

Latino Anti-Black Violence in Los Angeles: Not “Made in the USA”

By Tanya Kateri Hernández

A version of this piece was originally featured as an op-ed in the Los Angeles Times on 7 January 2007 as “Roots of Latino/Black Anger; Longtime Prejudices, Not Economic Rivalry, Fuel Tensions.”

The acrimonious relationship between Latinos and African Americans in Los Angeles is growing hard to ignore. Unfortunately, as reported by Joe Mazingo in the *Los Angeles Times* on 1 January 2007, the Black versus Latino race riot at Chino State Prison in December 2006 is not an aberration. Even so, the 27 December 2006 coverage by Sam Quinones, also in the *Los Angeles Times*, of the 15 December 2006 murder in the Harbor Gateway neighborhood of Cheryl Green, a fourteen-year-old African American, allegedly by members of a Latino gang, was shocking.

Yet there was nothing really new about it. Rather, the murder was a manifestation of an increasingly common trend: instances of Latino aggression toward African Americans in multiracial neighborhoods. Just last August, federal prosecutors convicted four Latino gang members of engaging in a six-year conspiracy to assault and murder African Americans in Highland Park area of Los Angeles (DOJ 2006). During the trial, prosecutors demonstrated that African American residents (with no gang ties at all) were being terrorized in an effort to force them out of a neighborhood now perceived as Latino, in a manner suggestive of ethnic cleansing. For example, one African American resident was murdered by Latino gang members as he looked for a parking space near his Highland Park home (Murr 2006). In another case, a woman was knocked off her bicycle and her husband was threatened with a box cutter by one of the defendants, who said, “You niggers have been here long enough.”

At first blush, it may be mystifying why such animosity exists between two ethnic groups that share so many of the same socioeconomic deprivations. Over the years, the hostility has been explained as a natural reaction to competition for blue-collar jobs in a tight labor market, or as the result of turf battles and cultural disputes

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in changing neighborhoods. Others have suggested that perhaps Latinos have simply been adept at learning the U.S. lesson of anti-Black racism, or that perhaps Black Americans are resentful at having the benefits of the civil rights movement extended to Latinos. Although there may be a degree of truth to some or all of these explanations, they are insufficient to explain the extremity of the ethnic violence.

Over the years, there's also been a tendency on the part of observers to blame the conflict more on African Americans (who are often portrayed as the aggressors) than on Latinos. But although it's certainly true that there's plenty of blame to go around, it's important not to ignore the effect of Latino culture and history in fueling the rift.

The fact is that racism-and anti-Black racism in particular-is a pervasive and historically entrenched reality of life in Latin America and the Caribbean. More than 90 percent of the approximately ten million enslaved Africans brought to the Americas were taken to Latin America and the Caribbean (by the French, Spanish, and British, primarily), whereas only 4.6 percent were brought to the United States (Román 1996). By 1793, colonial Mexico had a population of 370,000 Africans and descendants of Africans-the largest concentration in all of Spanish America (Vinson 2000).

The legacy of the slave period in Latin America and the Caribbean is similar to that in the United States: Having lighter skin and European features increases the chances of socioeconomic opportunity, while having darker skin and African features severely limits social mobility (Hernández 2002).

White supremacy is deeply ingrained in Latin America and continues into the present. In Mexico, for instance, citizens of African descent, estimated to make up 1 percent of the population (Gleaton 2004), report that they regularly experience racial harassment at the hands of local and state police, according to recent studies by Antonieta Gimeno, then of Mount Holyoke College, and Sagrario Cruz-Carretero of the University of Veracruz. (Mount Holyoke College 2000; Cruz-Carretero 2003).

Anti-Black sentiment also manifests itself in Mexican politics. During the 2001 elections, for instance, Lazaro Cardenas, a candidate for governor of the state of Michoacan, is believed to have lost substantial support among voters for having an Afro Cuban wife, according to Yvette Cabrera in the 1 March 2002 *Orange County Register*. Even though Cardenas had great name recognition (as the grandson of Mexico's most popular president), he only won by 5 percentage points-largely because of the anti-Black platform of his opponent, Alfredo Anaya, who was quoted by Unification Press International's Steve Sailer on 8 May 2002 saying, "There is a great feeling that we want to be governed by our own race, by our own people."

Given this, it should not be surprising that migrants from Mexico and other areas of Latin America and the Caribbean arrive in the United States carrying the baggage of racism. Nor that this facet of Latino culture is in turn transmitted, to some degree, to younger generations along with all other manifestations of the culture.

The sociological concept of "social distance" measures the unease one ethnic or racial group has for interacting with another (Yancey 2003). Social science studies of Latino racial attitudes often indicate a preference for maintaining social distance from African Americans. (Mindiola, Flores Niemann, and Rodriguez 2002). And although the social distance level is largest for recent immigrants, more established

communities of Latinos in the United States also show a marked social distance from African Americans.

For instance, in University of Houston sociologist Tatcho Mindiola's 2002 survey of six hundred Latinos in Houston (two-thirds of whom were Mexican, the remainder Salvadoran and Colombian) and six hundred African Americans, the African Americans had substantially more positive views of Latinos than Latinos had of African Americans. Although a slim majority of the U.S.-born Latinos used positive identifiers when describing African Americans, only a minority of the foreign-born Latinos did so. One typical foreign-born Latino respondent stated, "I just don't trust them . . . The men, especially, all use drugs, and they all carry guns." This same study found that 46 percent of Latino immigrants who lived in residential neighborhoods with African Americans reported almost no interaction with them (Mindiola, Flores Niemann, and Rodriguez 2002, 44-45).

The social distance of Latinos from African Americans is consistently reflected in Latino responses to survey questions. In a 2000 study of residential segregation, Camille Zubrinsky Charles, a sociology professor at the University of Pennsylvania, found that Latinos were more likely to reject African Americans as neighbors than they were to reject members of other racial groups. In addition, in the 1999-2000 Lilly Survey of American Attitudes and Friendships, Latinos identified African Americans as their least desirable marriage partners, whereas African Americans proved to be more accepting of intermarriage with Latinos (Yancey 2003). Ironically, African Americans, who are often depicted as being averse to coalition building with Latinos, have repeatedly demonstrated in their survey responses that they feel less hostility toward Latinos than Latinos feel toward them.

Although some commentators have attributed the Latino hostility of African Americans to the stress of competition in the job market, a 1996 sociological study of racial group competition suggests otherwise. In a study of 477 Latinos from the 1992 Los Angeles County Social Survey, professors Lawrence Bobo, then of Harvard University, and Vincent Hutchings of the University of Michigan found that underlying prejudices and existing animosities contribute to the perception that African Americans pose an economic threat-not the other way around.

It is certainly true that the acrimony between African Americans and Latinos cannot be resolved until *both* sides address their own unconscious biases about one another. But it would be a mistake to ignore the Latino side of the equation as some observers have done-particularly now, when the recent violence in Los Angeles has involved Latinos targeting peaceful African American citizens.

This conflict cannot be sloughed off as simply another generation of ethnic group competition in the United States (like the familiar rivalries between Irish, Italians, and Jews in the early part of the last century). Rather, as the violence grows, the "diasporic" origins of the anti-Black sentiment-the entrenched anti-Black prejudice among Latinos that exists not just in the United States but across the Americas-will need to be directly confronted. When that is done, Latino and African American communities will be better positioned to diminish the violence and build coalitions. Past experience has shown that these two groups can work together. Some notable examples include the 1983 Chicago mayoral election campaign of Harold Washington (Guinier and Torres 2002) and the Young Lords alliance with the Black

Panthers in the 1960s (Fox 1996). Honestly confronting all the sources of interethnic conflict will only enhance the potential for more frequent, extensive, and lasting collaborations.

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