On The Question of Race

They ask me to write down my race
And I think and think very seriously
and consider writing down the truth and have my answer read

I have a dark man listening to a bolero lighting a match inside this body
I have an old lady showing pictures to her children talking in a language called Spanish inside this body

They ask me to write down my race
And I think and think very seriously
and consider writing down the truth and have my answer read

I have another woman who looks like me she comes to me when I am dreaming she is trying to teach me the words to a language that I used to know

I have a drunk man he is painting a picture we share a secret it hides in the memory of a kiss
I have an old man he is singing patting juba passing the tradition on through the rhythms in his hands

I have a brown man he is painting a picture we share a secret it hides in the memory of a kiss
I have an old man he is singing patting juba passing the tradition on through the rhythms in his hands

I have a kid in the fifth grade who says he’s American “but my father’s from El Salvador and my mother is black”
I have all these people these drums these guiros all these aguacates

I have all these voices that have not yet learned to speak orisha tormentas sewas ancestors

I have a school girl in Bahia and a young man cutting cane in Miami inside this body
They ask me to write down my race and I think very seriously and consider writing down the truth and have my answer read

I have all these rhythms these languages these songs

I have my aunt Josephine my uncle James and my grandfathers poetry inside this body

I have doubledutch miss mary mat and king of the mountain inside this body

I have rare essence sarah vaughn tonya la negra and a yaqui deer song inside this body

I have the shrimp boat florida avenue bar and grill and doña ezzuena inside this body

I have eastgate simple city spotsylvania county, va orangeburg, sc central square and old pascua village inside this body

I have my grandmothers laughter inside this body

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Teaching Ideas

Two students can prepare to read this dialogue poem to the class. Read the shaded sections in unison. Alternate reading the other sections as indicated in the numerical sequence.

Please note that the authors both live in the Washington, D.C. area. A number of the references to street corners and neighborhoods refer to communities in D.C.

After listening to the poems, share in pairs your responses. How did they make you feel about the authors? About yourself? About application forms? (You may want to discuss how the categories on application forms are often included for positive reasons, to promote equity. Nevertheless, they tend to de-personalize and generalize our identity.)

Close your eyes and conjure images of all the people “inside of you.” These ancestors can be either “real” or chosen ancestors. Open your eyes and write a list of these images. Then write a poem about who has contributed to who you are today.

Quique Aviles and Michelle Banks are writers, actors and teachers with the Latinegro Theatre, a project of the Latin American Youth Center in Washington, D.C. They write and perform theatre that challenges the audience to think about contemporary social issues. The performances typically involve the audience. For more information, write to: Latinegro, LAYC, 3045 15th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20009.

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