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The Dream and Reality of an Afro-Latina El Sueño y la Realidad de una Afrolatina

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As an Afro Latina and community leader, I have witnessed massive power inequities and disproportionate access to social, economic, and cultural resources. First, the lack of representation of Latino and Afro Latinos in professional roles within government, nonprofit and private institutions is terrifying. Second, Latinos and Afro Latinos are often absent from leadership roles and decision-making opportunities, which creates generational gaps and identity imbalances. Third, it is extremely discouraging to participate in diversity and inclusion programs because follow through is short lived. Fourth, we need to emancipate Latino and Afro Latinos from the bondage of leading from behind. Instead of placing non-Latino individuals in leading roles to represent Latino communities, we need to allow them to lead and make decisions for Latinos by Latinos; this is essential to tackling social disparities and fortifying representation for us.

Historically, Latinos come from many different parts of the world. We have unique physical characteristics and diverse cultural experiences. Although some people think Afro Latinos are anomalies, Afro Latinos represent 24% of the entire U.S. Hispanic or Latino population. The African diaspora and ancestral roots are immanent reflections of rich cultural and multiracial characteristics. Our physical appearance, skin color, cuisine, dance, religious and ceremonial practices contribute to the numerous racial identities and cultural dimensions of being Latino.

I consider myself a Richmonder, though I am not a native Virginian. I have spent over twenty years in this state; Richmond is my home away from home. It was through hard work and perseverance that I was able to survive. Thus, I appreciate the privilege and hospitality that Richmond has given me and my family. Furthermore, most people learn about my "Afro Latinidad" through conversations. My heavily accented English creates a polarity between race and culture. Soon after it has been realized, the next immediate question I get is "Where are you from?" *As if someone can't be from another country or culture and be a Richmonder.* My racial experiences in Richmond have been filled with mixed emotions. I say this because I had to learn to assertively navigate and advocate for myself while dually representing my Latino community, in order to be heard and seen.

Another interesting aspect in my Richmond experiences relates to the challenges Latinos encounter with local segregation. I have lived in communities where Blacks, whites, and other diverse populations commune in their own siloed spaces. Success is often measured by entering privileged networks and spaces or the forgoing "red tape" and unsaid rules even within established Latino circles. As we know, these situations create unnecessary barriers and stressors, which perpetuate division, distrust, and isolation. We need to work harder to unify our communities because failing to create a holistic sense of community costs us opportunities for both organic immersion and meaningful integration.

The general population identifies me as African American or Black. However, once my Afrolatinidad is disclosed in conversations, the narrative changes to a more inquisitive one. Where my blackness is questioned with the statement, "I thought you were Black." My response is, "I am Black! I just happen to be a Black Latina." Unironically, there are a lot of misconceptions about Latinos. Stereotypes and cultural misconceptions against Latinos are rapidly spreading and gaining popularity including any Latino heritage derived from white, black, or indigenous

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descendants. The Center for Public Integrity reported one of the most common misconceptions about Latinos is that “all Latinos are immigrants.”

The negative impact that this type of misinformation has in communities is evident by the increase of hate speech, demonizing rhetoric, and criminalization of Latinos. The FBI also noticed a surge in hate crimes between 2018 and 2020. Communication outlets such as radio and community partners came together to openly protest these abuses and to offer solutions to confront, educate, and correct the racial misconceptions that promoted such attacks. In the words of a hate crime victim: “It doesn’t matter if I become an American citizen, if your skin color is not white and your, English is not perfect, you do not blend.” While I recognize that Richmond is not the exception, Latinos and Afro-Latinos here are also victims of microaggression. Personally, I have heard very hurtful words about Latinos, particularly during the pandemic. We are blamed for spreading the virus at construction sites or just going to the supermarket with our children. I have witnessed racial profiling conducted by police where a man was pulled over because of his “Mexican” appearance. The man was forced to show his “vehicle registration” and subsequently questioned about “his legal/illegal status.”

The solutions are simple: create culturally sensitive spaces for dialogue and celebration of Latino ancestry, history and culture, promote leadership that reflects the community being served and establish equitable distribution of power.

A great investment would be to develop a Latino Cultural Center that serves as a catalyst for the preservation, development, and promotion of Latino and Afro-Latino arts and culture.

Cultural Sensitivity and Celebration

Culturally diverse communities welcome and celebrate differences. They also provide culturally sensitive resources that inform communities of ways to manage and resolve conflict and foster collaboration. An equitable Richmond invests in infrastructures to support communities and celebrate differences. A great investment would be to develop a Latino Cultural Center that serves as a catalyst for the preservation, development, and promotion of Latino and Afro-Latino arts and culture. The Latino Cultural Center would lay the foundation to an inclusive environment that would also welcome communities that do not identify in the culture to learn and engage. This Latino Cultural Center would help to foster meaningful dialogue and cultural understanding of Latino (a/x) and Afro-Latino communities.

Representative Leadership

Local representation would look like electing [Afro] Latinos in City council positions or greater hiring within local government and nonprofits with intentionality in order to effectively address community issues such as poverty, close generational wealth gaps, and encourage job, housing, and health stability.

Latino leadership is seldom an organic process. Not to mention, Afro Latino leadership. It is rare to see Afro-Latinos in leadership roles. In my twenty-one years of living in Richmond, I have only met three Afro Latinos in leadership positions. When speaking on gender, I have seldom seen Afro Latinas in leadership roles. I have always wondered, why do we allow other races to speak about Latino experiences? How can we build our leaders if Latinos and Afro Latinos are not given the proper space and power to lead?

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Identity and leadership are analogous in communities of color because they are the survival mechanisms for the rising generations. Having connections and commonalities with a leader creates a sense of identity, hope and/or admiration. I feel the same way when I see Celia Cruz. Although she was a musical icon, her image always evoked pride in me as she wore her Afro Latina identity with valor. How about the image portrayed in public spaces? Does the Latino prototype resemble our diverse culture? with “fair” or light skin and “good” or “straight” hair? Where are the autochthonous, browned skin, and curly haired people? Do they not exist? Are we replacing them with “lighter” versions of Latinos? Are Latinos maintaining the “status quo” by perpetuating the same problematic and colonists’ values from other cultures?

Having connections and commonalities with a leader creates a sense of identity, hope and/or admiration.

These images we are reinforcing are of extreme relevance for Latinos (as/x) and Afro Latinos (as) in leadership and representation. I believe more Afro-Latino representation is critical to the positive development and growth of our communities. Richmond would be a better place if we developed infrastructures that promoted Latino and Afro Latino leadership. These leadership roles would encourage equitable racial representation and identity models for our current and future generations.

Equitable Distribution of Power

The average Richmond Latino works a blue-collar job and earns an hourly wage. The Labor and Statistics Bureau reports that Latinos are ranked highest in labor force participation and among men/teens. Inequities in hiring create barriers to income opportunities for Latinos including access to promotions impeding upward mobility and diversity into leadership roles. Moreover, Afro-Latinos are seldom chosen to hold positions of power. It has been my experience that once Latinos and Afro-Latinos achieve some level of power, they are scrutinized and questioned about their decisions where otherwise non-Latino/POC identities are applauded or revered for the decisions that they make. If you are Latino in a space of power, you are obviously a minority. In terms of equitable distribution of power, Richmond would benefit from making intentional efforts to cultivate greater Latino leadership in the nonprofit, business and government arenas, while also eliminating any bias and barriers. We need not just rely on a token few that hold positions to be the primary voices for the community. Those individuals exercising “chronic” privilege should be accountable to the “power” monopoly. We should all look to expand the Latino leadership base so that the voice and presence of Latinos in our community is adequately heard and represented.

In conclusion, an equitable Richmond would be a place where Latinos and Afro-Latinos can thrive in terms of cultural celebration, leadership and power. Richmond would be a city that works well for the seven percent of the population in Richmond that are Latino.

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El Sueño y la Realidad de una Afrolatina ***The Dream and Reality of an Afrolatina***

Soy parte de dos mundos – I am part of two worlds.

Dos mundos de colores diferentes – Two worlds of different colors

Soy Latina y a la misma vez Africana – I am Latina and African

Hablo español e inglés – I speak Spanish and English.

Mis compañeros latinos me ven como “negrita, morenita, morena, negra” –

My Latino peers see me as “negrita, morenita, morena, negra”

En cambio, en Richmond soy “African-American o Black”

Instead, in Richmond I am seen as “African American or Black”

¿Pero, será que pertenezco a estas identidades o me obligo a encajar? –

But, do I fit into these identities, or do I just squeeze myself in to fit?

En Richmond no he encontrado representación idónea de mi cultura ni mi imagen -

In Richmond, seldom do I find representation of my values, image, and culture.

Mi identidad está perdida en las esperanzas de una “típica” Latina –

My identity is lost in the hopes of the “stereotypical” Latina.

alguien que refleja una identidad y que imita a un grupo muy diferente, al mío -
someone who reflects the identity or tries to represent a person that does not look like me.

un grupo de tez “blanca” y cabello “lacio” – a person with “fair skin” and “straight” hair

En cambio: - Instead

Yo soy un orgullo Afro -Latino – I am a proud Afrolatina

de cabellos rizados y tez oscura – with curly hair and dark skin

¿Será que podemos hacer algo para cambiar la trayectoria en que nos direccionamos?

Can we change the trajectory of our actions?

¿O nuestro destino está predispuesto? Or is our destiny already written (or predestined)?

¿Podremos reflejar nuestra identidad afrolatina en lugares de liderazgo o poder?

Can we relate or identify with those in places of power and leadership?

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¿O solo es para aquellos que tienen el “color adecuado”?

Or is it exclusive to those of the “right color”?

¿Qué esperanzas tendrán las generaciones venideras?

What hope and legacy are we leaving to the next generations?

¿O no tienen opciones? - Do they have options?

Shanteny A. Jackson

Shanteny A. Jackson is an Afro-Latina. Mrs. Jackson embodies a multifaceted life. Professionally, she leads the Virginia Community Health Worker Association and works for Richmond City Health District as a Health Educator Senior.

She holds a master’s degree in Counseling and Human Services with a concentration in Addictions. She is a proud alumna of the Community Trust building Fellowship, Ginter Urban Gardener Program, Grace E. Harris Leadership Institute, and Circles USA.

Mrs. Jackson is known as a compassionate collaborator and community advocate. Her strong background in community engagement and organizing serves as a foundational asset in her career.

Personally, Mrs. Jackson enjoys outdoor activities, swimming, volleyball, and soccer. She strives and promotes values of inclusion and leadership in communities of color.