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The Hypocrisy of the “Pigmentocracy”

By
Lucas Rivera

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The question of race and skin color has haunted both the Latino and black communities, with far too many denying any ties to African ancestry—despite darker skin tones. But the choice many Latinos face—as to whether they should call themselves black or white—may be feeding into the hands of strategists, who may be making economic determinations based on the number of people of color.

The choice and how it impacts on society has befuddled the minds of many social researchers and is not unlike the problem of color that blacks in America confront. “My sense is that it hasn’t changed much,” explained Dr. Samuel Betances, a sociology professor at Chicago University who wrote a manifesto on the “Prejudice of Not Having Prejudice.”

“Puerto Ricans and Latinos have a fear of admitting that they are racially mixed. We don’t want to admit we are part of an African legacy. If you ask a Puerto Rican how he would describe himself, as black or white, he would claim he had Indian blood,” Betances said.

Latinos have faced the hypocrisy of color in the United States and especially in Latin America. “In the United States, it’s only based on color. Here, you could have a Ph.D. and you’re still black,” meaning “racism in the United States has no bearing on class or status,” said Digna Peralta, who has been working on a master’s thesis on “Skin Color and Its Impact on Latino Self-Concept.”

Peralta, who is a black woman with chestnut brown skin and almond eyes, has been delving into pigmentation as it relates to the Latino psyche. Peralta came from the Dominican Republic and has found her niche in life in the field of psychology at the City College of New York. According to Peralta, the reasons behind the classifications are contained in the history of Latin America and the Caribbean. “We were colonized by the Spaniards,” she said. The labeling takes place “because of the racial mixing in the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico—the fact that we were African slaves, Indians and Spaniards.”

In the United States, interracial dating is not totally accepted, while “in our country [the Dominican Republic], you have intermarriage,” Peralta continued. Here, she noted, interracial marriages still are frowned upon, whereas in Latin America and the Caribbean, the mixing of races is socially acceptable. She pointed out that people from Latin America or the Caribbean are

suddenly thrown for a loop when they enter this racially divided society. “When a Latino of color has internalized these attitudes it would affect him,” she said. “He’ll find that European features are more valued here.”

Peralta said that she personally has witnessed the harsh racial realities here while walking down the street with her former boyfriend. “My boyfriend was Italian-looking and you couldn’t see he was Puerto Rican,” Peralta recalled. “And we were walking in the street and this black man said, ‘Do you really love her?’ Because they perceived me as their’s. Another time, a man said: ‘Don’t mix the race.’”

During her research, she also discovered that “some Puerto Ricans who identified themselves as white are doing significantly better economically. There was a man named Renzo Sereno who came up with the term *Cryptomelanism*, which is the denial of Negro characteristics in the blood,” Peralta explained, “and he did a study in the 1940s in Puerto Rico and he found that the upper-class Puerto Ricans said they were pure [meaning white] and didn’t have any black blood.”

From that era a very popular poem, written by Fortunato Vizcarrondos, became folklore and was sung like an ode throughout Puerto Rico. It talked about hiding one’s grandmother because she was black. *¿y tu abuela adónde está?* “In a satirical song, a black man pulls the white man to the side and asks, ‘And where is your grandmother?’ because usually she was [being hidden] in

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the kitchen,” Peralta said.

Peralta asserted that “in 1974, Clara Rodriguez, a sociology professor at Fordham University, discovered that [some] Puerto Ricans . . . tend to see themselves as lighter than they are.”

“There are people who have rainbow ideas,” Rodriguez said during an interview with *The City Sun*, adding that she had written a book titled *Puerto Rican: Born in the U.S.* “That’s where people acknowledge their cultural pride—whether it be biracial or triracial. They are very proud of that,” she said. “And there are some people who say they are racially white and culturally Puerto Rican.”

“It’s a real issue that we are not acknowledging our African heritage,” Peralta said, adding that she has been researching the issue of skin color for the past two years. In a comparison between Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, Peralta’s sociological research found that “racial categories in the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico are not only based on color...It also covers cultural values, facial features and your economic status. A Puerto Rican, Dominican Republic and black who could pass as a *trigeño* (a brown-skinned black) and has good economic status will do well.”

Despite all the wrangling over Latino color-

consciousness, the earnings of both blacks and Latinos are lower than those of their white counterparts. Yet the method used by statisticians to come up with the number of Latinos within the United States is debatable. According to 1991 Department of Commerce vital statistics, the median earnings for white males is \$30,266; for blacks it is \$22,075; and for Hispanics it is \$19,771. The statistics for females are dramatically lower. White females make \$20,794; blacks, \$18,720; and Hispanics—ranking lowest—make \$16,244.

Peralta said she believes that society has mirrored these false images—the myth that lighter-skinned blacks and Latinos tend to do better in America. That's why Peralta said she views the whole process involving the Census Bureau as duplicitous. "It's another form of pigeonholing blacks and Latinos," she said. "Americans—in order to view you as a human being—they put you in a category because they put themselves in categories," Peralta exclaimed. "It's like some psychologists say that aside from society, you're nothing, that we are what society makes of us."

One of the bedeviling facts that boggles the mind is the twisted bureaucracy of the Census Bureau, in Suitland, Maryland. In the bureau's Ethnic and Hispanic Branch, which strangely enough does not employ any Latino statisticians, employees recite the statistics, yet offer very little insight. "Every household is given a questionnaire every ten years," said Susan Lapham, a member of the unit. "They fill out one circle for the race of that person—which they consider themselves to be. Another column has a group that asks if you are white. The second choice asks if you are black or Negro. And the third question asks if you are American Indian to print the name of the enrolled or principal tribe. We also collect information on Hispanic groups. You can be Hispanic and you could be black or any race."

"You can see all these novellas on Channel 47 and you won't see someone my color," Peralta confided. "And we have to awaken to the fact that there is a color problem."

The Racial "Pecking Order"

By attaching social classes to dark-skinned people, America has created a wedge between blacks and Latinos. "The pigmentocracy and the racial identification is part of the Latin American and Caribbean experience," explained Howard Jordan, a long-time political activist. "This could be referred to as the Latino form of the color complex."

Jordan has penned a number of columns on black and Latino relations in the United States and he said he believes that the problem is endemic. "You could be *moreno* (black), *jabao* (light-skinned black), a *pelo bueno* (good hair), or a *pelo malo* (bad hair)," Jordan explained, "and usually, if you are lighter you hold higher status in the racial pecking order."

El Negro si no lo hace a la entrada, lo hace a la salida, Jordan said is a mantra-like, folkloric saying, which has become legendary in Puerto Rico and the Caribbean. It means, "If a black doesn't mess up in the beginning, he'll mess it up at the end," he said.

A Drop of White Blood in Latin America Classifies One as White

Jordan claimed that in Latin America and the Caribbean, the racial parody worked in reverse. "Part of the problem is misunderstanding," he said. "Racial definitions in Latin America versus the United States are different. In the United States, if you have a drop of black blood, you're black. In Latin America, if you have a drop of white blood, you're defined as white, which is often referred to as the *blancamiento*, meaning 'whitening.'"

Jordan further asserted that "these two definitions clash because when people from Latin America come here, they operate under the rules of Latin America. So people clash because they see racial identifications differently through a prism. The other part is exacerbated by racism within the Latino community. Whereas Latinos pretend there's no racism in our culture."

"The Lighter the Better" Myth Survives Due to Racism

The political and economic battle between blacks and whites has forced many Latinos in America to face the perplexing question of ethnicity—one that doesn't present the same racist barriers and class distinctions as in Latin America and the Caribbean. The denial of African ancestry in the family line by some darker-skinned Latinos—who might even go so far as to hide their grandmothers in the kitchen—can be studied through an old African axiom, which was incorporated into the Latino culture: *el que no tiene Dinga, tiene Mandinga*. In other words, "If you don't have African blood from one tribe, you have it from another," said Jordan. Hundreds of African folkloric adages have emerged because many white Puerto Ricans failed to acknowledge their black ancestry in Puerto Rico.

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Marta Vega, executive director of the Caribbean Cultural Center-African Diaspora Institute in Manhattan, charged that racism has existed throughout Latino history. Vega said it stems from the British and Spanish enslavement of Africans in the American colonies. "It was the Spaniards and the British who felt their culture was superior and they dominated and oppressed other people. Within Latin America, you have the same mixing of African ancestry here as you do in the United States," argued Vega. "The prevailing notion is that 'The lighter you are—the better you are.' It still continues because of racial self-hate. People of color are treated unequally. Latinos are just as exploited as African-American communities."

Professor Betances worked on an article called "African Americans and Hispanics/Latinos: Eliminating

Barriers to Coalition Building.” In it, he argued that the reason race can’t be the glue for Hispanics or Latinos is, “not only are many Hispanics/Latinos European or Caucasian-looking, but even for the many who are not, there are sociohistorical reasons to the meaning of racial-intercultural mixing that Hispanics/Latinos have given to those experiences.” Betances, in his article, said he believes that skin color and facial features play a big role in American society. “In the case where people from their countries of origin and ethnic communities in the U.S. are very African or Negroid-looking and/or indigenous or their features resulting from racial mix resemble characteristics associated with people of color, their views and interpretation of who they are is likely to be rooted in the cultures of their national heritage rather than in the U.S. American point of view.” He noted further, “African-American oppression took place in a society where white females and white males had each other and depended on each other for building families and communities. The slaves were set apart for exploitation. After the sexual assaults that they inflicted on their female slaves, slave owners felt that they could abandon the victims of their sexual exploitation and abuse.”

Betances also argued that “white folks still had each other. Little if any intermarriage between oppressors and the oppressed took place. Laws prohibited and customs enforced the separation of the races. Two societies emerged. Very little blurring of identities took place. Children of mixed relationships were forced to remain with those who were not mixed. While lighter blacks received some preferential treatment as ‘house Negroes,’ as opposed to ‘field Negroes,’ they were still considered Negroes.”

The issue of skin color is part of a hidden myth, which is deeply rooted in the Latino culture, according to Betances. “Each level of ‘whitening’ was recognized in the society by its particular blend. At times, there were seventeen different categories. The Catholic Church used to give certificates of ‘pure white’ heritage, since records of marriages and births were kept for religious purposes,” he said.

“Are Hispanics or Latinos racist?” he asked. “Yes, to the degree that the culture has internalized a lot of values imported and/or invented to accommodate the conquest of indigenous Indians and the enslavement of Africans. It would be fair to say that amongst Hispanics/Latinos there is not so much an obsession to become white as a desire not to be black.”

One Man in the Middle of the Racial Conflict

William Bastian, who is a trigeño Puerto Rican who works as a social worker for the Department of Social Services, has fought all his life against racism. “From my personal experience, I always had an identity,” Bastian said. “And I always had to fight a little harder for what I got.”

Bastian, whose girlfriend is Jewish, said he has experienced subtle segregation in New York, especially in the city’s restaurants. “She invites me to certain restaurants and before I go into these restaurants, I look to see if there are people of color,” he said.

Bastian said he remembered going to Puerto Rico and experiencing undercurrents of racism on the island. “The first time I went to Puerto Rico, I was twenty-eight years old and I went to one of the fiestas in San Juan and I felt very uncomfortable among my own people,” Bastian said. Later, “I went to a fiesta in Loiza Aldea [a barrio in Puerto Rico], which is predominately darker Puerto Ricans. I had a better time because of the balance of color. They seemed to want to have a good time and they were more free,” he said.

But Bastian, while affected by the subtler forms of discrimination, has a job. According to the unemployment figures for blacks and Hispanics, during the first quarter of 1993, blacks made up 15.2 percent of the unemployed while the figure for Hispanics was 16.4 percent.

Although Bastian holds a job, he said he hasn’t bowed to any racial pressures. But he has heard countless tales of Puerto Ricans who—according to the old song—have tucked away their grandmothers in the back of the kitchen because they were too embarrassed to deal with the truth of their African ancestry.

Lucas Rivera is a writer with *The City Sun*, a New York City metropolitan weekly newspaper. A graduate of American University, he previously worked for the *Daily News*.