

MEETING MIRELYS:

Reconstruyendo Imaginarios and ReWriting AfroLatina Representations

A Dialogue Between NeoSoul World Music Singer, Filmmaker

& Founder/Director of Latinegras® Omilani Alarcón

and Actress Indhira Serrano

*Quando vine de mi tierra
Ninguna gracia tenia
Me vine a ver si cambiaba
Tristeza por alegría
Déjame ver*

SUSANA BACA
CANTANTE AFROPERUANA

As artists, all that we speak, do and move is an extension of our inner-most being. Commercial entertainers like actress Indhira Serrano and myself *are* the media, however, what influences the ideas for what we create and accept as *marketable* extend far beyond the genius of our creativity and expression. It goes further than talent. The ideas that have shaped our trajectory are long-building, quantitative measures, coupled with a historic ideology defining *valuable, acceptable, commercial, marketable, or beautiful*. It is an ideology that repeats in different forms. Whether it be sheer luck or a bestowed responsibility, there is *something* that opened the road for Indhira Serrano and me to “*slip through the cracks*” in a system where it appears that all odds are against us.

Being a professional singer has afforded me the fortunate opportunity to travel a lot since I was young. I recall living in San José, Costa Rica and in Mexico DF where I stayed with big families and when it was *Telenovela* time, we all gathered in the living room and sat in intense concentration with our eyes glued to the television in suspense of the unfolding drama. Usually, not only was I the only Afrodescendiente in the room, I was also the only one who felt uneasy about the fact that either there were no representations of people who looked like me on television or the fact that the few Afrolatinos I did see on television, played subservient roles or were made to perform the role of an imbecilic caricature. In fact, at times, when they did not use a Black actor/actress to fulfill the role, a White Latino would appear in blackface and mimic an exaggerated stereotype of *blackness*. Quite often, my disapproval was met with an offensive, “we don’t even see you as Black” type of response. When you are surrounded by few images of yourself that only appear in such limited scope, it does something to your psyche. It is exhausting and disheartening.

I began to question my marketability, my worth and my value to the commercial market until I met *Mirelys*. Well, I did not *actually meet* Mirelys! She is a character from the telenovela *Celia* played by Indhira Serrano. At first, I was drawn to the novela because ... well ... *Celia Cruz*! The telenovela was beautiful, charming, and it was also the first time I saw a cast of so many AfroLatinos in so many diverse roles. While actresses like Jeimy Osorio, who played a young

Celia or Margoth Velázquez, who played the role of Celia's mother, definitely captured my heart, there was just *something* special about Mirelys. I think it was her strength and the complexity of her character that drew me in. I liked the feistiness and fieriness she had while going through the scandalous, heart breaking, and at times hilarious relationship tribulations. I also could relate to the hurt, compassion and good-heart I could feel in the character. She stood out to me and I was intrigued by the portrayal in a way that was incomprehensible.

I wanted to know *who* this character was. Not Mirelys, the telenovela character, I wanted to know Indhira Serrano. She left such an impression upon me that I wanted to know more about who the person was behind the *personaje*. Never did I imagine at that moment, that one day, I would have the opportunity.



We met, of all places, in Sevilla, Spain. We joined forces, as an unlikely unit – a professional singer and an actress – presenting at the 9th Biennial World Conference of African Diaspora Writers and Scholars (ASWAD). After a brief meeting of minds, it was clear what we came to do.

We sat in the lounge area of a swanky hotel, armed with laptops and a chest full of emotions welled up, about what it was like to be Black and Latina in the entertainment industry. Like an exploding dam, we were overflowing with ideas, feelings, and stories about things we encountered in the *industry*.

This encounter pushed me beyond *Mirelys* and into the bigger picture as she shared her story.

OMILANI: Estamos aquí, 2018, y somos 2 artistas, rompiendo barreras en nuestras propias carreras. Entonces, de tu perspectiva, ¿cuáles son los retos que enfrentamos hoy día en el mundo de entretenimiento?

INDHIRA: The first challenge that we face is to continue moving forward and to keep on breaking barriers as we avoid being funneled into other stereotypes. Although we may see new characters appear for Afrodescendiente artists and even though we may find new examples of AfroLatino role models, the difference is that for generations, everybody else has had a whole universe of forms, expression and representation of reality that looked like them. This is something

we are still slowly building, so the big challenge for me as an actress, is to try as much as possible to move past the stereotype and to reach as many representations of humanity as possible in the roles I select. Hopefully there will be a time when each person will have the opportunity to create new possibilities and to just be the “*first one*” and not the “*first Black one*”.

The second and important challenge we face is to be sure to keep opening the paths for the people who come behind us. We have to ensure that the people who are behind us know it is possible. We must move outside of the boxes keeping us enclosed, and for me personally, I believe that the most important challenge we have is to learn about what it means to *deserve*. We must practice a self-empowering attitude that does not make you feel guilty for knowing or for believing you *deserve* something that is meant for you.

It has been embedded in some people’s mind that they do not *deserve* anything. Especially here in Latin America. It is an established idea in the minds of many Afro Latinos. It is unfortunate that when someone does something amazing, not only in entertainment but in any area, people truly believe it is not possible or that it was *luck*. We have to be thankful for great opportunities, but we have to also recognize that we all deserve the same things everybody deserves.

We must also face the challenge of changing the way people think and perceive themselves. I am not only talking about the producers or directors of films or of a play. I do not only mean the people who own art galleries or music producers, I mean everyday people. We have to shift our consciousness and restructure our images or deconstruct the ideology that has constructed a limited perception of who we are. This change must reach both the community and the people who are responsible for creating content because people, on both sides, buy in to the image. No matter if it is a product, a song or a movie, people around us are consuming stereotypes and we have to keep on changing that every day.

OMILANI: ¿Cuál es tu papel favorito y por qué?

INDHIRA: I get asked that question a lot. Each of the characters I have played have a special essence that reaches me for a different reason. I love my first character in the movie *Piel* because it was the one that led me to the path and showed me that I wanted to be an actress. I enjoyed my role in a series called *Tres Milagros* - Because she was a *campesina*- a country girl, who was thrown away from her home and from her land because of the war and the guerillas and because of that, she suffered so much. She lost her husband and she lost her Child. It was really close to my heart. Later on, I played a woman who was the mistress of a policeman and she was funny, she was evil, she was seductive, and many people remember me from that character. So, it is special for me. The character I played in *El Clon* was really sweet and she was a dancer and, of course, my character in *Azúcar* was powerful because she was wise. She was a woman with a lot of wisdom. And of course, Mirelys in *Celia* because...

OMILANI: [*now I smile wide and express excitement because this is my favorite character*]

INDHIRA: [*Indhira laughs and continues to describe Mirelys*] ...because she was a powerful woman and an intelligent woman. And a woman with many colors in her performance.

But I do not have a personal favorite or a favorite character because I fell in love with each one of my characters. I am still waiting for different ones. I love my characters when I don't have to repeat the same types of roles.

OMILANI: ¿Tienes ideas o cosas que te gustaría ver en la tele con respecto a los afrodescendientes?

INDHIRA: I'd like to see more things on television in the Latino market like Afrodescendiente characters in positions of power. I especially like characters that Shonda Rhimes creates such as the characters on the popular show *Scandal* or like the character Viola Davis plays in *How to Get Away with Murder*. These shows have powerful characters. Interesting characters. Lawyers, doctors, entrepreneurs. The characters may be wealthy, intelligent, independent, Black women. This is important because I have realized that our kids in the neighborhoods, in towns or in the city are watching. Our Black Latino kids idolize and respond to those characters and the vision of who they are creates part of their dreams and goals. What they see on film and television influences who they want to be when they grow up.

I remember when I was working with a social foundation a few years ago. Spending time with the children in the community, when I realized in a very real way, the power of *imaginarios*. I could clearly see why the images we promote in popular culture are so important. For some children and for some adults too, television, print media and music are their only exposure to the world outside of their communities.

At this point, in the Latino market, the diversity of representations of successful Afrodescendientes are highly limited. It seems that the well-known representations are either famous or infamous. Many young children glamorize the athletes, actors and singers they see on television. Although they know drugs are bad and it is not an honorable position, there is also a glamorization of the infamous culture as a way to get rich quick and easy amid the danger.

If the world you see on television, including the way the talent looks, does not match the world you see at home, and if this is what is promoted to you as "success," you may grow an ambition to get "success" in the way you have seen promoted to you. For many children, *success* is either the idea that they be a famous *deportista* (athlete) or that they develop another talent that can make them famous.

However, the reality is, that sometimes the drug dealer, living right there in the community may have an opportunity to get to them before the university professor, or the doctor or lawyer does. The possibility must be present, and they will find it whether it be through fame or infamy, but we hope for positive success.

We have to expose children, to options and to the possibilities for success. This is why I make it a point to personally go into communities and talk with the youth and share my story because they need to see what is possible, right in front of them.

If we can give the children multiple examples and models of success it will change them in a positive way. However, the change cannot be only one or the other.

We have to make the change from the communities, to the towns, through our art, and in our professions, all the way to the decision makers and those who add content to popular media. This change must be throughout. There is a definite need to show more successful Afrodescendientes as teachers, lawyers, doctors, and even as community leaders. When they see themselves reflected in images of success, they will have more possibilities to dream.

OMILANI: Which term do you prefer? Latina? AfroLatina? Afrodescendiente?

INDHIRA: I have some issues with the name Afro Descendent, Afro Latino, or Afro American. I hope one day it will not be necessary anymore. It will have to be unnecessary. I think we are under construction. I think we are developing our identity. Even in this century and decade, we still have to tell people, “We are here” -- that’s why the terms are important right now.

I hope one day people understand that Latino is a communion of Afro people, Indigenous people, Mestizo people, White people and many more. Through more unity and understanding, there may come a time when we do not need those names anymore. Right now, we are working to creating a space to have people realize that AfroLatinos exist all over the world. Even though I hope this term will not last forever, I think right now it is necessary. I consider myself AfroLatina because it is an easy way to define myself for the whole world. In fact, I hope there will be a time where we will not need the term Latino either.

OMILANI: *Thanks, Indhira!*

Just as I am preparing concluding comments, Indhira nudges my arm and says, “Wait a minute” with a smile. “I also have a few questions for you.” At that moment, I close my laptop and embrace the unreal moment when one of my favorite actresses in the world turns the tables and becomes the interviewer. I listen intently as she speaks the first question.

INDHIRA: Why did you decide to create Latinegras? Where did you get the term? Why did you decide to use it?

OMILANI: The funny thing is that I *didn’t* decide on any of this! So many unexplainable things happen in my life and I can truly say that this was a long time in the making. There are three answers to this question. First, I grew up in a place that did not understand my diasporic Blackness. In my case, that includes Asian too since I am second generation Filipina as well.

Perhaps I was a strange child because, I did not fancy dolls and girly toys, my joy as a child, was books. I would read all day and absorb myself into different worlds. When I was about 8 years old, my aunt gave me a book. It was Piri Thomas’s book, *Down These Mean Streets*, a book about a Nuyorican kid coming of age in New York City during the segregation era. He traveled to the South to see if people would treat him differently since he was Puerto Rican. In the end, he learned, “if you’re Black, you’re Black.” I fell in love with that book because it was the first time I truly saw myself in a book. I understood the struggle with his father who was the first generation from Puerto Rico. I felt understood for the first time. Then I read more and if you can believe, even at a young age of like 10 or 12, I was reading scholarly articles and books. *I forgot to mention, not only did I not like toys... I also did not read much fiction.* Around that time, I read an article called

“Latinegras” by Lilian Comas Díaz and I never heard of it before, but I related to what it represented. It was me. A woman of obvious Black ancestry with Latino roots. In research, the earliest use of the word I could find was an AfroPuerto Rican scholar Xeñon Cruz in the 1970’s. I do not claim to have invented the word, but I have a feeling that I have introduced the word to a new generation of people who never heard of the term. I branded it, not to take a word that I knew existed, but because an entire vision came to me and I felt a calling to move in the way I moved. However, I honor and respect the source, always. Getting the message out and expressing all of these things in my head took center stage as I dealt with my *skeletons*. The more I spoke, the more I found that I was not alone.

Growing up mixed can be confusing and painful. Half of the time I don’t know who I am or I may change my mind. Sometimes I feel a lot of pressure to identify as other people deem proper. By that I mean, there is a *woke* way people identify. However, sometimes in the *woke* world, I’m criticized for fitting or not fitting a certain visual aesthetic.

It actually bothers me that I get criticized for my skin complexion. Actually, I don’t understand it. I don’t feel I fit into the “light skinned” privilege group because I was usually the darkest person in the people I grew up around. Of my siblings, my hair is the only one that came out in this bushy afro. My nose is flat, and my hips are wide. My weight fluctuates and now I am in a skin that some may not see as beautiful, but I had to reclaim my own beauty and my own image.

So now, I look at my overweight self, my bushy hair, my funny looking self, in the mirror and have decided to “Love the Skin I’m In” – that is why it is the motto of Latinegras. Each day is a challenge to love myself.

INDHIRA: Why did you start this movement. Do you feel like you are gathering Latinas around you in awareness and consciousness?

OMILANI: I wrote a song called *Latinegra* for one of my students who needed the encouragement. I also shared it with a friend (who is in the film now) and she really had an epiphany. She got chills when I spoke the word to her and showed her a conceptual flyer. She felt a strong message and told me that this should be my “thing,” *you know*, that I was destined to do something bigger than just a song with Latinegras.

I did not want anything to do with Latinegras, Latinos, or any affiliation with the identity. Living in Miami, I was treated terribly by the local Cuban community. It was so mentally and spiritually draining that I hated everything Spanish. I used to be totally fluent, I even ranked highest and earned the top score on the National Spanish Exam, but after moving to Miami, I found anything Spanish oriented to be repulsive (music, language, food – anything).

I tried everything I could to avoid starting this movement.

As a matter of fact. I made the first trailer just playing around with iMovie. Since my friend thought it should be my thing, I just posted it online as a joke, *and it is still there*, I said, what if this were a real movie. I put it on my Youtube channel thinking no one would watch this made up trailer with fake film festival awards, but what happened next really touched me.

I was getting an outpour of messages. People wrote things like, “I can’t wait” or “this is so needed”. People were inboxing me with their stories and sharing their hearts with me. Still, I did not want to participate. I wanted those in the inbox to come forward and speak *their* story.

It was not that I did not have the passion or the need to use my voice. It was that I felt like I was still figuring it out and I wanted to find the answer outside of myself. I even tried to convince a person I met when I first started the project, to take it over and to take credit for the work. As a matter of fact, I elevated her participation over all of the work I was doing to make Latinegras work. I did a lot to spread the name. Now I have trademarked the brand, but I almost gave that away too, because the work, the changes I was seeing in the community, and the passion I had for unity was more important than being the “leader.”

Now, I embrace that I am the director and Founder of the brand, but this was not an immediate success. When I first started Latinegras, it seemed like everything was falling apart. No one would interview with me. My friend in the entertainment industry contacted some of her friends who are professionals in film to help me start my project and film it properly. They answered the Cc’d email but I could never get anyone to respond to me. I was working as a French teacher at the time and quit my job. I took my last paycheck and purchased a DSLR camera. When I couldn’t get help or interviews for this project I knew I was called to do, I was frustrated and asked, “*Now what?*” As a matter of fact, I posted a video online telling people I was annoyed that I had to tell my story since no one would tell theirs.

There was no choice. I decided to take my new camera and go to Mayaguez, Puerto Rico. I heard about it so much growing up, I wondered if that was home for me. My mom always found a way to fit Mayaguez into a sentence. She made sure if we knew anything, we knew Mayaguez. Once I turned the cameras on myself and started telling my story, something opened up and I had so many people volunteering for Latinegras that I had to turn people away.

INDHIRA: Why do you keep singing? In what way is your music related to your Latinegras movement?

OMILANI: Music will never be a separate entity from me. It is my first language, haha! And I mean that! Sometimes I have trouble expressing myself when it is not through my art, or writing, or music. Music keeps me balanced.

When I was studying at Cornell, writing this massive thesis and reading heavy texts on diasporic theory and especially the texts from theorists like Derrida, Foucault, or even Heidegger, I needed a serious break!

I would write three chapters and would make three albums all at the same time, while publishing books on my own. I was the first to defend my thesis in my cohort and it was so long I had to delete a few chapters. I’m like that, a little intense when it comes to creation, but I love it.

Beyond Latinegras being inspired by the eponymous title track, my DNA is totally in my music. Now that I say that aloud, it sounds a little strange, but what I mean is that my music is, as Issa Rae would say, *hella* Latinegra. Lol. I speak in Spanglish while singing Hip hop, Ballads, Salsa, and whatever I am feeling and expressing. I pay tribute to not just musical artists like Celia Cruz, but I honor the strong women scholars, poets and warriors in my music and sound. I call them by name. It is reaching people and I am building an audience. I just have to follow your advice and stop believing that I don't deserve a space or that asserting my presence is *wrong*. It is a bad habit and I don't know where we get these things from, so thank you for your insight.

INDHIRA: Where do you see yourself a few years from now? Do you think your movements now will change your destiny and the way people around the world look at Latinos?

OMILANI: [*the first thought that comes to mind is that I hope to be directing my first Blockbuster starring you, but I amend the words a bit for modesty*]. Well, in five years, I imagine, I will be going to pick up my 6th Grammy on my way to make a blockbuster film starring Indhira Serrano! *¿Qué te parece?* I'm just joking. The truth is I am not sure where this life will lead me, but I'm ready for the journey.

INDHIRA: Actually, I love your answers and I look forward to being in a movie with you directing me. I know I'm going to be great.

As I picked myself up from metaphorically fainting out of the chair from her inspiring words, I realized in that moment how without saying any words, she reinforced her initial message. She showed me possibility. I met *Mirelys* as a fan, but found in *Indhira*, far more than I ever expected.



Beyond all of the advice that came out in the interviews, I realize that having a good mentor is so important. I did not set out to learn the things I learned from Indhira, but as a person and as an artist, reaching for a space behind her, she helps me see possibility. From the strong women she plays on the television, to the strong and caring woman I see before me, something about the example she sets and the fearlessness she has, wakes up a consciousness within me to believe.

It charges me with the tools and determination to conquer weaknesses and face the world with a level of excellence that drives me beyond a category or a limitation. I would command you to label me fearless, label me impeccable in my skill, or label me Latina, but after this sublime experience, I declare that I don't need to be labeled at all. I am.

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