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**SECTION:** Section B; Page 1; Column 2; Metropolitan Desk**LENGTH:** 1606 words**HEADLINE:** In New **York's Cultural Mix, Black Latinos Carve Out Niche****BYLINE:** By MIREYA NAVARRO**BODY:**

Sometime next year, Dominicans in New **York** City plan to open a museum and **cultural** center to document their immigrant experience. That is not surprising, given the growth of the Dominican population. But the name chosen for the center may come as more of a surprise: "Afro-Quisqueya," a nod to these **Latinos'** African roots.

As **Latinos** surpass African-Americans as the country's largest minority, **Latinos** who are also **black** have been increasingly asserting their place as a Hispanic subgroup.

Only 2 percent of **Latinos** counted in the 2000 census identified themselves as **black**. But the proportion is much higher in New **York**, which has a large concentration of **Latinos** from Caribbean countries with a legacy of African slavery. Of those **Latinos** in the United States who identified themselves as **black**, 28 percent -- more than 200,000 -- lived in New **York** City.

The Afro-**Latino** presence has been felt locally in recent years in a proliferation of music and **cultural** events, in new college courses and conferences that explore **black** roots in Latin America and in the growing numbers of Dominicans, who are predominantly **black** and are expected to eventually surpass Puerto Ricans as the city's biggest **Latino** group.

"The Dominican Republic is a country with a tremendous African influence; you see it in our daily customs, our music, our foods," said Moises Perez, executive director of Alianza Dominicana, an advocacy and social service agency that is building the Afro-Quisqueya **Cultural** Center on West 166th Street in Manhattan. Quisqueya is the Indian name for Hispaniola, the Caribbean island shared by Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

**Black Latinos** straddle America's main racial divide as well as two distinct cultures, and sometimes navigate treacherous waters. As a student at Fordham University, Fernando Ramirez joined a **black** fraternity. At Brooklyn Law School, he interned with the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund. His **Latino** friends were curious, he said, wanting to know why he did not work at the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund instead.

"I could tell what they were asking was, 'Why are you at the **black** one?' " said Mr. Ramirez, 35, now a lawyer in New **York** City.

Mr. Ramirez, born to a **black** Dominican mother and a white Puerto Rican father and raised in Washington Heights in Manhattan, is light-skinned and wears his hair in long dreadlocks. He goes to Spanish Mass and has a Puerto Rican fiancée. Of his two closest friends, one is Puerto Rican, the other African-American.

By now, he is used to being scrutinized.

"When I tell some African-Americans I'm **black** -- a **black Latino** -- they think I'm being cute," he said. "I push it. I ask, what does '**black**' mean? No one has a monopoly on **black** culture."

Jay Jolliffe, 36, a dark-skinned Panamanian who runs a marketing research firm in New **York**, remembers being called the ugliest of racial slurs used against **blacks** when her family moved to a white neighborhood in Queens when she was 6. All her life, she said, some whites have subjected her to their stereotypical views of African-Americans. She still feels pressured sometimes to choose between her racial and **cultural** identities.

"When I state I am a **black Latino**, some African-Americans feel like I am trying to deny my blackness," she said. "Here, you have to define who you are within these very narrow margins."

But recent surveys have shown resistance among **Latinos** to racial classification. Almost half the respondents to a national survey last year by the Pew Hispanic Center and the Kaiser Family Foundation said they would rather answer "Hispanic" or "**Latino**" -- and leave it at that -- than choose from the standard racial categories.

This was also evident in the 2000 census, where 42 percent of those identifying themselves as "Hispanic," "Spanish" or "**Latino**" also identified themselves as a member of "some other race" besides **black** or white. An additional 6 percent said they were members of "two or more races."

Many of those choosing these options are Mexican-Americans, whose racial background includes a strong indigenous influence, experts in **Latino** demographics said. But such preferences made **Latinos** "virtually alone in breaking away from the standard racial categories," the Pew/Kaiser study reported.

This resistance to racial categorization worries some advocates for minority groups.

"If you have populations that need certain remedies, what do you do to identify them?" asked William A. Darity, director of the Institute of African American Research at the University of North Carolina. Self-identification is the only way, he said, "while being careful that how they are seen by others can be quite different from the way they label themselves -- and that may be more important in the kind of social treatment they face."

Some **black Latinos** say that how others perceive them has an effect on how they identify themselves. Maria Perez-Brown, 41, a Puerto Rican television producer and entertainment lawyer in New **York**, is the daughter of a dark-skinned Puerto Rican mother and a white Puerto Rican father. She marked "Hispanic" and "**black**" on the census form.

"A lot of times society makes that decision for you," she said. "The way American culture works, you select one or the other. If you're brown-skinned and you say you're white, you're going to grow up with a lot of conflict."

But self-identification can also be a personal choice. Nina Paulino, 42, a Dominican who organizes a festival of Dominican African dance in New **York** every year, is blue-eyed and olive-skinned but said she identifies herself as a **black** Latina as a political statement, to honor her father's side of the family.

"I had never given respect to that side of me" while growing up in the Dominican Republic, she said.

Almost half the **Latinos** responding in the census -- 47.9 percent -- identified themselves as white, even though many Americans might not see some of them that way. In Latin America, by contrast, the concept of race tends to be more elastic, said Roberto Suro, the director of the Pew Hispanic Center. It often starts out from a baseline of mixed heritage rather than one that is purely **black** or white.

"In the Caribbean we're white, but in this country we would be **black**," said Neyda Martinez, Fernando Ramirez's fiancée, who was born in Chicago to Puerto Rican parents. She is dark-skinned, with long wavy hair, and is often regarded as Indian in Puerto Rico but is more accurately mulatto, a **mix of black** and white.

"It's empowering for **Latinos** to say you're **black** instead of Indian," said Ms. Martinez, who identifies herself as a **black** Latina. "Usually people try to hide behind the romanticism of saying you're Indian. For some it's a denial of the blackness. It's a very personal thing how people identify themselves. You can't go by skin color."

Among the young, hip-hop has given **black Latinos** the confidence to express a **black** racial identity, said Raquel Z. Rivera, author of the just-released "New **York** Ricans From the Hip Hop Zone" (Palgrave Macmillan), which documents the Puerto Rican roots of hip-hop, particularly in the dancing. Some performers have even branched out from hip-hop to reclaim African rhythms of their parents' countries, rhythms like bomba, a Puerto

Rican music form that has become popular among Puerto Ricans in their 20's and 30's in the last five years, Ms. Rivera said.

Will Jones, a 26-year-old **black Latino** of Panamanian descent, said that when he was a teenager, hip-hop gave him a platform to rap about racial matters and bond with African-Americans who shared his urban experiences.

"When hip-hop began, most people thought it was just **black** people, but it was really **blacks and Latinos** and it became the middle ground both groups could feel part of," he said.

Mr. Jones, now a sales representative with Fat Beats, a Brooklyn hip-hop label, said he has moved comfortably in the Hispanic and African-American worlds because he sees himself as belonging to both.

"I'm 100 percent **black** and 100 percent **Latino**," he said. "I don't swing back and forth -- the pendulum is always in the middle."

Ms. Perez-Brown, who grew up in the East New **York** section of Brooklyn, said that when she attended Yale University there was a division between the Puerto Ricans from the island -- "rich and blonde," she said -- and "mainlanders" like her, dark-skinned, urban and more in tune with African-Americans from the same background.

"It was a class issue, but class and race became commingled," she said. "I made a conscious decision to hang out with **blacks** rather than the Latin Americans."

These days, Ms. Perez-Brown is busy trying to pick the right skin tone for Kaelyn, the lead character in an animated series she is creating for Nickelodeon that features preschool superheroes. The character's parents are Puerto Rican and African-American, like Ms. Perez-Brown and her husband. Ms. Perez-Brown also has two other Nickelodeon shows to her credit.

In the superheroes' circle of friends, one character is African-American, another is Native American and a third is non-Hispanic white. Kaelyn's brother is pink. Ms. Perez-Brown was leaning toward making Kaelyn a medium brown, not unlike herself. While a marketing team may look at the character's coloring as something that will help determine its commercial success as a toy, Ms. Perez-Brown said, she has other priorities in mind.

"I want **black** and Puerto Rican girls to be able to say, 'That's me,' " she said. "And 'that's me' because of the way she acts, the way she talks and the way she looks."

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**GRAPHIC:** Photos: Nina Paulino, on the roof of her Upper West Side apartment building with her musical group, says racial identification is a personal choice. Neyda Martinez, in the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn with her fiance, Fernando Ramirez, says it can be "empowering for **Latinos** to say you're **black**." (Photographs by Michelle V. Agins/The New **York** Times) (pg. B5)

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