

# black / Maybe: An Afro Lyric: Study Guide & Discussion Questions

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Poet, storyteller, and essayist Roberto Carlos Garcia is a self-described “sancocho [...] of provisions from the Harlem Renaissance, the Spanish Poets of 1929, the Black Arts Movement, the Nuyorican School, and the Modernists.” Garcia is rigorously interrogative of himself and the world around him, conveying “nakedness of emotion, intent, and experience,” and he writes extensively about the Dominican Afro-Latinx and Afro-diasporic experience.

His poems and prose have appeared or are forthcoming in *Bettering American Poetry*, *The Root*, *Those People*, *Rigorous*, *Academy of American Poets Poem-A-Day*, *Gawker*, *Barrelhouse*, *The Acentos Review*, *Lunch Ticket*, and many others.

He is founder of the cooperative press Get Fresh Books Publishing. A native New Yorker, Roberto holds an MFA in Poetry and Poetry in Translation from Drew University, and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

## Comments on the Text:

Part history lesson, part memoir, and part love letter, Roberto Carlos Garcia’s *black/Maybe: An Afro Lyric* explores identity, belonging, and race with grace and frankness. In the opening essay, Garcia paints a broad portrait of home that includes housing projects and suburbs, a grandmother’s apartments, a rooming house, and “cracked and crooked sidewalks forming patterns like neurons.” In this essay, “Home [An Irrevocable Condition],” Garcia grants us access to places that have formed him, describing even how the cracks in the concrete “made new forms, retreaded old ones, and [were] used . . . all the time like stencils,” patterns that created a life. These themes of identity and home continue throughout the collection, as Garcia navigates a world where being black/Maybe is an irrevocable part of both.

—Donna Vorreyer, *RHINO Magazine*

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As Garcia later discusses in the lyric essay “black Maybe,” he could not imagine how many times he would have to answer the question “Where are you from?” occupying the liminal space of “being black in between,” while negotiating the paradox of being “black in a country that by all indications hates black people, and [...] descended from people that are black, but pretend not to be black.” Throughout the book, Garcia skillfully recreates the complexities of the Afro-Latinx identity, opening the conversation to many voices and providing historical context.

—Emari Di Giorgio, *Tupelo Quarterly*

The speaker's pain and frustration of trying to grapple with his identity and not finding acceptance with either community is especially felt in the poems that combine personal memory, such as being shunned by a black poet, with family history told through the lens of race and colonization. The speaker is constantly the one on the margins. The book concludes with "**black Maybe**," which is more of a personal and historical essay than a prose poem. In it, Garcia gives a brief history of the Dominican Republic, which helps to explain his grandmother's aversion to blackness, as she grew up living under the brutal dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo, who ordered the deaths of countless Haitians and dark-skinned Dominicans. What Garcia again does so well is place his personal story within a larger historical framework. Garcia's **black/Maybe** is a book that feels important in the present moment, as global nationalism continues to rise, and darker-skinned people continue to be vilified, including in the U.S. The book is in part a history lesson, but one that contextualizes first-person narratives to show how the past impacts the present and continues to affect us in deeply personal ways.

—Brian Fanelli, *Pedestal Magazine*

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Roberto Carlos García's hybrid poetry collection, *black/Maybe*, is both a Caribbean/U.S. history lesson and an intimate view of how colorism and systemic racism in the Latinx community—and among those who interact with Latinos/as—hinders the possibility for intimacy and worthwhile friendship or familial bonding. Five movements in the book are separated by stark black pages, which is how one might imagine narrow-minded people might perceive any and all color, without the nuance that García expertly depicts and explores in all the pages in between the inky separations. This work, in García's own words, points out that "the Latinx community, has some serious reckoning to do with racialism and racism" (Mendez 2018). The author is writing directly to Latinos who have not come to terms with Latin America's African ancestry and accepted their own family lineage. However, it also asks African Americans, and other folks in the United States, to know the history of their Latinx friends and peers, to understand that some of us are just as Black as someone who is not of Latino descent...

When an Afro-Latino is denied by both family and literary colleagues, the sting is formidable. García traces this pattern of categorization and denial to the Castas paintings, which are depicted on the cover of the collection. When the Spanish came, they had to figure out an economic system that kept those who they wanted to keep as slaves in their place, and the Castas imagery created that system. The heteronormative grid depicts a series of possible interracial marriages and where they are in a hierarchical order. Races imagined to be "purer" are at the top and races that are generally darker in skin color and more "mixed" are at the bottom. In his poem, "Casta," García follows the chronology of our racial categories, starting with the conquest, continuing with the Castas, and continuing with current racial categories found on the census forms of today, all with the repeated refrain, "And It Goes On" (23-24). One can see how white supremacists might continue to use these categories, as it is in their nature to create these separations, but what García thoughtfully points out is how *everyone* perpetuates these separations, even those of us who have a shared history...

What García, in effect, does with this collection is show the timeline of dehumanization of the Afro-Latino, how that affects not only one's identity but also how one is perceived by others and, ultimately, the violence that occurs as a result of this dehumanizing categorization. García notes in multiple poems that this racism/colorism goes hand in hand with sexism and misogyny/toxic masculinity. I would urge folks to read *black/Maybe* alongside works by Willie Perdomo and Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*. This collection is definitely in the same category in terms of themes and quality.

—Dr. Grisel Y. Acosta, Professor of Latinx Studies, CUNY Bronx Community College



### Discussion Questions:

#### Parts 1 & 2 (pgs 1-20):

- 1) In the epigraph on page vii Ellison explains that people of African ancestry [in the West] are linked by slavery, systems of inequality, and racialized thinking. In what ways does the opening essay, “Home [An Irrevocable Condition]” and the poems in the opening chapter dramatize this?
- 2) What are some examples of the ideological, institutional, interpersonal, internalized, and intersectional racism being explored in the poems?
- 3) The opening pages of *black / Maybe: An Afro Lyric* contain several epigraphs. How do the epigraphs work together to serve as preface, as summary? How do they create foreshadowing in the book, and point to themes?
- 4) So far, which themes from the book stand out most to you? Why?

#### Part 3 (pgs 22-34):

- 5) What is the importance of the Greek Chorus in this book? How do the differences between the characters in the chorus inform what’s happening in the book?
- 6) What voice does Mama Ana represent for the speaker in the poems? Miguel Piñero? James Baldwin?
- 7) Research the terms in the poem “Casta.” Which term would apply to you? Your immediate family? Your partner? What animal or kind of insult inspires the term? How does it make you feel that the *casta* taxonomy exists?
- 8) Discuss this chapter's themes: spirituality, ancestors, dreams (*mensajes*), family histories, class, socio-economics, coming of age.





#### Part 4 (pgs 36-54):

- 9) How does the personal become political in this section? Discuss the intersections between this section and the ones before it.
- 10) How is the N word used in your friends group, your community, your family? Has anyone ever checked you on it? What kinds of conversations have you had with people about using the N word?
- 11) Think about the different ways this chapter depicts the struggles of Afro-descendents around the world.
- 12) Andre 3000 wore a jumpsuit inscribed with the words “ACROSS CULTURES DARKER PEOPLE SUFFER MOST. WHY?” Discuss different answers to this question.

#### Part 5 (Pages 56-64)

- 13) In what ways do Garcia’s Dominican-American experiences intersect, mirror, or diverge from your own?
- 14) Did this section help you better understand yourself and/or your own experience as a Person of Color? Why or why not?
- 15) What is Garcia’s main argument? What is the implication of his argument? How would things have to change if his argument became political will and or action?

