

Some Afro-Latinos say the phrase ‘Latinos for Black Lives Matter’ makes no sense

By **Rachel Hatzipanagos**

August 28, 2020 at 12:05 a.m. EDT



About US is an initiative by The Washington Post to explore issues of identity in the United States. [Sign up for the newsletter.](#)

When Janel Martinez started seeing the “Latinos for Black Lives Matter” hashtag trending, she saw it as the latest example of a long history of slights.

“It was extremely problematic simply because it’s erasing Blackness,” Martinez said. “But was I shocked? No, this is something that is definitely on brand for the Latinx community.”

Martinez is a Black Honduran-American and the founder of *Ain’t I Latina?*, an online destination for Afro-Latinos. She started the site in 2013, after a lifetime of noticing a void of people who look like her in television and magazines.

“The problem that I saw very frequently throughout media, in both Spanish-language media and media targeted at Latinx people in the U.S., was that Black stories, Black people were not valued,” Martinez said.

About 1 in 4 U.S. Latinos identify as Afro-Latino, according to a 2014 [Pew Research Center](#) survey. Yet Univisión only hired its first Afro-Latina to anchor an evening news show, [Ilia Calderón](#), in 2017.

While the United States tends to flatten Latinos as a vaguely Brown racial mass, Latino is an ethnicity. Those with roots in Latin America and the Caribbean can belong to any race. But the misconception about Latino identity is a common one.

Expressions like “Latinos for Black Lives,” or another iteration, “Brown Lives Matter” are, therefore, illogical, said Paul Joseph López Oro, an assistant professor in the department of Africana studies at Smith College.

“The phrase makes you first immediately think there are no Black people in the Latinx community,” said López Oro, who is a Black Honduran of Garifuna descent and was born in Brooklyn. “So even though that slogan most likely doesn’t come from a place of hatred or supporting racism against Black people, it comes from a place of marking Latinx people as non-Black, and the dangers of that is that it’s not true.”

‘Race doesn’t exist’

Latin American and Caribbean nations have long celebrated the mestizo or mulatto identity — those people who have some mixture of European, Indigenous and sometimes African ancestry. As a result, Black populations in Latin America are overlooked and often treated as though they aren’t Latino. Mexico only just this year began counting its Afro-Latino population in its census

the Latino population in its census.

“That creates a racial democracy where the discourse is that race doesn’t exist, racism is not our problem, racism is a U.S. problem,” López Oro said. “That, in fact, racism actually doesn’t exist because everybody has a little bit of everything.”

In reality, there are significant Black populations in Latin America. According to the [Slave Voyages website](#), of the 10.7 million Africans taken to the New World who survived the Middle Passage, just 388,000 landed in what became the United States. Brazil received 4.86 million Africans alone, and others were taken to the Caribbean and to the rest of North, Central and South America. An additional 52,000 people arrived to what became the United States from slave routes internal to the Americas.

Those Latinos who do identify as Black, however, encounter the racial hierarchy that favors light-skinned people.

Dash Harris, who is Black, has experienced those dynamics firsthand. Harris, who has dual U.S. and Panamanian citizenship, said her experiences traveling through Latin America demonstrate that racism doesn’t stop at the border.

“Wherever I’m moving through, whether it’s the U.S., Canada, Cuba, Colombia, name the country, I am identified as a Black woman and I’m identified as a problem to be dealt with or snuff out, and society treats me as such,” said Harris, a multimedia journalist, entrepreneur and doula.

Harris added that mestizaje, the idea of a nation of racially mixed people, has “obviously been successful in erasing Black people for people to even think ‘Latinos for Black Lives’ makes sense.”

The phrase also represents a lack of awareness of support for the movement in Latin America and [the Caribbean](#), Harris said.

“We’ve been saying, ‘Las vidas negras importan,’ or Black Lives Matter in Spanish, not only in solidarity with Black Americans, but in demanding justice for our own Black lives that have been targeted and sanctioned by the state,” Harris said.

Decentering Black people

Jonathan Rosa, an associate professor of education, anthropology, linguistics, and comparative race and ethnic studies at Stanford University, said discerning the motivations behind “Latinos for Black Lives” is complex.

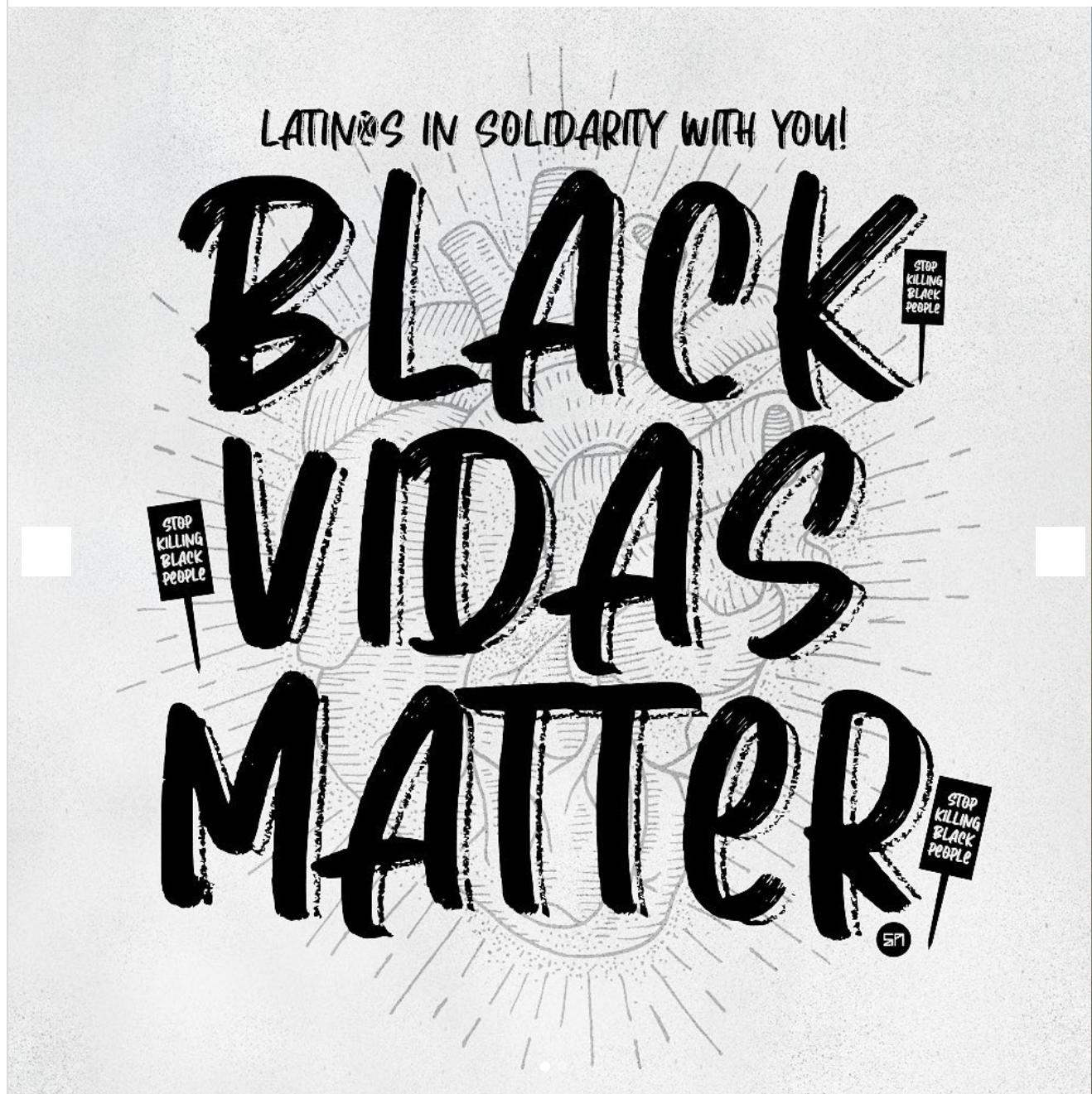
“For some people, it’s a slogan that corresponds to an investment in solidarity. From another perspective, it’s an appropriation of ‘Black Lives Matter,’ ” Rosa said. “And so it’s that tension that can be really challenging.”

D.C.-based graphic designer Steve Alfaro ran into this issue himself. Alfaro, who runs his own creative studio, created a T-shirt design after the police killing of George Floyd that read, “Latinos in solidarity with you! Black Vidas Matter.” He posted an [image of his design](#) on Instagram.



stevealfarola
Washington D.C.

[View Profile](#)



[View More on Instagram](#)

186 likes
stevealfarola

I appreciate everyone who reached out asking if I had any art supporting BLM. It took me a long time to get out of a dark place due to all the traumatic events that we are witnessing. I'm glad I was able to get out of this mental block and design again and support the call for justice.

Please download this FREE file and share it with anyone attending the peaceful protest.

Click on the link on my profile to access all files for FREE! . [#BlackLivesMatter](#) [#BlackVidasMatter](#)
view all 9 comments

Add a comment...

“I had a friend that had reached out to me, and she felt that the Afro-Latinx community was not included in the phrase that I had used,” Alfaro said. “And I was sort of caught off guard, as I didn’t have that awareness that [Afro Latinos] felt that way.”

After he told her that he only meant to express solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, she ended up removing a critical comment she’d posted on Instagram. He sold over 100 shirts, with the proceeds going to [the Bail Project](#), which raises funds to post bail for people in need.

“We need to figure out how to have these conversations,” said Alfaro, who identifies as Latinx. “I haven’t had a conversation with my family about Afro-Latinx people and anti-Blackness in my community. ... I’m glad people are telling their stories and talking about it because it’s real and it should be addressed.”

One moderator of the Facebook group [Latinos for Black Lives Matter](#) sees it differently. Sandra Lemus, a founder of the 600-plus member community, said that it’s open to everyone and that it includes Afro-Latinos.

“I can see where sometimes the phrase ‘Latinos for Black Lives Matter’ maybe excludes certain people, but it’s definitely welcome for everyone to participate,” Lemus said.

Although no one has expressed issues with the name of the group, if someone were to, Lemus said, she would put it to a vote. She said the group was intended to be a safe space for Latinos to discuss issues of racial inequality.

“There are still a lot of people in the Latino community that don’t understand what the Black community goes through,” Lemus said. “So I feel like we needed somewhere to share and inform the Latino community.”

She added that her group joins in with protests in North Carolina, where she lives, that support the Black Lives Matter movement, including one protest on Juneteenth. In turn, local Black Lives Matter activists also support protests against children being held in immigration detention centers.

“We support each other in the marches and protests,” Lemus said. “I would encourage everyone to join these different types of groups to get educated about the things others experience.”

While Black Latinx people, non-Black Latinx people and Black Americans have historically worked together to advance civil rights in the United States, Rosa, the associate professor, said the concern is that by putting the focus on Brown lives, Black experiences will be silenced.

Martinez, the founder of [Ain’t I Latina?](#), points out that what is likely to benefit Black people will also benefit other ethnic and racial groups. The 1964 Civil Rights Act, for example, was largely the result of a movement led by Black people, but the law protects against the discrimination of all people based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin.

“If Black people get the rights that they need and deserve, that would then mean Brown lives would, of course, get the rights that they need and deserve,” Martinez said. “That’s just how power dynamics work.”

While immigration is often framed as an issue predominantly affecting non-Black Latinos, 44 percent of families being detained by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement during the coronavirus pandemic are Haitian, according to a study by the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services, which provides legal services to immigrants. Black immigrants are also at higher risk of being deported, the same study found.

Black people are overwhelmingly most likely to die at the hands of police, but Hispanic people are also killed by police at a disproportionate rate, according to a Post database of fatal police shootings. Earlier this year, 18-year-old Andres Guardado, a Salvadoran American, was fatally shot in the back by a Los Angeles County sheriff’s deputy in June. The killing, in the midst of the national protests after Floyd’s death, drew a large outcry in the Los Angeles area.

Still, Martinez said, other groups should consider the issue of appropriation.

“The point of Black Lives Matter was to center Black people,” Martinez said.