England
So who Spanish?
Who English?”*

In all of these examples, whether due to rejection, out of consideration, or a product of dominant racial narratives, Afro-Latines are continuously sent the same message: Blackness is owned by African Americans and therefore excludes Latines. This misconception ostracizes Afro-Latines, invalidating any effort they may put into embracing their Blackness.

Sidelining within Latinidad

On the opposite side of the Afro-Latine hyphen, U.S. Latinidad has distanced itself from its Afro-descended members primarily by its racialization. Latines have been perceived as a monolithically mixed racial group, especially distinct from and socially inferior to white U.S. Americans, since the mid-1800s — an image that mostly drew from Mexican mestizos, who are mixed-race, especially of Indigenous and white descent (Cobas et al. 4). This image of Latinidad being equated to mestizaje was strengthened by the Chicano movement, when Mexican-Americans took on a singular non-white (and decidedly non-Black) racial identity that leaned

toward Indigenous ancestry (Hernández 155). This supposed racial singularity of Latinidad has been empowered by the Latine panethnicity, which was initially developed in the 1970s and 1980s to gain political clout, and has since come to be perceived as a singular intermediary race between white and Black (Foner et al. 10; Rivera 159). This misconception of Latines as a monolithic racial group, as well as the phenotype associated with this racialization, acts as another obstacle that prevents Afro-Latines from integrating the two prongs of their ethnoracial heritage into a unified identity.

In and of itself, the overgeneralization of the Latine experience automatically ostracizes Afro-Latines from the Latine panethnicity. Latinidad's broadness, despite its potential for political mobilization, fails to accommodate the sheer number of Latines who do not fit the light-skinned mestizo perception of Latinidad (Foner et al. 10; Castillo). In fact, Latine "authenticity" has been equated to racelessness. For example, Latines who do not identify with a race and list Hispanic/Latino as their race on the Census have been referred to as "Hispanic Hispanics," further suggesting that raceless Latines are the ones perceived

as "truly" Latine (Hernández 153; Godoy Peñas 9–10). It has been argued that the need to use this pan-ethnic, racialized view of Latinidad also reduces Latines to an "ethnic singularity," consequently reducing any parts of identity — including race — to background identities (Godoy Peñas 5). In this case, even if a Latine's race is recognized, it is regarded as negligible, consequently denying the duality of Afro-Latinidad as a valid experience within the Latine umbrella. The racialization of Latinidad has also given Latines their own spot on the American racial hierarchy. As a result, those who fit the expected phenotypical image of a Latine face anti-Latine discrimination, affirming the reality of racialized Latines (Foner et al. 11–12). However, it is the collapsing of all Latines into that singular experience that is problematic, isolating Afro-Latines from their own cultural identity.

This oversimplification has permeated mass media and many major American institutions, who increasingly regard the Hispanic/Latino group as completely separate from both whiteness and Blackness, further invalidating Afro-Latine identity (Cobas et al. 8). Moreover, the U.S. Census, even with its responsibility to

accurately track the demographics of the nation, has also treated Hispanic/Latino as a separate race (Cobas et al. 11). It uses the Hispanic/Latino ethnicity question to compare Latines to non-Hispanic Asian, Black, and white Americans, especially pitting them against African-Americans in a race for the largest minority group (Cobas et al. 24; Flores and Jiménez Román, 326). Consequently, the Census uses the Latine panethnicity as a “racial analogy” and puts them in direct opposition to a group, even if they share the same race (Nolasco 7). Making this sweeping analysis that all Latines fall under the same “race” which opposes African Americans disregards the racialized experiences of visibly Black Latines. As a whole, this racialization of Latinidad has reached so far that the Census recently proposed listing Hispanic/Latino as a race, and it has been argued that Latines may eventually become an actual racial category, not just a racialized ethnicity (Godoy Peñas 29; Stokes-Brown 315). Of course, these changes would not change an Afro-Latine’s internal self-identification, but it would separate the interwoven sides of their identity and render the official recognition of their dual identities impossible. At any rate, the

oversimplification of the racially diverse Latine panethnicity results in the sidelining of Afro-Latines within their own community, invalidating any effort they may take in identifying as both Black and Latine.

“Invoking the term Black Latina/o also highlights ‘the inadequacy of the Latin@ concept along with the need to broaden and complicate the notion of Blackness in the United States’ troubling the assumption that Latinidad and Blackness are mutually exclusive.” (Molina-Guzmán 212)

The racialization of Latinidad has also produced a phenotypic model for the “authentic” Latine, which causes visibly Black Latines to not be perceived as Latine, further excluding them from the Latine panethnicity. Typically, Latines are expected to have a Mediterranean-esque appearance — tan- to brown-skinned, dark- and straight-haired, brown-eyed; and “a body type ...ambiguously located... somewhere between whiteness and blackness” — a non-Black (or, at times, anti-Black) image (Rivera 159; García-Louis and Cortes 1; Foner et al. 11; Cobas et al. 8). Either way, visibly Black Latines are typically initially perceived as non-Latine Black at first sight (Nolasco 19). These may be brief moments of ignorance about Afro-Latines, especially since Black-looking Latines are underrepresented TV and K–12

education (Eaton-Martínez 5; Jiménez Román and Flores 465; Adams and Busey 13; Salas Pujols 11; Molina-Guzmán 216). Even non-Black Latines — including those aware of the African diaspora in their countries of origin — mistake Afro-Latines for non-Latine Black people, disregarding Afro-Latine identity (Jiménez Román 456; Hernández 153; Cruz-Jansen 172–173). Either way, the misconception that a Black appearance denies one's Latinidad can make individuals feel insecure about or unaccepted in their Latinidad, to the point that Afro-Latines may perform the Latine cultural/linguistic practices to be seen as “authentically” Latine (Hordge-Freeman and Veras 153–155; Nolasco 9–10, 21–23). This need to be acknowledged as Latine emphasizes the importance of validation in the development of a secure ethnoracial identity, which maintaining the hegemonic phenotype for the “authentic Latine” prevents. Even outside of an individual's internal identification, wrongly assuming an Afro-Latine's ethnic identity due to their appearance forces them into a social position that disregards — and therefore invalidates — their actual identities (García-Louis 113). In each of these cases, Black Latines' Latinidad is denied due to a

misconception of the phenotypic diversity across Latin America unnecessarily disregards Afro-Latines cultural backgrounds and any attempts they make to identify with Latinidad.

“Latinidad...is often used to erase people who don't fit into the narrow definition of what a Latino looks like. Latinos are so much more than one story, one skin tone, or one umbrella identity.” (Castillo)

“Afro-Latino/a identity is a contested terrain in which self-identified Afro-Latino/as are visually viewed as Anglo-Blacks and hence not ‘authentic’ Latinos. Self-identified Afro-Latino/as are inassimilable foreigners who challenge the notion that mestizaje has molded together a racially unique people separate from Anglo-Whites, but more importantly separate from Anglo-Blacks.” (Hernández 153)

Finally, and most simply, the existence of racialized Latinidad allows Latines to racially identify and disregard their own Blackness. Despite the vagueness of the Latine panethnicity, Latines can and do find a sense of belonging within it, especially if they live in a multinational Latine community (Foner et al. 17). Moreover, many Latines buy into the racialization of Latinidad. In a nationally representative survey of U.S. Latines from 2006, 40 percent of the 76 percent of total Latines who list Hispanic/Latino believe that Latine itself is a race (Stokes-Brown, “America's Shifting Color Line?” 313 & 315). In another survey by Pew Research Center, 67 percent of all

Latines and 24 percent of self-identified Afro-Latines listed Hispanic/Latino as one of their races (López and Gonzalez-Barrera). Even individuals and families who have self-identified as Black in the past can eventually adopt a racialized Latine identity (Jiménez Román 147). Thus, in no small part due to this narrative of racialized Latinidad, Afro-Latines can instead opt to racially identify as Latine, enabling them to avoid identification with their Blackness. And, more broadly, the racialization of Latinidad repeatedly works to drive a wedge between Black Latines and all other — especially “authentic” — Latines, negating any change they have to simultaneously and acceptably be both Black and Latine.

“The confusion when filling out the ethnicity category, the dilemma people face when having to choose between White and Black, the different conceptualization of ‘blackness,’ as well as the association between blackness and the U.S. and, therefore, the ‘conversion’ of an Afro-Latino into an African American because [they are] black and [were] born in the U.S., demonstrate the complex identity issues that Afro-Latinos face in the U.S.” (Godoy Peñas 29).

The Impact of Mestizaje: Black Erasure, Denial, & Shame

Beyond the U.S.’s mainstream constructs of race, Latin Americans and the U.S. Latine community have also done their part to distance the Blackness from the Latine

identity. The primary enforcer of Latin America’s Black erasure and denial is the international concept of mestizaje. Mestizaje has been a central racial ideology throughout the nation-building process of various countries across Latin America and has been especially prominent in Brazil, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and Central America (Telles and Garcia 132–135; Jiménez Roman and Flores 429). Across Latin America, mestizaje has used its influence to erase race — especially Blackness — from the Latin American narrative, pulling Afro-Latines away from their racial identities.

Mestizaje and Color-Blindness

In its minimization of racial identity and emphasis on national identity, mestizaje has prevented Afro-Latines from becoming conscious of their race. As Latin American elites formed their nations in the early twentieth century, they sought to foster unified national identities by downplaying individual racial and ethnic identities. Although this homogeneity arguably could produce racial harmony, the fluid racial order of Latin America can prevent individuals from fully developing racial consciousness (Telles and Garcia 132; Jiménez Román and Flores 447). In other

words, mestizaje's overlooking of race may inhibit Afro-Latines from becoming aware of their racial identities. This phenomenon has been carried over to the U.S. by Latin American immigrants: often, they will initially identify primarily with their specific national origin, revealing how mestizaje's prioritization of national identity marks Latin Americans' identity development (Cobas et al. 25). The diminishing of racial identity can also be seen in the previously-mentioned survey on Dominican immigrants' self-identification. When participants were asked how they defined themselves racially, 6.9 percent of them responded "human race/other," and another 5 percent responded "do not know" instead of the various racial (both Black/white binary-based and caste-based) and ethnic terms. This complete disregard for racial identity further reveals the racial unawareness that immigrants from the Dominican Republic — a country with a strong mestizaje narrative — possess (Cobas et al. 31). Overall, mestizaje's attempt to erase race leaves Afro-Latines unaware of, and therefore unable to identify with, their own racial identities.

"The mythical view that the Puerto Rican is the fusion of three races, compounded by the perfunctory declaration that all Puerto Ricans are African on one side or the other ('el que no

tiene dinga tiene mandinga'), has operated to silence, veil, and marginalize Afro-Puerto Ricans...This is why we have seldom come together, as Afro-Puerto Ricans, to define our collective agendas and fight, independently, for our common interests."

(by Afro-Puerto Rican Testimonies: An Oral History Project in Western Puerto Rico, in The Afro-Latin@ Reader 510)

Due to mestizaje's attempt to diminish race, Latines often tend to disregard racism, which prevents Afro-Latines from understanding their racialized experiences. Narratives of mestizaje claim that racial mixing has made Latin America into a harmonious mix of Black, white, and Indigenous populations, and Latines follow that narrative, upholding it as "an exceptionalist and wishful panacea" (Salas Pujols 3; Jiménez Román and Flores 3). Although racism — particularly anti-Blackness — persists in Latin America, many Latines still believe that mestizaje's color-blindness has obliterated racial discrimination, so many Latines remain silent on racism (Nolasco 16–17). As a result, Afro-Latines who have experienced anti-Black prejudice, but are surrounded by Latines who refuse to speak on race, often cannot verbalize their racial identities and racialized struggles. This alienates them from non-Black Latines, erases their experiences as Black people, and leaves

them confused about their racial identity (Nolasco 17). Alternatively, experiencing race-based discrimination despite Latinidad's self-proclaimed color-blindness can often catalyze Afro-Latines' identity discovery (Hordge Freeman and Veras 157). In either case, Afro-Latines struggle through their identity development due to the deceptive color-blindness that Latine mestizaje preaches.

Mestizaje and Black Erasure: Who Is Latine?

“Latino racism, throughout Latin America, Spain, and the United States, begins with the negation of the black presence in history.”
(Cruz-Jansen 174)

The narrative of mestizaje across Latin America has worked to erase Afro-Latines from the region's past and present, discounting the population as a significant — or even existing — part of the community. Instead of being regarded as “another rich color in [Latin America's mixed-race] rainbow,” Black identity has been consistently erased from Latin American history and identity. This “historical amnesia” has allowed for the “collective passing” of Latines as a whole as non-Black, solidifying the perception of Blackness as non-Latine (Jiménez Román and Flores 490–491). This historical erasure is

exemplified in the blatant exclusion of Africans in white/Indigenous-centric mestizaje narratives, such as those in Mexico, Andean nations, and even the significantly Afro-descended nation of the Dominican Republic (Telles and Garcia 134–135). By intentionally rendering Afro-Latines invisible in the racial construct that was essential to building national identity, Afro-Latines are excluded from these Latin American countries' senses of identity. Furthermore, mestizaje attempts to erase the existence of Afro-Latines in a more concrete sense: through *blanqueamiento*, or whitening. During the infancy of modern Latin American nations, nation-building elites believed pseudo-scientific claims that dubbed Black and Indigenous populations as inferior, and therefore impediments to national development. They consequently adopted mestizaje in an attempt to whiten — and, in their minds, improve their countries — and ideals moving Latin America away from Blackness and towards brownness and whiteness have persisted (Telles and García 132; Godoy Peñas 13; Nolasco 4–5). In its effort to pave over the Afro-Latine presence across Latin America, mestizaje serves to widen the imposed

fissure between Black and Latine, forcing Afro-Latines to remain lost in between.

On the interpersonal level, many non-Black Latines often refuse to accept Afro-Latines as a valid part of the community, making it difficult for Afro-Latines to create a community with other Latines. In some cases, Afro-Latinidad may be viewed as insignificant — “a curiosity that [belongs] at the periphery of the nation” — as Afro-Mexican María Rosario Jackson describes (Cruz-Jansen 174; Jiménez Román and Flores 435). In other situations, Afro-Latinidad is regarded as foreign or as an illegitimate piece of Latinidad, while other non-Black Latines still may reject Afro-Latines out of blatant racism (Cruz-Jansen 172; Jiménez Román and Flores 13). As a result, non-Black Latines may regard Afro-Latines as “not Latine enough,” and many Afro-Latines are shunned by other Latines and instead find more community and acceptance within African American spaces (Hordge-Freeman and Veras 154). In more extreme circumstances of Latines’ anti-Black discrimination, Black individuals from Latin American countries may feel so ostracized that they refuse to identify as Latine at all (García-Louis and Cortes 9–10). Through

non-Latines’ refusal to acknowledge Afro-Latines as a valid part of the Latine community, they make Black Latines struggle to belong within their ethnic origins and prevent many individuals from claiming a Latine — and, by extension, Afro-Latine — identity.

Non-Black Latines also erase Afro-Latines by refusing to allow them to be representative of Latinidad, consequently encouraging Afro-Latines to minimize their Black identities. Within mestizaje, mestizos are considered the prototypical citizens, while more distinctly non-white Latines cannot “represent [a Latin American] nation’s greatness” (Telles and Garcia 130; Cruz-Jansen 177). This choice of who represents Latinidad is present in both Latin American and U.S. Latine media. In Latin America, television stars and newscasters are often light-skinned, white-passing, and/or blond-haired and blue-eyed (Castillo). The recently-released *In the Heights* is a movie centered on the Latine diaspora from mostly Afro-descended countries and territories: the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Cuba. Yet, the main and supporting Latine cast appeared mixed and relatively light-skinned, whereas more

unambiguously Black characters were either African American relegated to background characters and extras (Castillo; Chu, *In the Heights*). These larger choices of who and what represents Latinidad translates to the interpersonal, where non-Black Latines will try to convince Afro-Latines that they are not “really” Black. They may tell them that they are not Black like African Americans are, or that they must minimize their Blackness and emphasize their Latinidad to not be confused with African Americans (Hernández 154; Cruz-Jansen 171). These claims not only reinforce the idea that African Americans are the prototypical Black Americans, but also imply that Afro-Latines’ Blackness has no place within Latinidad. Although they do not outwardly reject Afro-Latines as mentioned in the previous paragraph, these non-Black Latines still deny Afro-Latinidad as a valid part of Latinidad and actively try to prevent them from identifying as Black.

“Some Hispanics here don’t want to see you as one of them because you represent everything they do not want to be. They see you as a black person, and they don’t want to be black. They want you to stop saying you’re like them.” (Cruz-Jansen 171)

At any rate, mestizaje takes large-scale steps to erase Blackness from the Latine

narrative. Whether that manifests as denying Afro-Latines’ Black identities or rejecting Afro-Latines as a whole, it works to divide Afro-Latines from both their Blackness and their Latinidad, further complicating their identity development.

Mejorar la Raza and Black Shame & Denial in the Family

As aforementioned, mestizaje originated as an attempt to whiten Latin American nations, and over time, *blanqueamiento* has remained the goal of mestizaje, where “the lower types of the species will be absorbed by the superior...the blacks could be redeemed, and ...by the voluntary extinction, the uglier [Black] stocks will give way to the more handsome [white]” (Telles and Garcia 132; Hernández 153). This often takes the form of family-based *mejorando la raza*, or “improving the race,” an intergenerational effort to whiten families by bearing lighter children, often to promote social mobility in Latin American countries, where light skin provides privilege (Hordge-Freeman and Veras 151; Veras 00:40:15–00:40:35). Family dynamics often serve as a “point of origin” for the racialized messages that shape an individual’s identity development, and *mejorar la raza*’s white supremacist agenda

deeply permeates family structures (Hordge-Freeman and Veras 147). Therefore, *mejorar la raza* must be explored as a major contributor to Afro-Latine identity development. This mission to whiten a family culminates into an effort to distance oneself from or entirely deny one's Blackness, worsening an Afro-Latines' inability to identify as both Black and Latine.

As a result of *mejorar la raza's* pressure to whiten the family, the presence of Blackness in a family brings about shame and therefore makes identification with Blackness more difficult. The practice of *mejorar la raza* has transferred to and even been augmented in the United States: as the U.S.'s Black/white binary system make racial lines grow starker, and the need to "free [the family] of any and all vestiges of African ancestry" grows more powerful (Cruz-Jansen 172). Thus, *mejorar la raza's* requirements grow more severe, where the ideal partner for a Latine — especially a Latina — evolves into a white American (Cruz-Jansen 180). Therefore, the pressure to "marry up" remains across Latin America and the U.S. alike, especially for Afro-Latina women, where marrying a white man will bring acceptance and elevation while

marrying a Black man will bring rejection and disgrace (Cruz-Jansen 169 & 179; Jiménez Román and Flores 179). When, amid all this pressure to whiten the family, a child is born visibly Black, parents' guilt over their failure to racially elevate the next generation is transferred onto the child (Jiménez Román and Flores 273). By being Black in a Latine family, an Afro-Latine is perceived as a hindrance to the clan's intergenerational effort to racially "improve," and if Blackness is presented as an emblem of failure, then how could it possibly be identified with or embraced? Therefore, by emphasizing *mejorar la raza's* importance, Afro-Latines are prevented from fully accepting their own Blackness.

This stigmatization of Blackness continues throughout childhood, further discouraging Afro-Latines from identifying as Black. Narratives of anti-Blackness permeate Latine life: often, the negative connotation that Blackness carries keeps many Afro-Latines from embracing their Blackness (Jiménez Román and Flores 421). These anti-Black messages can take the shape of anti-African American sentiments, the attachment of negative meanings to Blackness in school, malicious jokes about a visibly Afro-Latines' appearance, or even

showing preference to white family members over Black ones (Hernández 156–157; Salas Pujols 5; Jiménez Román and Flores 445–446). As a consequence of this ever-present anti-Blackness, Afro-Latines often have little knowledge of Blackness beyond stigmatization (Garcia-Louis and Cortes 8). Families will consequently push children to reject their Blackness and identify with their Latinidad, preventing Afro-Latine individuals from figuring out their true ethnoracial identities (Hordge-Freeman and Veras 146; Salas Pujols 3). Therefore, due to the rampant anti-Blackness that influences the major parts of Afro-Latine childhood, many Black Latines will remain unaware of or distant from their Black identities.

As a result of this distancing from Blackness, many U.S. Latines have outrightly denied their Blackness in favor of other racial/racialized identities. For example, Black denial was a major source of error that contributed to the low number of Black Latines on the 2010 U.S. Census, and in a Pew Research study, only 18 percent of individuals who identified as Afro-Latine listed “Black” as one of their races (Stokes-Brown 321; Busey and Cruz 297; López and Gonzalez-Barrera). Many

Afro-Latines will take advantage of the racialization of Latinidad and identify racially as Latine or as their nation of origin as a strategy to reject their Black identity; in the same Pew Research study, 24 percent of self-identified Afro-Latines racially identified as Latine (Jiménez Román and Flores 148; Salas Pujols 10; López and Gonzalez-Barrera). Oddly enough, however, Afro-Latines show an even-stronger preference for racially identifying as white than with Blackness or Latinidad, with 39 percent of Afro-Latines doing so in the previously mentioned study (López and Gonzalez-Barrera; Jiménez Román and Flores 487). More studies have shown that even darker-skinned Latines — specifically, Cubans and Puerto Ricans — will identify as white (Jiménez Román and Flores 488–489). As shown by these statistics, rampant anti-Blackness in Latine upbringings can profoundly affect the extent to which Afro-Latines deny their own Blackness and fall short of fully embracing their identities.

Finally, Blackness in Afro-Latine individuals will be primarily rejected as a product of racially charged body politics. As a result of *mejorar la raza*'s agenda to make families mestizo, parental figures

(especially women) in Latine households will “whiten” their children through grooming practices to make them look more mestizo (Salas Pujols 9). Afro-Latines, especially Afro-Latinas, will be taught strategies from a young age to appear whiter: staying out of the sun to keep skin lighter, or avoiding bright lipstick and sucking in lips to make them appear smaller (Hordge-Freeman and Veras 151–152). Hair has especially been cemented as the primary way that Latines “do mestizaje” and hide one’s Blackness; as a result, coily and curly hair are presented as something to be tamed and is often described as messy or unruly with the term “pajón,” which derives from the Spanish word for “straw” (Salas Pujols 9; García-Louis and Cortes 10; Hordge-Freeman and Veras 152). This criticism of Afro-Latinas’ bodies may reach the point where they refuse to recognize the Blackness of their features, and instead take advantage of white/Indigenous-centric racial mixing narratives and attribute these features to Indigeneity (García, *black/Maybe* 13). This constant racialized policing of Afro-Latina bodies simultaneously highlights the strenuous effort of Latines to reject Blackness. This leads to many Black Latines’

disidentifications with a Latine identity that is meant to be a homogenous ethnicity, to the point where accepting dual Afro-Latine identity begins with embracing Black hair types as well as other racialized features (Hordge-Freeman and Veras 153 & 158; García-Louis and Cortes 10). Thus, anti-Black body politics in the Latine community serve to separate Afro-Latines from their Blackness and make them question their belonging in the Latine ethnicity due to their racialized experience. This final piece of the puzzle — attacking the Blackness of Afro-Latinas’ bodies — inhibits many Afro-Latinas from resolving the dissonance between Blackness and Latinidad.

Conclusion

Suffice to say, reaching a point of comfortable identification with Blackness, Latinidad, and Afro-Latinidad is difficult for Afro-Latinas. Even when the term “Afro-Latinx” provides a positive way to describe a person as both authentically Black and authentically Latine, there are years of stigmatization, racism, confusion, and misconceptions to unlearn (Hordge-Freeman and Veras 158). On top of this, Afro-Latinidad is seldom understood by most Americans, so trying to outwardly

self-identify as Afro-Latine is accompanied by long-winded explanations, making the process tiring even once internal confusion has been resolved. As a result, Afro-Latines may settle for understanding themselves and letting others make their own assumptions, even if it means going misunderstood (García-Louis 111). Because the sources of these difficulties with self-identification are so complicated, long-term solutions in the U.S. require aiding Latin Americans in their ethnoracial transitions to the United States and broadening American definitions of Blackness and Latinidad. Even more responsibilities stretch beyond the U.S. to across the globe: increasing Afro-Latine representation, unlearning the white supremacist and colorblind implications of *mestizaje* from Latin America, and destigmatizing and accepting Blackness in Latine communities. However, on the personal level, we can only take small steps. If you tell Latine stories, be aware of the Black members of these communities. If you teach Latin American history, acknowledge the African presence across the region. But, whoever you are, you now know that Afro-Latinidad exists. If someone is Black and Latine, simply accept it. Don't ask or

make unsolicited questions or comments. Accept it as a valid part of the human experience. For Afro-Latines, identifying as who we are is already so difficult. Don't make it any harder.

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