

The Afro-Latino connection: can this group be the bridge to a broadbased black-Hispanic alliance?

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CID WILSON HAD HIS FIRST UGLY RUN-IN WITH RACISM AS A TEENAGER ON A FRIDAY AFTERNOON. "One kid threw something at another kid," Wilson recalls. "The kid actually thought it was me." One of only 11 minorities in a senior student body of 300, Wilson recalls being called the "n-word" by the white teen.

"I was so infuriated with him," says the New York native. "The following Monday--its something I'm not proud of--I looked for him and got into an actual physical altercation. That whole weekend, it was just building up inside, how angry I was."

Justifiably angry, Wilson's father was the voice of reason. James A. Wilson, a medical doctor, counseled his young son to handle racism in a more constructive way in the future: demand more of yourself and work twice as hard as your white counterparts.

Now a 33-year-old Paramus, New Jersey, resident, Wilson took his father's words to heart and worked hard to excel. A former market analyst at Salomon Smith Barney, he is now a senior analyst at Whitaker Securities, a boutique investment bank, where he tracks past performance and future prospects of publicly traded stocks. Politically active, the NAACP member hopes to run for office someday. But the sting of that racial slur remains to this day.

Wilson's tale seems a familiar one to African Americans, except he's not African American. He's un puro (pure) Latino, whose parents immigrated to the United States from the Dominicans Republic. Wilson, president of the Dominican American National Roundtable, is one of millions of America's Afro-Latinos who belong to both of the United States' largest minority groups. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, approximately 1.7 million of the 38.8 million Hispanics identified themselves as both Hispanic and of

African descent, yet many believe this number to be much higher--closer to 3.9 million. (More than 42% of all Latino respondents marked a box labeled "some other race" on the Census form.) Among the more famous Afro-Latinos: Dominican baseball superstar Sammy Sosa, retired Puerto Rican boxing champ Felix Trinidad, and the recently deceased Cuban salsa icon Celia Cruz.

And while historically attempts by Latinos and African Americans to forge economic, political, and social alliances have yielded lackluster results, it can be argued that this group--many of whom feel comfortable in both the black and Latino communities--could be the key to a much-needed business and political link between America's largest minority groups.

It's estimated that between 10% and 80% of Latinos who hail from countries like Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Panama, Venezuela, Belize, and the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico have African ancestry. As the slave trade proliferated in the Americas from the 1500s through the 1800s, Europeans used Caribbean ports as a hub to transfer African slaves throughout North, Central, and South America, as part of the African Diaspora.

And some say Afro-Latinos have as much or more in common with African Americans as their lighter-skinned countrymen. Many regularly face discrimination and battle racism, both in the United States and in their native countries. Such disparaging terms as *negrito* (little black one), *pelo malo* (bad hair), or worse are commonplace for this group that often wields little political and economic power in their homelands. Poverty as well as poor educational and employment opportunities are high on the list of concerns to both African Americans and Afro-Latinos. However, the beginnings of a civil rights movement for blacks throughout Central and South America has come about fairly recently and Afro-Latinos are beginning to make some progress.

"In essence, white Latinos discriminate against black Latinos just like [white Americans] may do here," says Harry C. Alford, president and CEO of the National Black Chamber of Commerce. In order to effect change, Alford believes, "The 40 million blacks in this country need to start communicating better with the 135 million blacks in the Caribbean and South America."

The good news is, this group is beginning to come together to build a sense of pride in their African heritage by forming organizations and teaching others that Latinos come in all shades. "Blacks have already walked twice the miles we have walked," says Grace Williams, an Afro-Latino who is president

of the Atlanta chapter of the National Society of Hispanic MBAs (NSHMBA). "We're starting to walk right now."

Interestingly, efforts to increase awareness regarding Afro-Latino culture and plight can be found on the campuses of historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). At Howard University, Nadine Bascombe heads Cimarrones, a 50-member black student union of Caribbean, Central, and South Americans that recently expanded to include a chapter at Benedict College in South Carolina. Before Afro-Latinos can even begin to link the black-Hispanic communities, more Afro-Latinos must embrace their African heritage. "Within the population of what are considered Afro-Latinos, not all people identify with being black, so they'll join the Latino organizations because it's more of an assimilation of being white," says Bascombe, a junior. "It seems that if you relate yourself to being black it's something negative, so with that problem existing within the Afro-Latino population, not too many people run towards having an organization with that name."

Another HBCU, Spelman College, recently hosted a series of lectures, performances, and a conference looking at the African Diaspora and its impact on the Americas. A visiting group of Afro-Latinos from the Spanish-speaking nations of South America discussed their similarities based on common African heritages. "It seems [to be] apparent that Afro-Latinos of various sorts see [African Americans] as role models with respect to political participation and economic success," says Sheila S. Walker, a professor of anthropology, who organized the event. "Their consciousness raising and civil rights movements were inspired by their knowledge of ours."

There's no denying the merits of bringing these groups together from a business standpoint. "If we were to combine the African American and Hispanic community, it means a purchasing power block of \$1 trillion dollars," says George Herrera, former president and CEO of the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. "That kind of purchasing power and that kind of strength can basically make industry come to a standstill ... power within our communities lays in our discretionary purchasing with corporate America, to be able to change the corporate landscape and change the dialogue of how corporate America deals with our communities." Herrera says this power can be used to affect corporate governance, procurement, and employment opportunities.

Currently, the state of black Hispanic relations in the United States is a mixed picture. Surely the media frenzy surrounding the emergence of the Latino

population as the largest minority group has lent itself to a contest like atmosphere between the racial groups. There's also no denying that old prejudices and rivalries remain on both sides--bringing numerous challenges to overcome before any alliance can be formed.

In order for an alliance to succeed, a national agenda would have to be created that includes such issues as diversity, inclusion, and access to economic, political, and educational resources, according to Nicolas C. Vaca, a Harvard Law School graduate and author of *The Presumed Alliance: The Unspoken Conflict Between Latinos and Blacks and What it Means for America* (Rayo; \$24.95). "Let's figure out exactly what each party needs and wants, what is important for each group, and then work out a plan for achieving it without the rose colored glasses," he recommends.

Efforts for alliances are being made on the political front. Members of the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation hosted members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, Congressional Black Caucus, and the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus in a small beach resort in Puerto Rico in October 2003. Politicians were invited for a weekend of social activities as well as political dialogue designed to foster cross-cultural understanding and facilitate the forging of common political agendas. This was the second gathering: the group met for the first time in 2002 at a New Orleans retreat.

"In order for us to work together and dialogue, we have to be able to interact, to get to know each other," says Congressman Ciro D. Rodriguez (D-TX), chair of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus. Rodriguez adds that the caucuses have worked to jointly draft a minority legislative health initiative that will be presented to Sens. Daschle and Kennedy.

In the meantime hopefully, Afro-Latinos will continue on the path to becoming an economic and political force, and by doing so, bring the Hispanic and black communities together. This is something Cid Wilson hopes to see. "We can honestly say we know what it's like to feel racism and discrimination--on the Latino and the African American sides," he says. "The way to build bridges is to get involved in both communities."

Whether these bridges are eventually built remains to be seen. Hailing from different countries with different cultures, the movement toward a stronger sense of Afro-Latino unity and identity must pick up speed. There is no doubt that challenges will abound, but the potential rewards are too promising to dismiss.

BLACK ENTERPRISE spoke with several prominent Afro-Latinos to better understand the issues they face daily. Here's what they had to say:

MISCONCEPTIONS IN THE MEDIA

Cuban-American actress Gina Torres' television credits include recurring roles on the FOX drama 24 and ABC's Alias, as well as appearances on Law & Order, The Agency, and Angel. In nearly all her roles, however, she plays an African American. She hopes to take on more Latina roles in the future.

"I've gone out for several [Latina] roles," says Torres, who recently had cameo appearances in the highly successful Matrix Reloaded and Matrix Revolutions films. "It has not been my experience thus far that the people that have the power to make those [casting] decisions are ready to embrace a Latina who is dark. They like to keep it simple. You don't want complicated when you're trying to sell gum. You want to say 'that is a black person, that is a Latin person, that is a white person. Everybody looks like they came from where they're supposed to come from. Let's not complicate that.'"

The Bronx-raised Torres admits that she gets annoyed when people assume she's not a flail Latino. "That it's so out of the realm of possibility that somebody like me can be all Latina. Both my parents were born in Cuba; they came over in the mid-50s before the revolution."

Torres, who married Laurence Fishburne in 2002 after meeting on the set of Matrix Reloaded, views her work as contributing to the struggle and making a difference. "I often say I didn't become black until I became a professional actress. It's when I realized I wasn't the Latina that America was comfortable with. I'm still not. Inside of the industry, it's changing slowly," she says. "The darkest Latina that first had name recognition was Rosie Perez, but because she sounded familiar no one made a big deal out of it. But the image the business perpetuates and is still most comfortable with is Jennifer Lopez, as was Rita Moreno in her day."

Torres says that she is comfortable with serving as a bridge between the black and Latino cultures. "As a people, we are both certainly much stronger if we align ... we all want our children to grow up in a better place and to have better opportunities than we did." she says. "We all want the same things, we all hit a similar wall in terms of being viewed [against] standards that were set up so long ago, that we continue to bust out of and redefine. I am proof that it works."

At an early age, Maria Perez-Brown learned to live in two worlds. Born in Puerto Rico and moving to Brooklyn at the age of 6, she lived in what she describes as a segregated neighborhood. "One block was all Puerto Rican and the other block was all black," she recalls. "I felt early on that my identifying quality was not only that I was Latina, but that I was a black Latina from an urban experience, with much more in common with my black friends from my neighborhood than with my Puerto Rican cousins from Puerto Rico."

In the early 1990s, Perez-Brown left the corporate world for the world of television. Now, Perez-Brown is a successful television producer. Among her credits is creating and producing *Gullah Gullah Island*, which ran for six years and was named one of the Top 10 television shows for children by TV Guide in 1996. She was also the creator and executive producer of *Taina*, a comedy series that aired from 2001 to 2002 on Nickelodeon about a 15-year-old Latina caught between two cultures: that of her traditional Latino family and the modern world of her school and friends. Perez-Brown uses her insight into both cultures to breathe life into characters that are believable and real.

"Sometimes you look at all the shows and Latino characters in American television and you have a Jewish writer from the Upper East Side or from Los Angeles purporting to write what he thinks is a character that's Latino," she says. "What results many times is an insulting and very offensive stereotype of a character. At no point did they think it was important to find an authentic voice to write that character, or to integrate their writers, which is a pet peeve in my industry."

If African Americans and Latinos were to form lasting alliances via the Afro-Latino connection, Perez-Brown believes perception is the first thing that needs to be addressed. "The moment you start creating an image that these two groups are separate and have separate interests, you start creating a rift that allows people to divide and conquer," she says. "We can have, wield, 25% of the population--that is huge political power. That is a huge economic force that could make a much bigger difference than we could separately."

EMBRACING HIS HERITAGE

Though he's a BE 100s executive, Frank Mercado-Valdes remains rooted in the Latino community. The CEO of The Heritage Networks (No. 61 on the BE INDUSTRIAL/SERVICE 100 list with \$61.5 million in revenue) often laments the fact that with the exception of baseball programming, Afro-Latinos are nearly non-existent on television--even on Latino programs.

"In Latino broadcasting we're invisible because Latino broadcasting is Mexican-centric and Mexicans really don't have many blacks--they have certain pockets of Mexico where there are black populations who have been there a long time," he says. "But for the most part, you won't see black people in anything Mexican."

The son of Cuban and Puerto Rican parents says blacks in Latin America have an even lower standing socially than African Americans did prior to the Civil Rights Movement. "There never was a Dr. King, a Malcolm X, or a Stokely Carmichael," says the Bronx native. "So some of them come here and shed their identity and what happens is they merge with the greater white Latino community rather than with the black community."

His Latino heritage has influenced his business decisions. "My business niche was the African American community at first," he recalls. "I've changed the name of my company from The African Heritage Network to The Heritage Networks because I wanted to get into the perpetuation of English-language Latino programming." The syndicated network includes original properties such as Showtime at the Apollo, Livin' Large, and Weekend VIBE, as well as Resurrection Boulevard, a drama set in Los Angeles with a Latino cast.

And though he has seen prejudices firsthand in his industry, he still gets upset when he experiences it from the African American community. "I think the most frustrating thing comes from the black side of the equation--not the white. I've never had white people say 'you're not really black, are you?'" he says, "I'm always thinking 'when did I stop being black because my last name is Mercado or Valdes?'"

Mercado-Valdes says that the Afro-Latino community could be a powerful ally to both the African American and Latino communities once more civic, business, and political leaders emerge. "It's one of the things that I feel I should have been more active in that I libel like I haven't been," he confesses. "I spent so much time being black I forgot I was Latino."

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