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Remembering "Las Caras Lindas"

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Remembering "Las Caras Lindas"

Cover Page Footnote
This article is from an earlier iteration of Diálogo which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."
Las Caras Lindas de mi Gente Negra,
Son un desfile de melaza en flor,
Que cuando pasan frente a mi se alegra,
De su negrura todo el corazón

Las Caras Lindas de mi Raza Prieta,
Tienen de llanto, de pena y dolor,
Son las verdades que la vida reta,
Pero que llevan dentro mucho amor,

Somos la melaza que rie,
Somos la melaza que llora,
Somos la melaza que ama,
Y en cada beso,
Es conmovedora

Por eso vivo orgulloso,
De su colorido,
Somos betún amable,
De clara poesía,
Tienen su ritmo,
Tienen Melodía

Las Caras Lindas de mi Gente Negra

The beautiful faces of my Black people.
Are a parade of molasses in bloom,
And when they pass before me,
Their Blackness cheers my heart,

The beautiful faces of my dark race,
Are made of weeping, pain and suffering,
They are the truth that life challenges,

And they carry within so much love,

We are the molasses that laughs,
The molasses that cries,
The molasses that loves,
In each moving kiss

That's why I live proud of our color,
We are friendly shoe polish of clear poetry,
They have their rhythm,
They have their melody,
The beautiful faces of my Black people

Beautiful faces of my Black people.
Throughout the centuries, human and social conditions have provided motivation to develop artistic expression. In most instances, artists reflect these conditions on their canvasses, by their sculptures, in theatrical stage productions or musical compositions and lyrics. Presently, I believe that musical composers are at the forefront of this movement. It is through their lyrics and compositions that they express these social conditions—war, poverty, discrimination and patriotism among many others. Their musical works impact masses of people. Impact is achieved when the music elevates or raises the awareness and conscience in the intended listener.

In any corner of the world one can find music relating to patriotism, ethnic and racial pride. Twice in my lifetime I’ve had the experience of listening to songs which have awakened racial pride.

It’s been twenty-three years since the song Las Caras Lindas, was written by the Afro Puerto Rican composer Tite Curet Alonso, and recorded by the immortal Puerto Rican singer Ismael Rivera in an album entitled Esto Es Lo Mio (Tico Records, 1978). Curet Alonso’s inspiration probably stems from his observation of the negative attitude Afro-Latinos have created about themselves, as well as the state of mind created as a result of centuries of enslavement and colonialism. The attitude of self-denial and rejection of Black/African heritage, coupled with the embracing and acceptance of trying to become white, are examples of the mental conditions which continue to plague generations of Afro-Latinos.

In the early 1990’s, Tite Curet Alonso was interviewed by George Colliner, the host of Afro-Pop World Wide, a National Public Radio program. During this interview Curet Alonso was asked about Las Caras Lindas. He stated:

“Black people still carry along sorrow with them from the era of colonialism, “invisible chains”. I look at these faces of dark skinned people and they’re all so different from one another. There is a certain beauty in them, in the attitude they carry through life. That is what I was thinking, the lovely faces of my Black people”.

I wonder whether or not Tite Curet Alonso was enlightened by the experience of living in the United States as a journalist, and what, if any, impact the civil rights and the black resistance movement of the 1960s had on his inspiration to compose this tune. I am also curious whether or not a song which preceded Las Caras Lindas, by almost a decade, influenced the creation of this composition. The song I refer to is entitled, Say It Loud, I Am Black and I Am Proud, (King Record, K1015, 1969), written and recorded by the popular African American singer James Brown.

This tune had a personal impact on millions of African Americans, particularly during a crucial point in the history of the civil rights movement in the United States. The song provided a voice of self-acceptance, pride, hope and dignity to those individuals who for centuries felt excluded and disenfranchised from the rest of the American society. This song fueled and celebrated a new identity for Black Americans, which included a new greeting toward one another (brothers and sisters), and the creation of new fashions, i.e. the “Afro” hairstyle. This song even influenced individuals from other communities who were also subjected to similar conditions and identified with the predicament of the African American community. Recently at a social gathering, I happened to mentioned the James Brown tune and suddenly an individual yelled out,” Yeah, I remember that song, however we would sing the song by saying, “Say it Loud, I am Puerto Rican and I am Proud.”

Both of these tunes attempt to humanize Black people through their simple lyrics; by acknowledging and reaffirming our physical and spiritual beauty. In Caras Lindas, the composer describes Black people as a parade of molasses in bloom, molasses that cry and carry within so much love. In his tune, James Brown refers to Black people as being like the birds and the bees, individuals demanding to do things for them, who rather die on their feet than live on their knees.

I believe that the James Brown tune had a profound impact on many more people because of its timelines with the civil rights movement. Las Caras Lindas caught the attention of many and has become significant because it raises awareness about the beauty of Afro-Latinos. For so long Afro-Latinos continued to be bombarded by Eurocentric images that became the standard of beauty communicated by print and other media within their societies.

As we enter the new millennium, racism has resulted in new generations of Afro-Latinos questioning exclusion and discrimination against them. Las Caras Lindas was resuscitated in a 1997 recording by the world-renowned Afro-Peruvian singer Susana Baca (Susana Baca, Luaka Bop/ Warner Bros.). Baca has dedicated her artistic career to preserving and promoting traditional Afro-Peruvian art forms. She indicates that the words of this song pertained to all Black people throughout the Americas. I am certain that Tite Curet Alonso is pleased in the manner that Baca has interpreted his song.