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Afro Latinos: Everywhere, Yet Invisible

OUR WEEKLY / NNPA

Cynthia Griffin

Last year, during a discussion on increasing the number of African Americans in Major League Baseball, Angel's center-fielder Torii Hunter in a USA Today interview called the dark-skinned Latino baseball players "imposters" and said they are not Black.

Hunter's comments strike at the heart of an issue that is one reason scholar Miriam Jimenez Roman is undertaking a three-day conference called "Afro Latinos Now! Strategies for Visibility and Action," on Nov. 3-5 in New York that will be the biggest such effort her organization, The AfroLatin@ Forum, has undertaken.

"This is the first time we have done such a comprehensive event where we discuss Afro Latinos specifically. We're going to look at the state of the field and where we want to be, and there is going to be a heavy emphasis on youth, especially those in middle school years."

Jimenez Roman says the confusion Hunter demonstrated about the connection between Africans born in Latin America and those born in the United States is particularly acute for U.S.-based 11- to 15-year-old Afro Latinos. In the context of a racist society like America, they are not only struggling to figure out how they feel about themselves, but also how they connect in relation to others, especially African Americans.

There are millions of Afro Latinos in America who live their lives in what is essentially a "Black" context but identify themselves as White, because of the perceived stigma of being African American, said Jimenez Roman, who last year came to the West Coast promoting her newly released book "Afro-Latino Reader," co-edited with Juan

Bolivia, for example, there are Black communities in the mountains. They are totally isolated and ignored."

But in reality, Afro Latinos are everywhere in Latin America as they are in the United States, says the head of the AfroLatin@ Forum.

In Los Angeles, there is large community of Garifuna people and many Afro Mexicans in Pasadena.

The Garifuna are found primarily in Central America along the

Mexicans who have both a contemporary and historical space in the city.

According to Alva Stevenson, program coordinator with the UCLA Department of Special Collections, who has spent the last 12 years researching and lecturing about Afro Mexicans, there were some Afro Mexicans in California in the early days prior to statehood, including the Pico family.

Two of the most prominent members of the Pico clan, Pio and Andres were intimately involved in the development of the region and the state. Both were businessmen who amassed fortunes from their various ventures, including a hotel in downtown Los Angeles.

Both also served as key political figures—Pio as the last Mexican governor of California and Andres as a member of the Assembly once California gained statehood. Reminders of their presence today include a major thoroughfare, Pico Boulevard, named in honor of Pio.

Their paternal grandmother, Maria Jacinta de la Bastida, was listed in the 1790 census as mulatta

Stevenson said what is important to note is that the Pico family originated from a town in Mexico, Sinaloa, where two-thirds of the inhabitants were of African descent. And that sort of mixing was not unusual.

"In fact, a professor did a DNA study (in the last 20 years) in Northern Mexico and found that two-thirds of the people living in the region have African ancestry," Stevenson said.

Sinaloa was also one of the areas where the 44 Mexican settlers who helped found Los Angeles came from.

Struggles with self-image, assimilation mirror Black American experience

racism. It's the notion of complaining. If you make a big deal out of it, you are the problem, and they say you're playing the race card," explained Jimenez Roman, who is of Afro Puerto Rican background, and noted that during book events, African Americans were much more receptive to the reader than were Afro Latinos.

She attributes that to a dichotomy about race many Afro Latinos experience in their countries of origin.

"There is the idea that Latino culture is Mestizo and European and Indian, and Black people don't belong," said the race and ethnicity professor about how many Latin American countries think about themselves. In fact, Latinos of African descent have been in many countries for at least 200 years.

If they do acknowledge their Black citizens, Jimenez Roman said officials will say "they all live on the coast."

"This isolates them. Or in

Caribbean coast in Belize, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Honduras, and are descendants of shipwrecked slaves who intermarried with the Carib Indians on the island of St. Vincent.

Both the British and French tried to colonize the island, but were initially rebuffed by the inhabitants. By 1796, however, the British were victorious in gaining control and shipped Black-looking Caribs to Roatan, an island off the coast of Honduras. Only about 2,500 survived the voyage.

Because the island was too small and infertile to support their population, the Garifuna, originally called the Garinagu, petitioned the Spanish authorities to be allowed to settle on the mainland.

New York has the largest Garifuna population, heavily dominated by Hondurans, Guatemalans and Belizeans. Los Angeles ranks second and is populated by the Belizean Garifuna.

The City of Angels is also home to a growing number of Afro

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One in Three African Americans are Broke

The first Friday of the month is a day when economists like me are riveted to the news. We want to know what's up with the unemployment rate, and with the changes that have taken place in the last month. Last week, our nation learned that we treaded water. The unemployment rate remained at a high of 9.1 percent, 8 percent for white folks, and 16 percent for Black folks. Some pundits were jazzed at the rates, thinking that they meant we are doing okay. What's okay? The real unemployment rate for African Americans is close to thirty percent.

This means that a third of the Black world is not working. This means that there are too many Black folks who are tripping. This means that too many are managing pain. And with the Congress ignoring the reality, failing to offer the relief from the jobs bill, this means that nobody cares.

I hear from people all the time. Their stories are heart rendering. They talk about the lives they once had, the lives the now have. Once upon a time, they had homes, mortgages, and opportunities. Now they have lost jobs,



BENNETT COLLEGE

Julianne Malveaux

homes, and their opportunities. They are the folks that stand in the middle of the statistics. We

One in three African Americans are broke with no employment in sight

know the numbers, but we don't know their pain.

The pain is more acute for African Americans than it is for others. President Obama has not fully addressed that, although his spirited anger at the recent Congressional Black Caucus dinner was a great step in the right direction. Still, I have to think that if there were a crisis in Appalachia or in New Mexico, there would be a more invigorated response. Instead, Black folks are

unemployed and nobody really cares.

Go to church and count it out. If there are three people huddled over water, one of them is unemployed. If there are three people passing out programs, one of them is unemployed. If there are three people, or four, or five, or six, this pox called unemployment has visited them. Who is he, who is she? Mother, father, brother. Sister, somebody who brought

President's jobs bill, and they have offered few alternatives. So we sit and wait to see if anyone will break the gridlock that keeps our legislators from moving forward. This is drama, it is trauma, it is bless you, mama, cause it is overtime for there to be some forward movement.

Perhaps this is not an issue for those whose constituency is enjoying a 9.1 percent unemployment rate. But there are too many who are experiencing much more than that. Throw a stone into the Black community. See who it hits. It is one in three, one in three, one in three. What that means is that the pox called unemployment affects everyone. When the reality of worklessness hits so so many, the fact is that it affects us all.

The numbers come out every first Friday. The reality visits our community each and every day. One in three adult African Americans cannot find work. This is a depression level unemployment rate. People are hurting, but nobody really cares. One in three. One in three. One in three.

Julianne Malveaux is President of Bennett College for Women in Greensboro, North Carolina.