Latinegras: Desired Women--Undesirable Mothers, Daughters, Sisters, and Wives

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Latinegras

Desired Women—Undesirable Mothers, Daughters, Sisters, and Wives

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Latinegras are Latinas of obvious black ancestry and undeniable ties to Africa, women whose ancestral mothers were abducted from the rich lands that cradled them to become and bear slaves, endure the lust of their masters, and nurture other women's children. They are the mothers of generations stripped of their identity and rich heritage that should have been their legacy. Latinegras are women who cannot escape the many layers of racism, sexism, and inhumanity that have marked their existence. Painters, poets, singers, and writers have exalted their beauty, loyalty, and strength, but centuries of open assaults and rapes have also turned them into concubines, prostitutes, and undesirable mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives.

Latinegras are marked by a cruel, racialized history because of the shades of their skin, the colors and shapes of their eyes, and the textures and hues of their hair. They are the darkest *negras*, *morenas*, and *prietas*, the brown and golden *cholas* and *mulatas*, and the wheat-colored *trigueñas*. They are the light-skinned *jabás* with black features and the *grifas* with white looks but whose hair defiantly announces their ancestry. They are the Spanish-looking *criollas*, and the *pardas* and *zambas* who carry indigenous blood.

Latinegras represent the mirrors that most Latinos would like to shatter because they reflect the blackness Latinos don't want to see in themselves.[1] I am a Latinegra, born to a world that denies my humanity as a black person, a woman, and a Latina; born to a world where other Latinos reject me and deny my existence even though I share their heritage. As Lillian Comas-Diáz writes, the combination of race, ethnicity, and gender makes Latinegras a "minority within a minority."[2] Racism and sexism have been with me all my life. I was raised in Puerto Rico during the 1950s and 1960s, and lived on and off in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s. Today, I still live in both worlds, and most of the gender and race themes I grew up with remain. This essay is my personal and historical narrative of the intersection of racism and sexism that has defined my life and that of other Latinegras.

SOMOS UNA RAZA PURA/PURA REBELDE
(WE ARE A PURE RACE/PURE REBEL)

"Aquí, el que no tiene inga, tiene mandinga. El que no tiene congo, tiene carabalí. ¿Y pa'los que no saben ná, tu abuela a'onde está?" This popular expression reveals what most Latinos throughout Latin America, and particularly in the Caribbean, know but wish to hide. It attests to the broad racial mixing that exists as well as to its denial. It states: "Here, those who don't have Inga, have Mandinga. Those who don't have Congo, have Carabali. And those who claim not to know, where's your grandma at?" The Ingas, or Incas, were indigenous Indians. Mandingas and Congos were Africans. Carabalis were runaway slaves, both African and indigenous Indians, feared for their rebelliousness. The question, "Where is your grandmother at?" publicly mocks the hypocrisy of white-looking persons who conceal their blackness and deny their ancestral black mothers.

Such expressions permeated my childhood and revealed the many contradictions of my world. Growing up biracial in Puerto Rico, I became aware of Latino racism at a very young age. As the child of a white Puerto Rican mother, whose family counted their drops of pure Spanish blood and resented our dark presence, and a very prieto (dark black) Puerto Rican father, I became aware of the social and economic gulf that prevails within this purportedly harmonious, integrated society. My paternal grandparents were educated, considered middle-class, and lived in a white neighborhood of paved streets and nice homes. Theirs was a neat wooden house with electricity, indoor plumbing, and a telephone. A large concrete balcony and front fence were decorated with ornamental wrought iron. Grandma kept a beautiful front flower garden. They were the only blacks in the neighborhood, always conscious of their neighbors' watchful and critical eyes. We were careful never to set foot outside the house unless we were impeccably groomed. In contrast, the rest of my father's family lived in a predominantly black slum on the outskirts of town. In that neighborhood, everyone was *puro prieto* (pure black). The dirt streets, the dilapidated houses, the numerous domestic and farm animals running loose, and the lack of electricity and sanitary facilities unequivocally punctuated the differences.

My siblings and I were raised in predominantly white neighborhoods and moved back and forth between two realities that seemed worlds apart. I do not recall a time when both sides of the family got together. Teachers and other adults in the community openly commented to me and my siblings that my mother had disgraced her family by marrying a black man while my father had elevated himself and his family by marrying a white woman. It was then that I learned how identity labels reveal the rancor of white Latinos toward

Latinos of obviously nonwhite heritage. White Latinos are light-skinned Latinos who are usually the product of racial mixing, who profess white racial purity, and who are usually accepted as white ("social white"). While my father's family called me trigueña, signifying a "step up" from being black, my mother's called me negra (black) and mulata, signifying a step down from being white. On one side of the family we were *negros finos* (refined blacks), while on the other side we were *una pena* (a disgrace, sorrow, and shame). Both sides of the family continually judged our looks; whoever had the most clearly defined white features was considered good-looking. I was constantly reminded to pinch my nose each day so it would lose its roundness and be sharper like those of my brothers and sisters. My younger sister was openly praised for her long flowing hair while I was pitied for my *greñas* (long mane of tangly hair). I felt fortunate, though, that at least it was long and not considered *ceretas* (short and knotty, like raisins).

When I was four my father took me to my first day of school. Later, when my mother came to pick me up and I jumped up happy to see her, my teacher exclaimed, "That can't be your mother. That woman is white." Sadly I realized for the first time that I was not like my mother or a lot of other people around me, including classmates and teachers. I recall holding hands with my parents, thereafter comparing skin colors, seeing that I was not like either one of them. Anxiously I realized that our different skin colors would always be an issue. I recall the cruel taunts of classmates, adults, and even teachers who called me *negativo,* meaning photo negative, because, while I resembled my mother, they joked that we were opposites. They often called me *Perlina* (pearly white), referring to a bleaching detergent with the picture of black children dressed in white on the label. Peers teased that I was *una mosca en un vaso de leche* (a fly in a glass of milk) because I stood out among them. They also teased that my father was *retinto* (double-dyed black) and *moyeto,* meaning black and ugly. I was reminded repeatedly that my destiny could have been crueler. At least I was not pura prieta. At best I was *mejorando la raza* (improving the race). It was my duty to maintain and promote that improvement. These and other abuses made me sad not to be like my mother but quite relieved not to be like my father.

In retrospect, I realize that having a white mother was an asset. Our mother was easily accepted in the community, whereas our father was not. As public ambassador of the family, Mami dealt with neighbors and negotiated many opportunities for us, especially at school. She always managed to place us with the advanced students. I learned that a black mother would not have been very powerful because Latinegras have been socialized, through generations, to accept their inferiority to all men and whites. As occupants of the lowest rungs

on the social ladder, they are looked down upon, expected to be docile, subservient, uneducated, and ignorant. I always sensed others' resentment toward Papi (Father), especially by white men. Latino men challenge each other's machismo constantly, even in unspoken ways, and the authority of a black man is not accepted on equal terms. They commented to me that Papi thought himself *parao* (uppity), *presumío* (presumptuous), and *alzao* (elevated) because he married a white woman. The presence of an educated, successful, and very dark black man was threatening and simply not welcomed. I dreaded my father's presence in public because he didn't elicit the warmest of responses and was only superficially treated with respect. Behind his back, peers, teachers, neighbors, and other adults called him *negro come coco* (coconut-eating black man) an expression alluding to a popular cartoon that depicted a very dark monkey eating coconuts on a palm tree. It was clear to me that they were mocking my father for marrying a white woman.

When we moved to the United States mainland in the 1960s, concerned Latino friends advised me to emphasize my Latinness and to downplay my African traits to avoid being confused with African Americans. Some teachers advised that I might as well be black because I would be treated like one by white Latinos and mainstream white Americans. They felt that I should prepare myself for what inevitably awaited me. Fearful, I deliberately spoke with a Spanish accent even though schools kept placing me in speech courses; I learned to use a fan gracefully, and wore my hair long and straight. Many Latinos overtly distanced themselves from me by calling me morena (Moorish black), a derisive term reserved for dark-skinned blacks, especially African Americans.

Time has passed, but the realities of such racism remain constant. Two years ago a Latino educator in Colorado told me that I was not one of them: "Hispanics are from Spain. You are not Hispanic. Everyone knows you're black." At a Latino meeting where I raised concerns about the educational needs of African American children, I was addressed with contempt: "You ought to know; you're black like them." A Latina friend explained, "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."

Prior to 1976, persons from Latin America in the United States were referred to as Latinos. Then the term "Hispanic" was introduced, purportedly to classify all persons from Spain, Latin America, and their compatriots and descendants within the United States. "Hispanic" has come under intense criticism as a label that exalts and promotes whiteness by focusing on the

Spanish-speaking white European Spaniard as the ideal "Hispanic."[3] Hispanic connotes a homogeneous race and dilutes the black, Indian, and mestizo combinations that comprise this group of people. The term "Latino" also represents European Spaniards but is more inclusive of those Latin Americans who speak Spanish than those who do not.

In the United States blacks are usually identified as African American, and they are often considered the racialized group most discriminated against.[4] For Latinos, to be black in the United States is a perceived liability.[5] Regardless of skin color and physical appearance, in the United States one drop of nonwhite blood makes the person 100 percent nonwhite, while in Latin America one drop of white blood makes the person whiter, or at least no longer black or Indian.[6] In Latin America "racial impurity" can be "cleansed" and "expunged" in ascending stages; in the United States racial "impurity" designates the person and his or her future generations as unfit and undesirable.[7] In a society where "color supersedes ethnicity and culture,"[8] black Latinos in the United States find themselves identified as African Americans by both whites and Latinos.[9] The more Latinos become immersed in the racial ideology of the United States, the sharper and more unyielding the black/white dichotomy becomes, and the more powerful is their need and desire to free themselves of any and all vestiges of African ancestry.[10] Many Latinegros try to deny their blackness and identify themselves as Hispanic like their European compatriots.

Two years ago at a conference in California I got on an elevator with two Latinas who, upon seeing me, switched their conversation from English to Spanish. When I asked them a question in flawless Spanish, they seemed surprised and remarked, "You don't look Latina!" They attempted to conceal their embarrassment and explained their surprise by telling me, "*Nosotros tenemos personas como usted en nuestro país*" (We [Latino whites] have persons like you [Latino blacks] in our own country). Since few black Latinos from Latin American countries besides Puerto Rico are financially or legally able to migrate to the United States, these Latinas assumed that I was African American, which simultaneously meant that I could not be Latina like them. I found their explanation neither comforting nor flattering as it clearly asserted their differences and distance from all Latinegros and me. It reaffirmed my belief that Latinos in the United States prefer to deny my legitimate group membership. Their subtle, yet powerful, implication asserts that Latinegros are not true compatriots in their respective countries or in the United States. Within their native countries and within Latino groups in the United States, Latinegros live as "foreigners of both locations."[11] "You don't look Latina/o [or Hispanic]" is something Latinegros hear often not only from white Americans

but from other Latinos as well. It is another example of how Latinegros' ethnicity is repudiated.[12]

In the face of such repudiation the term Latinegro has been gaining currency among Latinos of African ancestry for several decades. The term emerged closely linked to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and has become an empowering affirmation of Latinegros' legitimacy as Latinos. The term represents indisputable proof that not only have blacks not disappeared from the Americas but they also demand their integral place among all Latinos.

Upon entering Cornell University in 1968, I tried joining several Latino student organizations. When that failed, I tried to establish a club for Puerto Ricans. It became apparent that Puerto Ricans from the island and those from the United States mainland did not view themselves in the same way. Puerto Ricans from the island did not want to be perceived as black and rejected me as well as mainland Puerto Ricans, quite shamelessly. In contrast, Puerto Ricans from the United States mainland saw their strength through unity with African American students. Many flaunted even the minutest African heritage with Afro hairstyles and African clothing. I severed ties with most Latinos from Latin America, including Puerto Rico, and sought out the African and African American communities. I styled my hair in an Afro and began wearing African clothes. I found myself in a constant struggle to find my identity. I felt obliged to prove my blackness to other African Americans, even when they looked just like me. I was the victim of jokes because my hair would not stay up, and, called "flat-top" and "lame-fro." I tried all sorts of styling chemicals; I even wore hairpieces and wigs. Finally, I cut my hair as short as possible. Repeatedly, African Americans told me that I must be ashamed of my African heritage because I tried to conceal it by claiming to be Latina and speaking Spanish. They insisted that blacks were foremost a single people, regardless of where they found themselves or what languages they spoke. I was accused of thinking myself superior, on one hand, and mocked as inferior for being impure and carrying the "blood of the Devil," on the other. I grew ashamed of my white heritage, prevented my mother from visiting me on campus, and worked hard to keep a dark tan. Eventually I stopped visiting Puerto Rico; I married an African American who planned to live in Africa, and I thought of adopting a traditional African name.

The culmination of my search for a legitimizing identity came when I visited Africa, "the homeland." Ironically, the search that took me halfway across the world brought me right back home. What began as a journey to establish my identity proved instead to be a dead end—I was not, nor could I ever be, an African: I was a Latinegra living among Africans in Africa. I further confirmed that I was not an African American. I had never felt so distant from

my physical and psychological center. While in Africa, I could not celebrate the return to my roots because of a persistent fear of not knowing where I really belonged. I mourned the loss of all I had known myself to be, longed for the place that truly felt like home, and I resented the people who would not allow me to share a Latino home with them. The anger and frustration within me erupted, and I swore never again to allow others to tell me what I was or was not. I came back determined to claim and uphold a legitimate and rightful sense of self.

Today, I affirm proudly that I am a Latinegra whose African ancestors were brutally extracted from a distant place and time and experienced historical realities no African who stayed behind could have ever fathomed. I am a Latinegra, a black Latina whose African heritage stands as an indelible stamp on my life. I am a Latinegra who will no longer accept the rejection and scorn of others, especially from those Latinos who share my origins.

NO HAY MOROS EN LA COSTA
(THERE ARE NO MOORS [BLACKS] ON THE COAST)

Many Mexican Americans have told me over the years that there are no blacks in Mexico. I puzzled over this, and, although I often suspected some individuals of having African heritage, I believed that there were no blacks in Mexico until I visited. I was quite surprised to meet obvious Latinegros in Guadalajara and other large cities. They openly welcomed me and told me about the many Latinegros throughout Mexico and the blatant hostility and racism against them. Nevertheless, Argentines, Mexicans, and other Latinos often state that blacks either no longer exist or are not a visible force in their nations and societies.[13] Many Latinos still have African bloodlines. Most Latin American countries do not maintain demographic data segregated by race, but it has been estimated, for example, that as many as 75 percent of the population of Mexico, Cuba, and Puerto Rico have African heritage.[14] Throughout Spain, across the Caribbean, from Mexico and all the way down to Argentina, Spaniards took great numbers of Africans. Although most blacks were brought as slaves, many were free.[15] In most Latin American countries, Africans rapidly comprised a significant portion of the total population. In many Latin American countries, Africans were rapidly assimilated through interracial unions, but dark-skinned Latinegros are still visible.[16]

I have come to the realization that Latino racism, throughout Latin America, Spain, and the United States, begins with the negation of the black presence in history. Whites in Latin America, and wherever African and indigenous slavery existed, have been responsible for writing history. Historical amnesia across Latin America, reflected in census counts and historical ac-

counts have systematically minimized or completely obliterated the presence and contributions of blacks. The darker the Latino, the greater the oppression of his or her existence and linkages to other Latinos.[17] Several authors make accusations of historical and systematic obliteration of the existence of Latinegros across Latin America. Even today, *blanqueamiento* (whitening of the race) remains the key to personal and national advancement, while darkening of the race is "blamed for everything from poverty and underdevelopment to the whole sorry history" of all Latin America and the Caribbean.[18] Many Latinos struggle with acceptance of their own blackness while accusing and mocking each other for having black ancestry. Few publications ever comment on Mexican muralist Diego Rivera's African heritage.

While proclaiming racial democracy and integration, most Latin American countries simultaneously institute and maintain social, economic, and political structures that continue to disenfranchise their African and indigenous populations. Even Brazil, which openly recognizes many racial gradations with accepted terms for each, and other countries like Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and Puerto Rico do not count their black or interracial populations. This has enabled them to diminish and conceal the African influence and even the existence of very dark-skinned Latinegros, who remain on the margins of society. A tour of any one of these countries reveals that socioeconomic status and implied "fluid" racial classifications are very much racial in nature. The social, economic, and political isolation of blacks has contributed to the invisibility of Latinegros in these countries.

Many Latin American countries endorse policies of *negritud* (negritude or blackness), *mestizaje* (racial mixing), and blanqueamiento (whitening). French-speaking Haiti, for example, where the majority of the population is black, is the only Latin American nation to endorse open policies of *negritud*, or affirmation of a black identity.[19] Negritude is the affirmation of a black heritage grounded in the unique historical antecedents of the nation. It promotes black racial pride with increased economic, political, and social linkages to other African nations and all global black populations.

Mestizaje represents an interracial heritage manifest in white and indigenous unions. Many Spanish-speaking Latin American countries, and significantly Mexico, call themselves nations of mestizos but forget their African bloodlines. Even Latin American scholars endorse the doctrine of two "worlds," the Spanish and the indigenous, meeting on American soil.[20] The concept of mestizaje sheds light on the historical rejection of Latinegros within most Latino cultures. Many Latinos, aware of their interracial heritage, may admit to their indigenous legacy, the mestizo, but few will admit to a black ancestor. The black/African identity becomes suppressed, the words negro and moreno become equated with dark-skinned indigenous Indians, and national mother-

hood is presented through indigenous women. Mestizo, therefore, becomes the acceptable identity. My father's birth certificate defines him as mestizo even though both of his parents, my grandparents, are puros prietos.

The policies of blanquemiento, prevalent in most Latin American countries, blatantly promote complete commitment to the elimination of all nonwhite ancestral traces, particularly those who are African/black. Blanqueamiento affirms the perceived superiority of whites coupled with the perceived inferiority of all others, with blacks and indigenous persons at the bottom. This doctrine endorses racial mixing aimed at whitening the national populace. It endorses concealment and denial of blackness. It promotes the infusion of new white bloodlines through immigration from European nations, while it encourages emigration of blacks and persons of apparent racial mixing and restricts black immigration. Several African American acquaintances, even some married to native Mexican citizens, have tried to migrate to Mexico but have been denied permanent resident and/or citizen status.[21]

While it could be argued that education confers social mobility and greater status to Latin Americans of black and indigenous heritage, it cannot be denied that being, or becoming, anything other than black is preferable. Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and Cubans, groups known for their apparent African ancestry, often joke, "There are more Indians today than when Columbus arrived."

The most blatant manifestation of Latino racism is denial. Many Latin Americans have even proclaimed the myth of racial integration and harmony along with the primacy of cultural identity over race. Indeed, many Latinos claim that their native countries or communities in the United States do not perceive race and racism as issues of concern. According to the North American Congress on Latin America, *The Black Americas, 1492–1992, Report on the Americas*, the "pervasive litanies" of Latin American color blindness and racial democracies belie the reality that "blatant discrimination continues to plague" the descendants of the millions of African slaves brought to the Americas.[22] Indeed, George Andrews Reid further asserts that racial inequality is endemic in Latin America.[23]

MADRE PATRIA (MOTHER COUNTRY)

I wanted to be the Virgin Mary for the community Christmas celebration when I was in third grade in Puerto Rico. A teacher quickly informed me that the mother of Christ could not be black. A girl with blond hair and blue eyes was selected for the role, and I was a shepherd. In middle school, also in Puerto Rico, for a school play I was assigned the role of a house servant. Only children of black heritage played the slaves and servants. A white student with

a painted face portrayed the only significant black character; all the other characters were white. I learned then that nonwhites could not represent the nation's greatness but could only serve as servants and slaves to the great white leaders. The strongly gendered nature of many Latino cultures, particularly those directly derived from Spain, add other enduring and significant contradictions to the Latinegra experience. Whereas my Spanish heritage taught me that women are weak and dependent, my African heritage taught me that women are strong and self-reliant. African women flourished in spite of the despair of their lives to emerge as enduring forces of cohesion and cultural transmission. My grandmother would often remind us that we were *negros finos y orugullosos* (refined [lightened] and proud blacks). As proud as she was of our racial mixing she was equally insistent that we know our heritage. Regularly, she shared stories of our "accomplished" ancestors, especially those with education, economic well being, and social integration within the white world.

Mothers are important in Latino cultures and are visible proof of matrilineal racial lines that cannot be concealed. Motherhood is also a paramount value within doctrines of nationalism, patriotism, and racialism endorsed by most Latino nations. Many countries around the world, including the United States and most in Latin America, revere motherhood and honor women's roles as creators and nurturers of the nations' past, present, and future. These national ideologies merge the powerful concepts of nationalism and patriotism with womanhood and motherhood to create a icon that defines and portrays these nations as inclusive of heritage both internally and to the outside world.

In Spanish, country of origin becomes *madre patria*, combining female and male symbolism. Literally, *madre patria* becomes mother of the fatherland and, ultimately, mother of the nation. In this context, nationalism and patriotism, without diminishing national patriarchy, legitimize women as bearers and nurturers of powerful men and nations. A complete national identity requires a mother. However, this powerful national icon cannot be the black/African woman. The Latinegra cannot be the representative of the national icon of motherhood because of what she historically represents to the nation—slavery and misogyny.[24]

CADA OVEJA CON SU PAREJA (EVERY SHEEP WITH ITS PARTNER)

A middle school teacher, who was also a family friend, punished a white classmate for dating a puro prieto. The school threatened to inform her parents whom she was going out with, and they were certain to be outraged. I recall sitting in the classroom after school with my inconsolable friend and the

teacher, a so-called friend of my parents', debating the unfairness and hypocrisy of the situation. The teacher warned, "*Cada oveja con su pareja*," an admonition that interracial marriages are frowned upon even by the Catholic Church. We are all "*ovejas de Dios*" (God's sheep), she preached, but I felt this superficial social acceptance merely concealed deeply ingrained racial prejudices and rejection.

Family lines and marriage are significant in a culture that has historically included extended families as well as genealogical and cultural connections through *compadrazgo*, or the joining of families through oaths of honor, loyalty, and support. While often unspoken, it is understood that the presence of blacks within a family drastically reduces its options in life. Options are very limited for Latinegros/as. There exists a sociocultural glass ceiling for Latinegros, and particularly for Latinegras. General cultural devaluation of females sets Latinegras additionally at risk. Because of the greater status and patriarchal authority bestowed on all males, regardless of race or social status, Latino cultures are more forgiving of blackness in males.[25]

Educational and career opportunities for Latinegros remain limited. In many Latino countries most Latinegros do not have access to a secondary school education or college. Many Latinegros, and particularly Latinegras, see education, even a limited one, as the only way out of a cruel, predetermined path. Although most lack financial resources and reside in areas with poorly staffed and funded schools, those who can pursue an education do so in part to avoid the most humbling servile jobs. Most dark-skinned persons work in menial low-paying jobs; positions that require a "good appearance" or contact with the public such as receptionists, bank tellers, or secretaries tend to be closed to them. Lighter-skinned Latinegros have better opportunities because they are favored over the darker-skinned ones.

While one of the few options available for Latinegras seeking an education and career is teaching, Mami did not want us to be teachers because in Puerto Rico, as in other Latin American countries, black teachers tend to be assigned to rural schools as opposed to city schools.[26] Rural populations tend to be poorer and have greater racial mixing.[27] Nevertheless, Mami emphasized education and prohibited my sisters and me from doing any service-oriented work, even baby-sitting, outside of our immediate family and close friends. I always found it odd that as my girlfriends grew older their household responsibilities increased, caring for younger siblings, cooking, and laundering; our mother, on the contrary, did not teach my sisters and me many household skills. Today, I understand that she planned it that way. It remains the practice to keep Latinegras, especially educated ones, out of sight and out of mind as it is still believed that an educated Latinegra is, unquestionably, *buscando*

pa'rriba (searching to move up) by marrying a white man. Stories of pregnant Latinegras abandoned by white men abound, and Mami did not want her daughters distant and alone in a very dangerous world.

In addition to a proper education, Latinegras must also find a proper marriage situation. I often overheard my mother's relatives asking, "*¿Y cómo las vas a casar?*" (How are you going to get them married?). Clearly, getting us *bien casadas* (properly married) was problematic. Apparently this was not as great a concern with my brothers. Within many Latino groups, it is more acceptable and less threatening to marry a Latinegro than a Latinegra. If a Latinegra is dark-skinned, she is less socially acceptable and is considered more likely to bring the family down.[28] Properly married meant not only getting us legally married, but also married to an acceptable and upwardly mobile family. Parents prefer that sons and daughters marry "light."[29] I was constantly reminded of my responsibility, my duty, to continue the family *echando pa'lante* (moving ahead) by marrying someone lighter, hopefully someone white. In many Latin American countries white Europeans, including U.S. mainstream white Americans, have always been highly admired, and marriage to them is encouraged. To marry a white person, especially a Spaniard, European, or white American, is *dando pa'rriba* (moving up); to marry a darker person is *dañar la raza* (damaging to the race).

Although black women are coveted sexually, they are rejected as acceptable wives—the darker the skin color and apparent Negroid features, the less acceptable the women.[30] Brown-skinned mulatas and wheat-colored trigueñas are feared within white social circles because of their white racial bloodlines. Although viewed as lesser wives and mothers than white women, mulatas are nevertheless perceived as better marriage partners than black women. It is shameful enough to admit to a black concubine in the family, but to actually bring a black woman into the family through the sanctity of marriage is an unbearable public nightmare to many whites. Latinegras thus represent a real threat to the family's purity and public *honra* (honor).

"Social" whites also fear Latinegras because of *requintamiento,* or the appearance of apparent African traits that can manifest themselves in the fifth and subsequent generations. Literally translated, *requinto* refers to a return in the fifth generation. Whites with known or suspected black bloodlines fear having children with other mulattos for this reason. Racial mixing, even remote, may *requintar* in their children, grandchildren, or great-grandchildren if they marry other nonwhite Latinos.[31] *Requinto* is a pejorative term for persons who are sometimes jeered as *mulatos blancos* (white mulattos), people whose parents look white but have passed on detectable African features to their children. Families that bear a requinto are ridiculed as *tapujos* (lies) and

chayotes, after a fruit, white inside and out, with a rough and prickly surface, said to resemble requintos "*con los pelos paraos*" (with hairs standing up). This is a cruel reminder that whiteness inside and out can still fail to hide blackness.

Many light-skinned Latinos attempt to conceal their nonwhite ancestors. For this reason, Latino cultures are deeply immersed in secrets. What is not stated is the fear that open discussions about race and racism may unveil personal and family mysteries. Another popular expression, "*Hasta en el mantel más fino cae la mancha* (The stain falls even on the finest tablecloth)," underlies the common fear that la mancha spares no one. A number of stories I hear from other Latinegras confirm the extent of this fear. A twenty-six-year-old Latinegra I know confessed that white Latino men did not consider her attractive enough to date openly.[32] She reported that they would be her friend; they would have a clandestine affair; but open courtship and marriage was out of the question. Within her family, this Latinegra lived a different life from her mother, a "very white-looking" Mexican. Her mother was accepted as a Mexican American, while she was not. Latinos in her community constantly reminded her that she was not one of them: "I was looked down upon because I thought I was Mexican. They'd make fun of my hair. My skin is too dark. The boys especially, they'd let me know they didn't think I was attractive." She added: "The Mexican girls were really mean—evil. They would let me know verbally that I wasn't Mexican like them." Further, this Latinegra explained her willful refusal to learn Spanish because, as a Spanish-speaker, she feared the Latino community's even crueler repudiation.[33]

This year I was told by a twenty-two-year-old Puerto Rican Latinegra, whose father is a white Latino and whose mother is a black Latino, that her paternal family still refuses to accept her parent's marriage and children. The family discord reached the point that forced her parents to move to the United States. She added, visibly pained, that her lighter-skinned siblings are accepted "just a little bit more."

In addition, a twenty-six-year-old white Latina of Mexican American ancestry recently told me that her family did not approve of her engagement to an African American. Her family did not approve of her having dark-skinned children, particularly African American, and felt publicly dishonored and humiliated. In her words, her family had worked hard to "be white," or "as white [white American] as possible." To marry another Latino was acceptable but not as good as marrying a white American. Marrying a Latinegro was "stepping down." Marriage to an African American was the "worst that could be done," definitively "going beneath" herself and lowering the status of the entire family.

In contrast, when a Latinegra marries well, there is no end to the family's

happiness. Two years ago I attended the wedding of a young Latinegra of Panamanian and Colombian parents to a mainstream white American. Her parents held an elaborate, very public, and expensive wedding to proclaim their daughter and family's good marriage and fortune. They could not wait to see the *precioso* (beautiful), *blanquito* (white) grandchildren they were going to have. Last year I attended the wedding of a twenty-four-year-old white Mexican American woman to a Spaniard from Madrid. The woman's family was very proud, and her parents began to plan their first trip to Spain to see the madre patria. Ironically, this family had ancestors in Mexico but none they could name in Spain. Last month a Latina colleague chose to spend several months in Spain. When asked why not a visit to a Latin American country, her response was a contemptuous, "What for? I haven't lost anything there." As I walked through campus recently, I met a Latinegra who told me that her brother had gone to Africa to "find his roots," upsetting the entire family. It seems some things never change.

Rejection of black Latinos by their own compatriots has intensified over the years, in Latin America as in the United States.[34] Latinegros know the reason: Africa is alive in all Latinos; the African blood that runs through my veins also runs deeply through the veins of all Latinos everywhere. Africa's blood clamors in the Spanish flamenco, resonates in the Mexican corrida, palpitates in Mexico's *La Bamba*, and laments in the Argentinian tango. It is alive in Diego Rivera's paintings. It calls to us in today's popular salsa sounds from the Caribbean. Just as earth is mother to us all, Africa is Latinos' other mother, *la querida* (mistress), *la concubina* (concubine), the exploited black woman, the mother of children whose patrimony cannot be denied. All Latinos, but especially Latinegras, must recognize racism as a source of oppression in their lives. Awareness is the first step in any personal change, and only through awareness can Latinegras develop the consciousness and subjectivity they will need to claim social, economic, and political empowerment.

NOTES

1. Lillian Comas-Díaz, "LatiNegra: Mental Health Issues of African Latinas," in *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier,* ed. Maria P. Root (Thousand Oaks CA: Sage Publications, 1996): 167–90.

2. Comas-Díaz, "LatiNegra," 169.

3. Jack D. Forbes, "The Hispanic Spin: Party Politics and Governmental Manipulation of Ethnic Identity," *Latin American Perspectives* 19:3 (1992): 59–78.

4. Toni Morrison, "On the Backs of Blacks," *Time*, December 2, 1993, Special Issue: *The New Face of America: How Immigrants are Shaping the World's First Multicultural*

Society, 57; and Roberto Santiago, "Negro is a Spanish Word: The Issue of Racism Bedevils White and Black Hispanics," *Denver Post, Vista,* July 7, 1991, 6–7, 20. Morrison and Santiago discuss the perceived inferiority of African Americans by other groups in the United States. Santiago explains how Latinos, including Latinegros, scoff at being associated with African Americans, particularly African Americans who openly assert their ties to Africa.

5. Delina D. Pryce, "Black Latina," *Hispanic*, March 1999, 56.

6. F. James Davis, *Who is Black? One Nation's Definition* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998); Lillian Comas-Díaz, "LatiNegra," 171.

7. Marta I. Cruz-Janzen, "Y Tu Abuela A'Onde Está?" *Sage Race Relations Abstracts* 26:2 (2001): 7–24.

8. Comas-Díaz, "LatiNegra," 180.

9. Gabriel Escobar, "Dominicans Assimilate in Black and White," *The Washington Post*, May 14, 1999, A2; and Mirta Ojito, "Best Friends, Worlds Apart," *The New York Times*, June 5, 2000, A1, A16–7.

10. Roberto Santiago, "Negro is a Spanish Word," 6.

11. Escobar, "Dominicans Assimilate in Black and White," 2.

12. Comas-Díaz, "LatiNegra," 168.

13. For more information about the systematic obliteration of the existence and contributions of Latinegros across Latin America, see George Andrews Reid, *Blacks and Whites in Sao Paulo, Brazil, 1888–1988* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991); North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), *The Black Americas, 1492–1992: Report on the Americas* (New York: NACLA, 1992); and Winthrop Wright, *Café con Leche: Race, Class, and National Image in Venezuela* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990).

14. Jameelah S. Muhammad, "Mexico," *No Longer Invisible: Afro-Latin Americans Today* (London: Minority Rights Publications, 1995), 163–80.

15. See Jalil Sued Badillo and Angel López Cantor, *Puerto Rico Negro* (Puerto Rico: Editorial Cultural, 1986) for further discussion of the presence of free blacks who came to the America as entrepreneurs, merchants, contracted free servants, or to join conquerors in their greedy expeditions and exploits for lands, riches, and slaves among the indigenous populations.

16. Minority Rights Group, eds., *No Longer Invisible: Afro-Latin Americans Today* (London: Minority Rights Publications, 1995).

17. Minority Rights Group, *No Longer Invisible.*

18. NACLA, *The Black Americas, 1492–1992*, 15.

19. NACLA, *The Black Americas, 1492–1992*, 18.

20. The doctrine of "two worlds," is discussed in NACLA, *The Black Americas, 1492–1992*, 15; and Muhammad, "Mexico," 176.

21. Muhammad, "Mexico," 170. Former dictator Porfirio Diaz banned immigra-

tion of people of African descent and encouraged immigration of European peoples, promising them jobs and economic stability. Although it is publicly proclaimed that such policies are no longer enforced, they are commonly practiced unofficially.

22. NACLA, *The Black Americas, 1492–1992*, 15.

23. George Andrews Reid, *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires, 1800–1900* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980).

24. Comas-Díaz, "LatiNegra," 171.

25. Comas-Díaz, "LatiNegra," 173.

26. Isabelo Zeñón Cruz, *Narciso Descubre su Traser: El Negro en la Cultural Puertorriqueña* (Utuado, Puerto Rico: Editorial Furidi, 1974).

27. Marta Cruz-Janzen, "Racial Amnesia, Avoidance, and Denial: Race and Racism Among Puerto Ricans," unpublished manuscript. This article discusses the creation of today's mountain people, *jíbaros*. Indigenous people and black slaves escaped to the mountain jungles where they could not be reached. They intermarried to create a highly diverse cultural group. As agricultural workers, they are often displaced from their source of income and must migrate to the U.S. mainland in search of work.

28. Comas-Díaz, "LatiNegra," 173.

29. Escobar, "Dominicans Assimilate in Black and White," 5.

30. Comas-Díaz, "LatiNegra," 186.

31. Cruz-Janzen, "Y Tu Abuela A'Onde Está?" 21.

32. Marta I. Cruz-Janzen, "Curriculum and the Self-Concept of Biethnic and Biracial Persons" (Ph.D diss., University of Denver, 1997), 167.

33. Cruz-Janzen, "Curriculum and the Self-Concept of Biethnic and Biracial Persons," 170.

34. Cruz-Janzen, "Y Tu Abuela A'Onde Está?" 23; Santiago, "Negro is a Spanish Word," 6; and Morrison, "On the Backs of Blacks," 57.