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Going Beyond Black and White, Hispanics Choose 'Other'

By MIREYA NAVARRO

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Patria Rodriguez, an advertising sales director for a women's magazine in New York, takes after her father. With light brown skin and thick, curly hair, she says she resembles the actress Rosie Perez, but some people have asked her if she is Italian, and others have told her she looks like the singer Sade.

Like many Hispanic Americans, Ms. Rodriguez does not think of herself as black or white. "I acknowledge I have both black and white ancestry in me, but I choose to label myself in nonracial terms: Latina. Hispanic. Puerto Rican. Nuyorican," Ms. Rodriguez, 31, said. "I feel that being Latina implies mixed racial heritage, and I wish more people knew that. Why should I have to choose?"

As the Hispanic population booms, the fluid ways that she and other Latinos view their racial identities are drawing more attention and fueling the national debate over racial classifications — what they mean, what they should be and whether they are needed at all.

Now members of the United States' largest minority group, the nation's 38.8 million Hispanics, nearly half of them immigrants, harbor notions of race that are as varied as their Spanish and that often clash with the more bipolar views of many other Americans.

White? Black? Try "moreno," "trigueno" or "indio," terms that indicate skin shades and ancestry and accommodate several hues.

This heterogeneity has stumped the Census Bureau. In its 2000 count, almost half the Hispanic



Ann Johansson for The New York Times
Eva Blanco, 32, of San Jose, Calif., wished there were a box on the census form labeled "red."

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[Graphic: How Hispanics Identify Themselves](#)

respondents refused to identify themselves by any of the five standard racial categories on the census forms: white, black, Asian, American Indian or Alaska native and a category that includes natives of Hawaii and the Pacific Islands. The agency has since been surveying Hispanics to find a way to pinpoint them racially.

In the census, respondents can mark their ethnicity as Hispanic, but then they are asked to choose a racial label. In 2000, almost half of the Hispanic respondents, 48 percent, identified themselves as white. Only 2 percent chose black.

But from the light-complexioned to the dark, more than 14 million, or more than 42 percent of all Latino respondents, marked the box labeled "some other race" and wrote in such disparate identities as Mayan, Tejano and mestizo. (An additional 6 percent said they were members of two or more races.)

The category "some other race" was used almost exclusively by Hispanics; of all those who chose it, 97 percent were Latino. Claudette Bennett, chief of the Census Bureau's racial-statistics branch, said follow-up research showed that a large portion of these respondents wanted Hispanic to be considered their race.

A recent study by the Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research at the State University of New York at Albany noted that the popularity of the "some other race" category came at the expense of the "white" category, which was the choice of the majority of Latino respondents in 1980.

"There may have been a sense that being white was part of the process of being assimilated," said John R. Logan, Mumford's director. "There's a trend toward rejecting whiteness as a way of expressing success."

"That's the big change over time. There's a Latino identity that's neither white nor black, and it's a positive identity."

While there are clearly white Hispanics and black Hispanics, many more come from racially mixed stock, with white, black and American Indian or other indigenous strains. Even within one family, one sibling may look black by many Americans' standards, another white, and another in between. And factors as disparate as hair texture, education, income and even nationality matter almost as much as skin color in racial self-image.

Israel Coats, 24, a Dominican who moved to New York when he was 11 and is now studying marketing at Baruch College, is black in physical features and in the way he identifies himself. But in the Dominican Republic, he says, he is called "indio," Indian. That is because even the darkest-skinned Dominican often regards "black" as a synonym for Haitian; the two nations, which share the island of Hispaniola, have a long history of conflict.

Physical appearance is not even a factor in how some Latinos sort themselves into racial categories.

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Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times
Israel Coats, 24, of New York, says he is regarded as black in this country, but not in the Dominican Republic.

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