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## Being Latin and black

**Afro-Latinos grapple with labels in U.S.**

Janita Poe - Staff  
Wednesday, August 6, 2003

Jacqueline Rosier is a Latina who loves her culture and speaks Spanish as fluently as English.

But Rosier --- a native of Panama who is of African descent --- has struggled to identify herself as part of the Latin American community since coming to the United States 28 years ago.

"I always shock people and get a lot of questions when I say I'm a Latina," said Rosier, 38, a marketing and public relations manager in Duluth. "I've found a lot of white people don't accept me or respect me, on a certain level, because of my color. And I've found a lot of African-Americans want to put me in their box."

For dark-skinned Latinos in the United States, the American dream is often punctuated with dismaying experiences of trying to fit into a classification-oriented society. Black Latinos share a culture and language with white Latinos, but some say the race consciousness of America forces them to adopt an identity --- as black Americans --- that is not really their own. If they eschew the label, Afro-Latinos say they still are treated as African-Americans by most people and resented by some blacks who think they are ashamed of their African heritage.

Since moving to Georgia from Los Angeles in 1991, Rosier, whose husband is a New York-born black American, has taken on an African-American identity --- even embraced it --- in order to avoid conflict and to get along in her workplace and community, she said.

She learned the advantages of that practice early in life.

"In high school, I began identifying with the African-Americans because the whites treated us differently," said Rosier, who didn't speak English when she moved to Los Angeles with her family in 1976.

The American penchant for black-white labels puzzles the Rev. Johnathan Alvarado.

The 37-year-old pastor, whose mother is African-American and father is Puerto Rican, grew up in the United States and stresses both of his heritages, despite people wanting to classify him as either Latino or black.

Alvarado has Latino features and a Spanish surname. But he also is a Morehouse man who likes to brag about his "Nubian queen," his wife, Toni Alvarado, "a beautiful brown-skinned sister from the South Side of Chicago."

"I am very specific about identifying myself as an Afro-Latino," said Alvarado, pastor of Total Grace Christian Church in Decatur.

Numbers growing

As the Latino population has grown in the United States, so has the number of Latinos of African descent. According to the 2000 U.S. census, the 35.3 million Hispanics in the United States, the nation's largest minority, account for 12.5 percent of the country's population, up from 8.8 percent in 1990.



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About 2 percent of the Hispanics in the 2000 census identified themselves as "black." That compares with close to half who said they were "white" and the 42.5 percent who described themselves as "some other race." Since 1970, in addition to asking people to identify themselves by race, the U.S. census has asked people to indicate if they are either "Hispanic" or "non-Hispanic." "Hispanic" is considered an ethnicity, not a race; people of Hispanic origin can be of any race.

Though Latinos who describe themselves as black make up a very small percentage of the U.S. Hispanic population, studies suggest their socioeconomic status is more akin to that of African-Americans than other Latinos or white Americans.

According to a study by the State University of New York at Albany that was released last month, "How Race Counts for Hispanic Americans," Hispanics who define themselves as "black" have lower incomes and are more likely to reside in segregated neighborhoods than those who identify themselves as "white" or "other."

Most black Hispanics, the study found, come from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, though nearly a quarter-million people of Mexican heritage defined themselves as black in the census.

While it looks at quantitative data, the study has implications about the quality of life for black Latinos in the United States, said State University of New York sociologist John Logan.

"The data suggest Hispanics may think about race differently than most Americans," said Logan, who directs the university's Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research, which conducted the study. "Dark-skinned Hispanics as well as black people from the Caribbean knew they would be black in America before coming here, but they didn't realize how much of an impact it would have on their lives."

Because Latin American culture has fused different cultures and races, many Latinos have unique experiences of being classified by others as white or black, depending on the situation. Some say Latin Americans have a better sense of how important color is in the United States because they usually straddle the line between white and black.

### Color matters

When Consuelo "Connie" Taylor, a third-generation Mexican-American, was born 48 years ago in Los Angeles, her birth certificate labeled her as Caucasian. But while growing up in a racially mixed neighborhood in Los Angeles, her schoolmates called her names because of her light brown skin and wavy hair.

"I was called the n-word all the time," said Taylor, who is married to an African-American and is the manager of the Georgia Department of Labor's Gwinnett Career Center. "So I felt if they are treating me like one, I might as well join" the black community.

Taylor said her extended family in the United States and in Latin America talk routinely about skin color, hair texture and features when describing someone.

Fair skin is preferred over darker skin within the Latino culture, Taylor said, and it affects everything from job opportunities to romantic relationships. When marrying, for instance, Taylor said, "you've done well" when you've wed someone lighter than yourself.

After high school, Taylor joined the Air Force, where she said she first felt free of discrimination based on her skin color. "I spent 12 years in the military as just an American," Taylor said. "Then I came back here to the States [from having served overseas], and I'm not an American anymore; I'm someone that has to be put in some category."

Perceptions in metro Atlanta are gradually changing, however, Alvarado said.

While attending Morehouse College, Alvarado said, he was classified solely as a black American. But since the rapid ethnic diversification of Atlanta over the last decade, Alvarado says many people now assume he is Latino.

"Before, I was seen pretty much as a light-skinned black person," Alvarado said, "but now because of the way I look, people will come up to me and ask directions in Spanish."

Alvarado, who speaks fluent Spanish, travels regularly to Puerto Rico to assist two fledgling churches affiliated with Total Grace. A trained musician, he also mentors music students and recent graduates of Morehouse.

"I think I was put here as a pastor in Atlanta to help bridge the gap between the African-American and Latino communities," Alvarado said. "These two communities should come together more, because they have an opportunity to make a serious impact on Atlanta."

AFRO-DESCENDANTS IN LATIN AMERICA

The number of people of African origin in the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking portions of Latin America varies widely from country to country. Here's an abbreviated list, based on available data.

	Total.....	Percentage of
	population.....	Afro-
		descendants

Dominican Republic.....	9 million.....	84%
Cuba.....	11 million.....	62%
Brazil.....	170 million.....	45%
Colombia.....	40 million.....	26%
Panama.....	3 million.....	14%
Venezuela.....	23 million.....	10%
Ecuador.....	12 million.....	10%
Nicaragua.....	5 million.....	9%
Peru.....	27 million.....	5%

Source: Inter-American Dialogue Race Report, January 2003



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