

HOUSTON'S AFRO-LATINX COMMUNITY:

Larger than you know

“

Too often, Afro-Latinx are stereotyped as criminal, exotic or racially ambiguous. Yet, the reality is much more complex.”

DR. WILL GUZMÁN

By ASWAD WALKER

AFRO-LATINX IN HOLLYWOOD



Zoe Saldana



Rosario Dawson



Rosie Perez



Laz Alonso



Cardi B



Yaya DeCosta



Amara La Negra

Hispanic Heritage Month (Sept. 15 – Oct. 15), like Black History Month, doesn't do justice to the history of an entire people. And one group feels this slight from two different directions—members of the Afro-Latinx (pronounced Latin-x) community, individuals whose race is Black and whose ethnicity is Latinx.

The Defender spoke to four local Afro-Latinx members to get their perspective on their group's Houston reality.

WORDS THAT DESCRIBE HOUSTON'S AFRO-LATINX COMMUNITY

“The first words I thought of when I arrived in Houston were “Where is it?” because I couldn't see it,” said Raúl Orlando Edwards, a native of Panama and founder of the non-profit Foundation for Latin American Arts (F-LAMARTS), a foundation that hosts an annual music festival and events throughout the year. Edwards is also the founder/owner of Strictly Street Salsa, Houston's first salsa studio.

Dr. Will Guzmán, a professor of history at Prairie View A&M University (PVAMU) mentioned “diverse, proud and growing” to describe Houston's Afro-Latinx community.

However, poet/author and educator Jasminne Mendez, a Dominican American, had a different take.

“Unfortunately, ignored and overlooked are the first words that come to mind,” said Mendez.

“For so long, when it came to things like Hispanic (or Latinx) Heritage Month or even Black History Month, so much of our experiences and stories we're just not a part of the conversation.”

WHAT COUNTRIES ARE REPRESENTED IN HOUSTON

According to Guzmán, most Afro-Latinx in the US hail from the Caribbean, particularly The Dominican Republic, Cuba, Haiti and Puerto Rico.

“Currently, there are nearly three million people in the U.S. who self-identify as Afro-Latinx, and some suspect the numbers are much higher particularly in places such as Afro-Brazilians in the Ironbound section of Newark, NJ, Afro-Mexicans in California and North Carolina, Afro-Puerto Ricans in Kissimmee and Orlando, Florida, and Afro-Dominicans in Washington Heights, Boston and Orlando.”

Guzmán, Edwards and Mendez concurred that Honduras, Columbia, Venezuela and Panama are the countries of origin for most of Houston's Afro-Latinx residents.

CONNECTION TO THE COMMUNITY

However, even with the many countries represented, not all Afro-Latinx feel welcomed.

Liliana Castrillon, a longtime community activist and Afro-Columbian, says though she proudly identifies as Afro-Latina, neither the Afro-Latinx community nor the larger society see her as such.

“In my case, I don't fit the profile to be seen as Afro-Latina,” said Castrillon. “I would have to look different. I would have to be darker.”

“Colorism and white supremacy are very real and very present in our Afro-Latinx communities.”

Castrillon also believes other reasons why some Afro-Latinx members remain disconnected is because they're so spread out and many, because of

the negativity associated with being Black, refuse to identify as Afro-Latinx.”



Dr. Will Guzmán



Raúl Orlando Edwards

WHERE & HOW CAN PRESENCE BE FELT THE MOST

That said, Edwards says the local Afro-Latinx cultural presence can be felt in many ways, including through foods introduced to Houston and several festivals highlighting various Latin American and Caribbean countries including Cuba, Puerto Rico and Columbia.

He also sees organizations like his Strictly Street Salsa and F-LAMARTS as being powerful ambassadors for the Afro-Latinx community. Edwards says the inspiration for F-LAMARTS came when he was a K-12 teacher and was asked to create a Hispanic Heritage Month program that celebrated all things Mexico.

“And I said, “Can we do something else? It's not Mexican Heritage Month. There are over 15 other countries in Latin America. Why do we only have to showcase Mexico?”

Edwards said the experience revealed how bad Houstonians needed education and exposure to Afro-Latinx reality.

“The fact that I speak fluent Spanish is usually a shock. People say, ‘Oh, you speak Spanish?’ I'm like, ‘Yes, this is my first language. And there's millions of us Blacks throughout Latin America.”

For the poet/author/educator Mendez, the Afro-Latinx presence can be seen and felt throughout her work on the job and at home.

“I'm very intentional in my writing, especially, to indicate that my characters, if I'm writing fiction, are Afro-Latinx. Because growing up, I didn't have any representation of myself and my stories and experience in any of the books I read,” said Mendez whose debut picture book *Josefina's Habichuelas* (Arte Público Press) coming out in October spotlights an Afro-Latinx little girl and her family.

“I worked together with the artist to make sure like this little girl specifically is dark-skinned and her family shows a myriad of complexions. I don't want this sort of white-washed version of our reality. We come in all shades.”

While Guzmán appreciates the arts and food aspect of the Afro-Latinx experience being celebrated, he wants people to realize there's so much more.

“Afro-Latinx are in the fields of education, government, business and medicine—areas that people overlook when thinking of the Afro-Latinx community. Too often, Afro-Latinx are stereotyped as criminal, exotic or racially ambiguous. Yet, the reality is much more complex,” he said.

BIGGEST ISSUES IMPACTING THE COMMUNITY

Everyone interviewed mentioned racism and white supremacy as big issues, both experiencing it in America and more specifically, within the global and local Afro-Latinx communities.

“Talk about racism, Mexico is very good at it,” shared Edwards. “They've had an Afro Mexican population for years that they didn't even recognize until just recently. And they're over five million of them. If you live in South

America, it's the same thing, even in my country (Panama).”

Mendez concurred with Edwards, but added issues that impact all Black people in America, whether Latinx or not.

“Interactions with authority like police, ICE, immigration officers or border patrol are problematic because we have the added layer of our blackness. We can get treated even worse at times.”

Mendez and Castrillon again mentioned colorism as a huge issue within the Afro-Latinx world.

“You are too dark for some communities and too light for others. You're profiled in every single community, the light-skinned community, Latino community, the white community and even the Black community,” said Castrillon. “For an Afro-Latinx, it's very hard to find a job if you're very dark. So, you're profiled by white supremacists via racism and your own people via colorism. I don't think the community in general or the African-American community realize how hard it is for an Afro-Latinx to fit into a society where you are not really seen or treated with respect and dignity.”

Guzmán sees a myriad of issues, including lack of economic access, cultural and language barriers, and institutional racism.

“Unfortunately, mainstream groups would rather acknowledge the presence of Afro-Latinx groups through what some scholars deem as ‘foods, fashion and festivals,’ which of course is fine. However, these superficial acts must be accompanied with power-sharing and substantive, equitable roles in corporations, banking and finance, and the public sector. Short of this, then so-called Hispanic Heritage Month will become shallow and another example to perpetuate the culture of our oppressors: Europeans (the Portuguese, Spaniards, and the French).”



Find out visions for the future for and most surprising facts about Houston's Afro-Latinx community at DefenderNetwork.com.

“And as a mom, I'm intentional about what I expose my daughter to, in the books that she reads and the media that she sees, in the stories that I tell her.”