

Blurring the lines

As U.S. grows more racially diverse, Afro-Latinos take pride in identity

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Afro-Latino dancers at Strictly Street Salsa learn a new dance from Rey Salsa in Houston.

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HOUSTON — It happens all the time. At the taco truck, Raul Orlando Edwards placed his fajita order: “Señorita, por favor, póngale la cebolla bien cocida.” (“I’d like the onions well-done.”)

“Man,” said the African-American behind him in line, “how did you learn to do that?” Meaning: Why, for a black man, is your Spanish so good?

“I’m Latino,” Edwards answered. The director of the Strictly Street Salsa studio and founder of the Afro-Latino Festival of Houston, he’s a Panamanian-Jamaican immigrant.

The guy stated the obvious: “I thought you were black!”

“I’m blacker than you are!” replied Edwards. And, he says, they laughed.

These days, in both Texas and the U.S. at large, skin color is an ever less reliable indicator of identity. According to a 2015 Pew survey, about a quarter of U.S. Hispanics identify themselves as Afro-Latino. Like Edwards, the vast majority (70 percent) are foreign-born.

Afro-Latinos are generally descendants of African slaves brought to Spanish and Portuguese colonies in Latin America and the Caribbean. Most are biracial or multiracial. Being Afro-Latino, says Alain Lawo-Sukam, professor of Hispanic and Africana Studies at Texas A&M University, is less about skin color than about identity and a sense of belonging.

By their very existence, Afro-Latinos challenge the traditional “one-drop” view of race in the United States: the idea that one drop of African blood makes a person black. Afro-Latinos like Edwards aren’t simply black, white or Hispanic. They’re a combination — and as such, a vision of the United States’ racially and ethnically complex future. They’re a minority inside a minority; a melting pot within the melting pot.

“Our identity,” says Edwards, “is like the drop that is spilling the glass of the black-and-white system.”

“Here is a group that we don’t think of much, but that’s an expression of the new America in the 21st century,” says Stephen Klineberg of the Rice University’s Kinder Institute for Urban Research.

In Texas, says Jasminne Méndez, “people always ask me, ‘What are you?’ ‘How did you get here?’ — as opposed to in New York or Florida, where they are more familiar with Afro-Latinos.” A poet and teacher, Méndez was born in the U.S. to Dominican parents.

“For African-Americans, whites and even some Latino people, I am just another black girl until they hear me speaking in Spanish, and then they don’t know what to make out of me,” she says.

Often, Afro-Latinos’ English attracts attention as well. Whites, Edwards says, sometimes tell him, “Oh, you speak so well.” They do not say “for being black,” but he feels sure that’s what they mean.

“I learned English from books and don’t speak with the slang they associate with wrong stereotypes of a black person,” he says.

“I don’t understand the slang yet,” he laughs. “I am barely Googling the meaning of LOL.”

“I had never thought of myself as belonging to a specific community based on racial factors,” says Heydel Cepero, a video producer from Cuba who now lives in Houston. On the island, he notes, as well as in many Latin American countries, it’s common to see a wide range of skin colors.

Spanish speakers use many matter-of-fact descriptors for mestizos, or mixed-race people — words commonly considered no more insulting than “blue-eyed” or “dark-haired.” “Mulatos” have black and white parents or grandparents, sometimes with Asians in the mix. “Jabaos” have light skin, and often blue or green eyes, but African features. “Morenos” describe dark skin and dark eyes in some countries or a brunette, a la Eva Longoria, in others.

And in Latin America, different attitudes go along with the different language. Though skintone words exist, the question “What are you?” is almost always answered not with one of them, but with a reference to geography. A person from Monterrey would tell another Mexican that he’s a “regiomontano”; a woman from Havana would tell another Cuban she’s a “habanera.”

But here in Texas, Cepero says, Americans seem unsatisfied with the answer that he’s Cuban, or Caribbean, or Latino, or American. “I am a product of la mezcla (the mixture),” he says. “I have never thought in terms of racial percentages, but here I would have to explain that I have an unknown percentage of black with 40 percent Spanish, 10 percent Asian.”

It’s difficult to know how many Afro-Latinos are in the U.S. and Houston. As Lawo-Sukam explains, the concept “Afro-Latino” has only recently begun to gain traction as a recognized American identity.

The U.S. Census doesn't track Afro-Latinos. In part, that's because the census doesn't count "Hispanic" as a racial category, but as a separate ethnic category — which, everyone seems to agree, leads to confusion. (For 2020, the Census plans a revamp of its racial categories.)

Asked to name their race, many Afro-Latinos chose to check "white alone." In the U.S., says professor Lawo-Sukam, Afro-Latinos often wish to avoid negative stereotypes that they don't believe fit them.

But there's another factor at play as well. In Spanish-speaking countries, being white doesn't necessarily mean being Caucasian. Whiteness, there, is considered not an absolute matter, but one of degrees.

In the Pew survey, more Afro-Latinos identify themselves as white (39 percent) than black (18 percent). A majority say their racial background is Hispanic (67 percent).

Still, in the city of Houston, a sizable number of Hispanics do not declare themselves to be white: 27 percent of Hispanics identified themselves as "black alone," "some other race alone," or "two or more races" combined.

Afro-Latinos are an example of the richer identities that are molding the new America.

Between 1990 and 2010, black-white intermarriage in the U.S. increased 600 percent, says Klineberg. Among U.S.-born Latinos, 28 percent of marriages are with non-Latinos.

Houston reflects that trend. Asians, for example, are also intermarrying. In the last three years in this city, a third have been tying the knot with non-Asians, he says.

While racism is a great social concern in the current America, "We are moving to what some people are calling a transracial world," Klineberg says. "We are going beyond race because ethnicity and race [identities] become less and less important [as we mix], and the great challenge in Houston and America is not going to be an ethnic divide. It's a class divide."