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Marta I. Cruz-Janzen  
*Florida Atlantic University*

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# Madre Patria (Mother Country)

Latino Identity and Rejections of Blackness\*

Marta I. Cruz-Janzen

## Introduction

When I was in third grade, in Puerto Rico, I wanted to be the Virgin Mary for the community Christmas celebration. A teacher promptly informed me that the mother of Christ could not be black. A girl with blonde hair and blue eyes was selected for the role, and I was given the role of a shepherd. In middle school, also in Puerto Rico, I played a house servant for a school play. 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 nonwhite persons could not be anyone or anything representative of the nation's greatness but could only serve as servants and slaves to the great white leaders. In this essay, I explore racism among Latinos both in Latin America and the United States, with particular reference to black Latino women, the *Latinegras*.

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## Madre Patria (Mother Country)

Mothers in Latino cultures are visible proof of the important matrilineal racial lines that cannot be concealed. "Y tu abuela a'onde esta?" (Where is your grandma from?). In Latin America and in the United States, this jeering question is often aimed at Latinos who pretend to be white, without any trace of African or Indian blood. "Aqui, el que no tiene inga, tiene mandinga. El que no tiene congo, tiene carabali. Y pa 'los que no saben na, tu abuela a'onde esta?" This popular expression speaks what most Latinos 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 of those who claim not to know, we ask, who's your grandma?" The Ingas or Incas were indigenous Indians. Mandingas and Congos were Africans. Carabalis were runaway slaves, both African and indigenous Indians, who were feared for their rebelliousness.

"Y tu abuela a'onde esta?" further attests to the centrality of females in Latino cultures as keepers of family racial lines and secrets. Motherhood is also a paramount value within doctrines of nationalism, patriotism, and racialism endorsed by most Latino nations. These notions are integral to the negation of Latinegras as valid Latin American mothers. Many countries around the world, including the United States and most in Latin America, although patriarchal, hold in reverence motherhood and thus women's roles as creators and nurturers of the nations' past, present, and future. National ideologies merge the powerful concepts of nationalism and patriotism with womanhood and motherhood to create a representation that defines and portrays the country internally and to the outside world. Nation stems from birth. Land or earth, stands as the giver and nurturer of all life. Thus nation and land tend to be maternal symbols. In the English language, significant referents for country of origin are "mother country," "mother land," or "mother nation." Our world is Mother Earth. We find most Spanish-speaking countries using similar symbolism.

While both English- and Spanish-speaking countries make regular references to nationalism and patriotism, or to devotion and loyalty to nation, origins, and birth in the Spanish language *patria*, which also stands for country, land, and nation, is a very powerful male word meaning father, fatherland, or land of the fathers. In Spanish, country of origin becomes *madre patria*, combining the female and the male. Madre

patria means mother of the fatherland or 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. Symbolically, motherhood is critical to national identity. In Latin America, as in other parts of the world, depictions of white men, as legitimate fathers of the nations, abound. A complete national identity requires a mother and when the ideal white mother cannot be portrayed, an acceptable alternative must be found. This powerful national icon cannot be the black/African woman but the indigenous one.

While both indigenous and African women were not recipients of white male respect, blacks were looked upon as lower beings; as beasts. Black women were perceived and further disrespected as the creators of beasts. Most imported slaves were men and few black women were brought in for the purpose of reproduction. The presence of black female slaves guaranteed expansion of the work force, and young, healthy, and pubescent black girls commanded very high prices. From the moment they could bear children they were sexually assaulted. It did not matter whose children they bore. A woman might bear many children by several slave workers, owners, other laborers, and even by their fathers and other male relatives. Not uncommonly, the *Latinegras'* role included introducing the younger males of the household to the "ways of physical love."<sup>1</sup> Sometimes these males were the children they had nursed and reared.

Latino cultures grant more privileges to men, and even black men were perceived as superior to black women whose main role was reproduction. Black male slaves were severely punished, even killed, for having sexual alliances outside of their race. Black men did father children with women of other races but if the mothers were not black, the offspring of interracial unions were not always declared "true" blacks, and therefore slaves. *Mulatos* (black and white) first and *zambos* (black and Indian) next were considered superior and more human than *pueros prietos*. *Mestizos* (Indian and white) were deemed to be superior to both *mulatos* and *zambos*. The fathers of black slave children did not matter, any man would do, because what determined bestiality, and thus slavery, was the mother's blackness.

Subliminally, *Latinegras* have been blamed for their status as victims, for their subservience, and lack of control over their destinies. Cultural reverence for female virtuosity, purity of body and soul, and the

visible loyalty of women as mothers and wives, similarly punished Latinegras for serving the pleasures of men's flesh and being the sinful bearers of children whose paternity could not be legally established. Latinegras have historically been associated with uncontrollable libido and promiscuity, simultaneously chastised for their lack of morality while being robbed of it. Black females were shamed for having children who could not be free and were repudiated as promoters of slavery. At various points in history, the words Negra, prostitute, and whore have been synonymous, and the black woman's body has been regarded as a commodity free for the taking. Black women have been accused of unnatural fertility and feral animal instincts while being exploited as creatures of procreation. Such images could not and cannot represent the nation's past, present, and future. Such images could not and cannot stand as the creators and nurturer of strong men and nations.

### *Mejorando la Raza (Improving the Race)*

Most Latin American countries endorse either policies of *mestizaje* (racial mixing), *blanqueamiento* (whitening), or *negritud* (negritude or blackness). French-speaking Haiti, 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.<sup>2</sup> Negritude is not the affirmation and/or endorsement of an African identity, but of a black heritage grounded in the unique historical antecedents of the nation. *Mestizaje* represents an interracial heritage, the result of 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.<sup>3</sup>

The concept of *mestizaje* sheds more light on the historical rejection of Latinegras within most Latino cultures. Many Latinos, aware of their interracial heritage, 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 the idea of national motherhood is presented through indigenous women. In lieu of a white image, *mestizo* is the next acceptable identity. 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."

Another factor that contributes to the rejection of *Latinegras* as acceptable symbols of national identity are policies of *blanqueamiento*, or *mejorando la raza* (improving the race), pervasive among Latin American nations, even those with large populations of blacks and Indians. These policies promote the improvement of the race through intermarriage with whites, increased white European immigration, and, at times, the outright elimination of black and indigenous groups.<sup>4</sup> *Blanqueamiento* affirms the perceived superiority of whites coupled with the perceived inferiority of all others, with blacks and indigenous persons at the bottom, and reflects the general belief that racial improvement through racial purification is attainable. Whites and light-skinned persons are held in higher esteem, requiring that vestiges of blackness disappear. The ideology of *blanqueamiento* often holds blacks and indigenous persons responsible for their own and the nation's failures and weaknesses.<sup>5</sup> *Blanqueamiento* sets forth the common conviction that incremental acquisition of whiteness, leading to hierarchical superiority and increased acceptability by the white elite, is desirable, possible, and essential for national regeneration, vigor, and prosperity.

Family lines, and thus 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 to each other across multiple generations. While often unspoken, it is understood that the presence of blacks within a family drastically reduces the family's options in life. Indeed, it is believed that the presence of a *Latinegra* is certain to bring the family down. Latino cultures hold mothers to higher and stricter standards than fathers. Mothers must be *abnegadas*, or self-sacrificing for their children. While fathers are not criticized for being absent, mothers who abandon or betray their children are unforgiven. Fathers may walk away in search of new conquests, but mothers must remain visible in the lives of their children. This presence and visibility makes it even more undesirable and despised to be *Latingras*.

## La Mancha de Platano (The Plantain Stain)

"Mucho que poco todos la tenemos" (Little or much we all have it). *La mancha* refers to racial impurity and relates to the plantain, a common vegetable resembling a banana, which, when handled, leaves a dark black stain that is extremely difficult to remove. The white elite of most Latin American nations, also known as *gente decente* (decent people) or *gente bien* (well-off people) because of their financial, political, and social superiority, subscribe to a racial solidarity that adamantly proclaims, their *pureza de sangre* (blood and racial purity). It proclaims their separation from other Latinos of interracial background.<sup>6</sup> Whereas the general populace accepts the principles of *blanqueamiento*, visible, known, and/or suspected non-White ancestry means exclusion from the elite. Thus, social, economic, and political mobility are bound by racial whitening and the denial of black heritage.<sup>7</sup>

Latino countries with large populations of nonwhites, such as the Dominican Republic and even Brazil where the myth of racial democracy has flourished, are still dominated by either the white elite or by light-skinned interracial persons.<sup>8</sup> The minority white Latin Americans elite, of various white European backgrounds and especially Spaniards, stands at the very top. An interracial population constitutes the majority and middle group. This middle group is graded from top to bottom according to skin color and physical appearance, the darker persons toward the bottom. Persons who look white but are *sospechosos* or suspected of having some nonwhite ancestry are accepted socially as whites as long as *la mancha* (the blood taint) is not apparent.

"Social" whites supersede the interracial middle group and may even reach high economic and political power but they are ultimately excluded from the highest social echelons. In sum, black and indigenous Latinos remain at the bottom of the social, economic, and political hierarchy; the darker the person, the more likely they will be toward the bottom and the greater the apparent African/black heritage the more likely that they will be even further toward the bottom. *Blanqueamiento* denigrates the position of blacks, particularly visible black females. *Latinegras* cannot be allowed to stand as the visible manifestation of the family's inability to improve the race and the nation.

Denial and concealment of African heritage is pervasive among Latinos. Lighter-skinned Latinos, including those of black and

indigenous backgrounds, hold strong prejudices against darker-complected ones; indeed, they avoid identification with dark blacks.<sup>9</sup> Eager to distance themselves from their African and black heritage and to approximate the European white ideal, light-skinned Latinos are often more prejudiced toward their darker compatriots than white Latinos. Light-skinned Latinos often harbor internalized racism against themselves as apparent, or suspected, persons of black heritage, and they may externalize this racism toward Latinegros.<sup>10</sup> White Latinos do not want their *pureza de sangre* to be questioned.

Latino culture and popular folklore have portrayed blacks as an abject and most contemptible group. Latin American television shamelessly depicts cultural contempt for Latinegros, who are portrayed in the most dehumanizing ways and are the object of vile ridicule. They are often forced to play stereotypical or self-dehumanizing roles such as comic characters who debase themselves as part of their act.<sup>11</sup> They tend to be overweight, uneducated, and speakers of "unintelligible" Spanish. It is also acceptable to deride them publicly in ways that would simply be unacceptable to today's African-American viewers. The darker the Latinegro and the stronger the apparent African heritage, the greater the efforts of light-skinned and white Latinos to keep their distance. Latinegros are not accepted as true compatriots in their respective countries or in the United States and continue to live within their country of origin and within their Latino groups in the United States as, "foreigners of both locations"<sup>12</sup>

Latinos in Latin America scorn Latinegros quietly, remorselessly, with guilt and shame. Latinos in the United States, are resentful in their repudiation, angry and fearful. They don't want to acknowledge Latinegros, as they don't want to remember their own true ancestry. The rejection of Latinegros by U.S. Latinos has intensified over the years.<sup>13</sup> Latinegros know the reason: Africa is alive in all Latinos. African blood runs deeply through the veins and souls of most Latinos. Africa's blood clamors in the Spanish flamenco, resonates in the Mexican corrido, palpitates in Mexico's *La Bamba*, 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. Africa rejoices in the reencounter of sounds from all across her continent coming together after centuries apart and celebrates meeting and merging with the Latin American spirit.



## No Hay Moros en la Costa (There are no Moors [Negroes] on the Coast)

Over the years, many Mexican-Americans told me that there were no blacks in Mexico. I was always told that Mexico was a nation of mestizos, the product of indigenous people and Spaniards. So, where have they all gone? Where are the Latinegros in Mexico? Where are the Latinegros in Argentina, Chile, and Peru? Where are the Latinegros in Iberia? Where are the blacks who sailed with Columbus?<sup>14</sup> Where are the thousands of blacks who followed? I puzzled over that although I often suspected some individuals of having African heritage. But I believed them—until I visited Mexico for the first time. Now a regular traveler to the country, I am always surprised to meet apparent Latinegros in Cancun, Chetumal, Guadalajara, Palenque, and other cities. Uninhibitedly, they welcome me and tell me about the many Latinegros throughout the country and the blatant hostility and racism that is often directed against them.

Argentineans, Mexicans, and other Latinos often state that blacks either no longer exist or are not a visible force in their nations and societies. Yet, most Latinos, whether they are aware of it or not, have African bloodlines. The facts are that throughout Spain, across the Caribbean, from Mexico, to Argentina, Spaniards took great numbers of Africans. In most Latin American countries, Africans constituted a significant proportion, even a majority, of the total population. And in most Latin American countries, Africans were rapidly assimilated through interracial unions. But dark-skinned Latinegros are still visible. Andrews Reid believes the plan has been to either assimilate them or let them "die out."<sup>15</sup> Historical cases of attempted extermination—outright massacres of black people across Latin America—have been documented.<sup>16</sup>

## Invisible No Mas (No Longer Invisible)

Prior to 1976, persons from Latin America in the United States were referred to as Latinos. Then "Hispanic" was introduced purportedly to classify all persons from Spain, Latin America, and their compatriots and descendants on U.S. soil. This label subliminally shapes the ethnic and racial consciousness and identity of Latinos. In 1993 a "Hispanic" reader from New Mexico wrote to *Hispanic* magazine (July issue), in reaction to an article about major league baseball players: "I would

appreciate knowing how the writer arrived at the classification of apparent blacks as Hispanics? Does the fact that men come from Spanish-speaking countries such as Puerto Rico or Cuba give them the Hispanic title designation? History shows that Africans were transported to the Americas as slaves and took the names of their slave masters."

"Hispanic" has come under intense criticism as a label that exalts and promotes whiteness by focusing on the Spanish-speaking white European Spaniards and thus supporting a hierarchy that perpetuates the exploitation of nonwhite Latinos. <sup>17</sup> Latino is perceived as a more encompassing term that includes European Spaniards, Latin Americans who speak Spanish and those who do not, indigenous Latin Americans, and all persons of African heritage. "Hispanic" represents the antithesis of black, Indian, and interracial. The result is that the U.S. collective consciousness fails to recognize Latinegros as "Hispanics."

The word Latinegro has gained increased popularity and use among Latinos of African ancestry for several decades. The term has emerged closely linked to the U.S. racial consciousness movements of the Twentieth Century including the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s that forged a similar awareness in Latin America and throughout the world. Latinegro has become an empowering affirmation of Latinegros' ethnicity and race, of their legitimacy, first as Latinos and then as Latinos who are both Latin Americans and blacks. Increasingly, it represents indisputable proof that blacks have not disappeared from the Americas but continue to emerge and demand their birthright and heritage. Latinegro focuses on the black experience, originating in Africa but no longer African, unfolded and evolved over centuries and generations within a Latin American context. In other words, Latinegros are not African or African-American but rather Latin American, inextricably webbed with other Latin Americans. Latinos' own denials of Latinegros, the pervasive use of excluding labels, and negative public images often offered by the media create the perception that Latino cultures are not inclusive of African ancestry.

### *Racismo a lo Latino (Racism, Latino Style)*

A significant manifestation of Latino racism, throughout Latin America, Spain, and the United States., has been the historical negation of the black presence. Whites, in Latin America and wherever African and indigenous slavery existed, have been responsible for writing

history in their own terms. Historical amnesia and the telling of falsehoods across Latin America, in census counts and even historical accounts, have systematically minimized and/or obliterated the presence and contributions of blacks. The darker the Latino and the closer their roots to Africa, the greater the oppression and concerted repression of their existence and linkages to other Latinos.<sup>18</sup> The truth is that while proclaiming racial democracy and integration, most Latin American countries simultaneously instituted and continue to maintain social, economic, and political structures that disenfranchise their African and indigenous populations. Most Latin American countries do not employ distinct racial classification as the United States does. Even Brazil, which openly recognizes many racial gradations with accepted terms for each, and others such as Cuba, the Dominican Republic (Santo Domingo), Mexico and Puerto Rico among many others, do not count their black or interracial populations. This has enabled them to diminish and/or conceal the African influence and the existence of very dark-skinned Latinegros. It only takes a tour of the countries to realize that socioeconomic status and the implied "fluid" classifications are very racial in nature. This social, economic, and political isolation has contributed to the invisibility of Latinegros from the national conscience.

The most blatant manifestation of Latino racism is denial. The myths of racial integration and harmony along with the supposed superimposition of cultural identity over race has even been proclaimed by Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and Dominicans, who are most visibly of African lineage. Many Latinos also often claim that compatriots in their respective countries or communities in the United States, regardless of pigmentation, do not perceive race and racism as issues of concern. The "pervasive litanies" of Latin American color-blindness and racial democracies underlie the reality that "blatant discrimination continues to plague" the descendants of the millions of African slaves brought to the Americas.<sup>19</sup> In fact, racial inequality is "endemic" in Latin America.<sup>20</sup>

Many Latinos attempt to conceal cultural racism by arguing that *negro* (Negro or black) is a term of endearment. Historically, the term became equated with Africans, blacks, and slaves. Synonyms are *moreno* (Moorish black), *moyeto* (black and ugly), and *prieto* (dark black). Among Puerto Ricans, and many other Latino groups, *negro*, as well as *moreno*, *moyeto*, and *prieto* are derisively reserved for "black, black" persons and in the United States, are conspicuously applied to Africans and African--

Americans.<sup>21</sup> When a white or light-skinned Latino refers to a Latinegro as negro, it is usually as a reminder of the Latinegros' race and social status. Calling someone negro is likely to be combined with a disapproving voice and negative facial expressions.<sup>22</sup> Negra or negro, when used toward a black person, tends to be followed by *sucialo* (dirty or immoral) or *parejera/o* (arrogant). Parejera/o is not used toward whites, only toward blacks and indigenous Indians. It denotes people who do not accept their place beneath whites and do not remain quiet and humbly obey.<sup>23</sup> It signifies a false sense of equality and belonging among superiors. The masculine form, negro, is used less often and usually as a put-down. Negra is used more often and is associated with the loving and nurturing of Latinegras, as well as their perceived sexuality. To call a Latinegra, and significantly, a White or light-skinned Latina, "negra" alludes to her perceived loving, nurturing, and very possibly, sexual nature. Members of the Latino white elite would never accept being addressed as negro and having their *pureza de sangre*—and superior status—called into question.

### *En el Norte (In the North)*

Beyond Latin America, something is happening to Latinos on U.S. soil. Latin American racism, mingled with the U.S. variety, is creating a unique dilemma not only for Latinegros but also for all Latinos in the United States. Latinos are being forced between a black versus a white identity. In the United States, identifiably black persons are perceived as possibly African or African-American, which many groups consider inferior. Indeed, African-Americans are most often considered the lowest group of all.<sup>24</sup> For Latinos, to be black in the United States is perceived as a liability.<sup>25</sup> Regardless of skin color and/or physical appearance, in the United States, one drop of non-White 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. While in Latin America racial impurity can be cleansed and expunged in ascending stages, in the United States racial impurity designates the person and their future generations as unfit and undesirable.

Latinos in the United States dread being pushed to the black or African side but soon find that they can't fit in with the mainstream white American side either. In their frantic quest to prove their

whiteness, they focus on their *Hispanidad* (Hispanicism), distance themselves from their interracial Latin American roots, and struggle to gain some semblance of acceptance with U.S. mainstream white Americans. The term "Hispanic" brings images of Spain, and European whiteness, rather than of interracial Latin America. In this light, it is imperative to conceal the Latinegros in the family closet. Latinos are not only disclaiming their compatriots, but their friends and families. White-looking siblings are rejecting the *negritos* or dark ones in the family, including their parents. Latino families in the United States sometimes live in separate parts of town, and in different life realities, according to physical appearance.

The deeper Latinos become immersed in U.S. racial ideology—the sharp and unyielding black versus white dichotomy—the more intensified becomes their desire, indeed their perceived need, to free themselves of any and all vestiges of Africa.<sup>26</sup> The more African-Americans assert their heritage and linkages to Africa, the more Latinos attempt to disassociate themselves from them.<sup>27</sup> Latinegros try to overlook their blackness and believe that they are Hispanic like their European compatriots. When they can't, they assert their indigenous Indian bloodlines in attempts to elevate themselves above black. They are forced to conceal the black mothers hidden in their families' closets. Many light-skinned Latinos attempt to conceal their nonwhite antecedents and maintain a tight lid on a history shrouded in secrecy and mysteries. This explains in part why within-group racism is not a welcome subject among light-skinned or presumably white Latinos. The subject is often considered impolite and/or taboo. 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 mas fino cae la mancha" (The stain falls even on the finest tablecloth), mocks the common fear and belief that *la mancha* spares no one. Denial of Latinegros is not only denial of blackness; it is denial of self.

## Notes

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