

Valuing Whiteness: Colorism in the Latino Community

September 20, 2016 by Sabrina Rivera

When I was younger, it always baffled me to see adults (more specifically, people of color) using umbrellas during a sunny day. It seemed an unnecessary deprivation. Many years and many dialogues around colorism later, I began to understand that such a habit went beyond trying to avoid the discomfort of sticky heat or the desire to protect oneself from skin cancer. It was about not wanting to be darker skinned.

Colorism is the preferential treatment given to light-skinned people. The existence of social justice movements like Black Lives Matter is proof that discrimination based on skin color is very much alive. This kind of discrimination plays itself out within and against communities of color.

When I was growing up in Vancouver, the majority of girls I hung out with were Latina – or, at least, part Latina. It was eye-opening to track the parallel lines of our experiences around identifying as people of color, building some kind of identity, and finding our belonging, while straddling the ever-shifting line between two worlds. However unspoken it was, on one thing we agreed: whiteness was valued. Whenever we hung out, there was a definite difference in the way my friends treated someone who was darker, even if they were from the same community. They were more wary, a lot less engaged, and sometimes, I'd hear them whispering to each other in Spanish, the word *negra* standing out like a sore thumb. It reminds me of the way my relatives use the word *igorot* to refer to other Filipino people who are darker, always with disdain or as a straight-up insult. They associate the word *igorot* with mountain people who are somehow uncivilized – somehow less than.

The message I got is that one must be colored to such a degree that it's clear one belongs to a certain ethnic group, but not so dark as to be confused with being black. But what happens if someone is both? In her article, *Afro-Latinas: Finding a Place to Belong*, Tracy Lopez interviews three Afro-Latinas on their experiences with identity confusion and discrimination. One of the women, Ivy Farguheson, describes experiencing anti-Black racism from other Latinos who assumed she was African-American and told her that she wasn't really Latina. All three women acknowledge the role media plays in showing (or rather, not showing) the diverse beauty that exists within the Latin community. **Vianessa Castanos says, "It's like we do not exist... It's frustrating to see the same stereotypical image of the fair skinned or slightly tanned Latina with long straight hair."**

All three women cite experiencing racism from all sides and being subjected to questions like "What are you?" Such questions are inappropriate and only add to the stress of building an identity as we change. I remember asking those questions when I was younger, out of sheer ignorance. It wasn't really until college that I began to challenge the beliefs and values I grew up with. There are many of them to unlearn. If you're someone who asks those questions now,

and you don't see the harm in it, read up on the experiences of the people you're directing these questions to. **Dig deep, do your research, do the work, and then confront your own beliefs.**

For Afro-Latinas who are struggling with a society that refuses to accept them, Farguheson offers up this advice, "Find a mentor or even an older Afro-Latina who is proud of who they are and build a friendship with them. That relationship will allow you to express your frustrations but also remind you that you should be proud of who you are."