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## Blackish: Afrolatinidad and Dominican Identity in NYC

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Blackish: *Afrolatinidad* and Dominican Identity in NYC

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
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## Introduction

“I don’t got to tell you that I’m black. I expect you to know it. When my father taught me about Caribbean countries, he told me that these Europeans took over our lands. That’s why we all speak different languages. I expect people to understand that just because we’re not African American, we are still black. It’s still in our culture. Just like everybody else, we came over here the same fucking way. I hate when people try to take my roots from me. Because we know that there’s African roots inside of us.”

— Cardi B in an interview with *CR Fashion Book* (2018)

The quote above is from an interview that rapper Cardi B did with *CR Fashion Book*, a magazine devoted to fashion, beauty, and celebrity news. In her own interview with *The Breakfast Club*, a New York City-based radio show hosted by DJ Envy, Angela Yee, and Charlamagne tha God, actress Dascha Polanco declared: “I consider myself an Afro-Latina. I think we are very black. ... I consider myself to be a black woman. And I think a lot of Dominicans should because from what I *see*, that's what we are” (2016). Polanco, a Dominican-American woman who grew up between Brooklyn, New York and Miami, made the claim that she is an Afro-Latina, a black woman. Not only that, but she asserted that many Dominicans should likewise see themselves as black. Echoing her sentiments in her *Breakfast Club* interview, singer Amara La Negra asserted: “I’m Dominican, born and raised in Miami ... And I’m obviously an Afro-Latina” (2018). Sharing Dominican-American identity, all of these women chose to define themselves as black.

Polanco’s claims were met with Charlamagne’s confusion about the difference between race and nationality. “Why not just be Dominican?” he asked. She explained to him that there is a difference between ethnicity (“where you’re from”) and race, stating that she can be both Dominican and black. Amara’s comments, which came nearly two years later, were again met with confusion, as DJ Envy stated “I thought [Afro-Latino] was half-black, half-Latino.”

Evidenced by the responses the two women received, there are very clear misunderstandings

about the meaning and ancestral implications of the term Afro-Latinx. Both Charlamagne and DJ Envy saw “Dominican” and “Latino” as taking the place of “black,” constituting distinct markers of identity between which there was no fluidity. In their minds, “Dominican” was not and could not be “black.” However, as the statements made by the women showed, thinking of themselves as both was easy, and the term Afro-Latina presented a way of marrying the two identities; it was the product of their lived experiences. Their nuanced understanding of their own identity represents a new racial consciousness among Dominican-Americans. Aside from making a statement about their race and ethnicity, their words operate in the realm of historical storytelling. Their words, as well as Cardi’s, exist in conversation with a long history of antiblackness amongst Dominicans.

The list, however, does not end with these women or even in the world of celebrities. In the realm of politics, Adriano Espaillat also made waves in 2016 when he replaced the longstanding incumbent Charles Rangel as the Representative of New York’s 13<sup>th</sup> Congressional District. Espaillat is of Dominican descent, born in the Dominican Republic and raised in Washington Heights from the age of nine. His predecessor, Charles Rangel, born in Harlem, himself of African American and Puerto Rican descent, had represented the area encompassing Harlem, Washington Heights, other parts of uptown Manhattan, and Bedford Park in the Bronx since 1971. More importantly, he was one of the founding members of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) and had been lauded as a major black figure in New York City politics. Following Rangel’s tenure, Espaillat found himself needing to follow up a history of powerful black congressional leadership. Describing himself as a Afro-Latino and having already joined the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, he expressed an interest in joining the Congressional Black Caucus, being the first Dominican to do so. His interest was met with some friction, being that

the caucus has historically been exclusively African-American, barring entrance in the past to white people who have attempted to join.

No formal request to join has been filed on the part of Espaillat and the members of the CBC have not made any official statement either denying or accepting his entry. However, the very fact of his intent to join forced the members of the CBC to question the nature of the caucus as an arbiter of blackness. Are (Afro-)Dominicans black? If so, does that make them African Americans? Are they something else entirely? Does that entitle them to membership in this historically Black American caucus? Should we alter the criteria for membership? Espaillat's presence in Congress disrupted traditional boundaries, both imagined and codified, between blackness and Dominicanness. In an interview with the *Latino USA* podcast, he described his entrance into U.S. Congress as "a great opportunity to bring the message of Afro-Latinos and to understand that maybe some of our ancestors picked cotton and maybe some others cut sugar cane" (Espaillat 2017).

## **My Story**

It's only been recently that I've learned more about my family's lineage. I've begun to ask my parents and grandparents questions about our roots: "We're Colombian, but what does that really mean?" For my parents, being Colombian is a fact that explains all aspects of their identities. It is also a given for them that we are not *negros* (read: black) nor *gringos* (read: white Americans). I embody a different narrative. Although I was born in Colombia, I moved to Miami, Florida with my family at the age of five. Although phenotypically my parents are what most Colombians would call *mestizos*, ancestrally there is a much deeper history of indigeneity, Africanity, and Middle Eastern immigration that complicates the ways that I identify and am

perceived. My experiences are also those of someone who exists in between two places, two countries, and two histories. As such, I am responsible for navigating the cultural entanglements that come with being in that position.

Growing up in Miami, I have always known that I'm not white and that mine is not a white experience. For a long time I had the luxury of not thinking extensively about my race because I lived in neighborhood made up exclusively of Latinxs of diverse races, nationalities, and family histories. As far as I was concerned, I knew that I was Colombian — as my parents had taught me — and that was enough. Being brown-skinned in a community of people of varied skin tones didn't give anyone reason to single me out. Other than that, we were all loud, spoke Spanglish, listened to rap, salsa, and reggaeton at obnoxious volumes, and had families that all cooked with the same GOYA-brand spices. More importantly, however, everybody knew everybody. I remember my mother always sending me to my friend's apartment to buy *deditos* and *empanadas* from his mom and to the apartment building next to ours to pick up calling cards for us to contact our family back in Colombia. I don't recall a single day that I left my house and didn't greet the Cubans who lived downstairs and were always loitering on the front steps. This was my reality.

All through elementary school, all of the schools I went to had been a mix of Latinxs and Black Americans. During that time, all of my best friends had been African-American. Although my parents would have and often did say otherwise, I did not see myself as all that different from them. When it was time for middle school, however, a shift took place. My parents enrolled me in a charter middle school, followed by a charter high school, both a ways away from my neighborhood. In these schools all of the students were Latinx, mostly of white Cuban descent. I recently learned that my mother made that choice because she wanted to send me to a school

where there weren't as many black people; this was intentional. Still, throughout my time there, I did not, at my core, feel any difference between myself and those I went to school with; we were all Latinxs, after all.

College was the place in which I started to question myself and my family's heritage; knowing we were Colombian was no longer enough. Attending predominantly white American institutions made me more self-conscious about the markers that made me different: my skin, my hair, the way I spoke, etc. I was no longer surrounded by the Latin culture in which I found comfort, forced to confront my non-whiteness. Not being able to pass for my white colleagues, I found myself searching for spaces that reflected the culture that I came from. From the moment I arrived at Bard College in the fall of 2014, I took classes that taught me about race in the United States and Latin America, educating myself about the multiple histories of *latinoamericanos*, who I saw as my people. Surrounding myself with people who shared my same struggles, both as non-white Latinxs and first-generation college students, I began to search for answers about my family's racial lineage and make sense of my own lived experiences. A large number of the friends I made were Dominicans, and the more I spoke to them the more I began to see myself in their narratives and in their search for identity — happening parallel to mine. Just as I did, they wanted to understand where the different components of their identities — their Dominicaness, their blackness, their color, etc. — fit in their lives. The questions that we asked ourselves were the same: “What does my nationality imply about my race?” “Am I an Afro-Latino/a/x?” “Does that make me black? Is blackness reserved only for African Americans?” “Is this what defines me?”

To this day my relationship with *afrolatinidad*<sup>1</sup> is complicated. My identity is something that I find myself constantly shifting, having to prove and renegotiate it as much with myself as with others; this process is not linear. However, although I don't know if I can rightfully call myself an Afro-Latinx, every day I find out something new about myself and my family's story that I am using to rebuild a collective narrative that will help me understand my place in history. This project is a product of both my drive to make sense of my identity and my desire to make space in academia for the narratives of people who are equally grappling with the racial dilemmas of the personal and collective pasts they embody. This is my contribution to a movement seeking to unearth and wrestle with Latin America's antiblack past and present, which are both unquestionably and intimately bound up with the histories of a people that its cultures and societies often refuse to recognize.

## Methods

My search for participants began sometime in October of 2017. At first, I thought to reach out to community organizations in places such as upper Manhattan and the Bronx, areas with large Dominican populations, that could connect me with locals involved in community affairs. However, that option quickly proved itself unviable as the contacts from organizations I had reached out to quickly either lost interest or ended the correspondence. My next option was to target local colleges in NYC in the same areas that I searched for organizations in, which led me to form a relationship with the administration of Boricua College. Contacting the college's campuses in Washington Heights and the Bronx, I established lines of communication and obtained permission from the deans to recruit participants. However, upon informing the deans

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<sup>1</sup> *Afrolatinidad* is a Spanish-language term referring to the collective cultural identity of Latinxs who are of African descent, whether partially or fully.

that I would require permission to recruit participants directly on campus, they narrowed my permissions in such a way that only allowed me to recruit by posting flyers around their campuses. Thus, this method of recruitment proved unviable as well, knowing that such indirect forms of recruitment, especially without incentive, would not guarantee that I receive the number of people that I sought to interview within the timeframe of my research.

Seemingly without options, I was reminded my advisor of the network of connections with Dominicans and Dominican-Americans that I had developed in my time at Bard College, most of whom lived in NYC. My first method of recruitment involved speaking to friends and acquaintances at Bard that identified as either Dominican or Dominican-American and, through their referrals, finding other participants who they knew qualified and would potentially be interested in participating. My second method involved reaching out to college- and university-based organizations that created spaces for people who identified as Latinx or Dominican and reaching out to possible participants by proxy of club leaders.

In the end, I recruited a total of eleven participants, conducting interviews with each of them. All of them were Dominican-Americans between the ages of nineteen and twenty-four who belonged to either the 1.5<sup>2</sup> or second generation. They had all lived in NYC for all or at least part of their childhood or adolescence. Of the eleven, four were enrolled at Bard at the time of the interview, three had previously attended Bard, two were enrolled at the State University of New York at New Paltz, one was enrolled at Baruch College, and another had previously graduated from the Fashion Institute of Technology. Of all of the participants, seven were men and four were women. Interviews were conducted at Bard College, SUNY New Paltz, and various sites in Washington Heights and the Bronx. Two of the interviews done in NYC were

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<sup>2</sup> The 1.5 generation refers to young immigrants who were born in one country and spent either their childhood or adolescence in the country to which they immigrated.

conducted in participants' homes. In order to protect the identities of my participants, I have opted to use pseudonyms when identifying them.

## Overview

In the eyes of many, the existence of Afro-Latinxs shatters the perceived binary between blackness and *latinidad*.<sup>3</sup> For Dominicans, the phenomenon of *afrolatinidad* — more specifically *afrodominicanidad* — is relatively new and must be understood in light of their community's own history of negrophobia and *antihaitianismo*.<sup>4</sup> Dominicans, especially in recent history, have been viewed primarily through the lens of their collective rejection of blackness. Popular outsider perspectives often employ sweeping generalizations, drawing from extreme examples, such as Sammy Sosa's infamous skin-bleaching, and relying on partial histories to bolster their accusations of universal Dominican negrophobia. Pointing to a well-known example of this phenomenon, Candelario draws attention to an article published in the *Miami Herald* entitled "Black Denial" (Robles 2007). She writes that aside from casting Dominicans as uniformly antiblack, it "did little to engage the long history of anti-racist Dominican research, writing, and activism" (Candelario 2007, 5), erasing the nuances and diversity of Dominican experiences.

My research will focus on the questions of how Dominican-Americans who have lived or are living in New York City have come to racially and ethnically self-identify within the context of national and local racial structures. The majority of this thesis will dissect how the imported ideologies that immigrant families bring with them from the Dominican Republic impact the identities that their children take on when situated in proximity to American ethnic, racial, and

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<sup>3</sup> *Latinidad* is a Spanish-language term that refers to the culture shared by Latin American people and their descendants, invoking regional solidarity between Latinxs and indexing collective understandings of identity, place, and belonging.

<sup>4</sup> This is the Spanish word for Anti-Haitianism.

national frameworks. While many Dominican immigrants have come to equate nationality with racial identity in the United States, further entrenching themselves in their Dominicaness, many in the communities, especially those of younger generations, have also found alternative ways of adapting to a changing racial landscape, questioning their community's racism and sometimes even electing to reject their previous ways of thinking; aside from age, such divides have often formed along such lines as gender, socioeconomic status, locality, etc. Ultimately, the goal of this thesis is to assess how the social dynamics brought about by migratory forces play themselves out currently, at a time when the Dominican-American community is experiencing generational shifts in the face of more fluid understandings of race and ethnicity.

Through this project I hope to bring proper context and history to popular perceptions of Dominican experiences. I also hope to show that the disavowal of blackness among Dominicans is not an inevitable or universal truth but rather something that is constructed, taught, learned, and reproduced. Holding that to be true, it is important to note the different ways in which people are interacting with racial and ethnic categories, choosing to accept or reject them dependent on the different contexts they inhabit. Countering popular narratives, there are, and have been, people of Dominican descent who are proudly tracing their ancestral lineage to Africa and confronting the racial problems of their history. Dominican-Americans have stood at the forefront of such efforts to reevaluate what it means to *be Dominican*, redefining its boundaries and implications. They have begun to toy with ideas of race and lineage that contradict those of past generations, including the recognition of their culture's African roots and reckoning with their own sense of blackness and *afrolatinidad*. As more of them are coming to embrace *afrolatinidad*, Dominican-Americans are beginning to acknowledge the ways in which the

people of their community have been miseducated about their national history and are attempting to rewrite that narrative.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. Chapter 1 focuses on the history of the Dominican Republic, paying particular attention to the ways in which Dominican identity was formed through the efforts of the state vis-à-vis Haitian-Dominican relations. This chapter also considers the salient role of dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo's nationalist projects, in which he encouraged *blanqueamiento* (whitening) of the Dominican population and institutionalized mixedness via state documentation, in the formation of modern *dominicanidad*. Chapter 2, which opens with a short history of Dominican immigration to the U.S., takes an intimate look at various trends among Dominicans and Dominican-Americans living in New York City, placing emphasis on the different sociocultural elements and institutions that shape racial and ethnic identity. Chapter 3 examines the new racial consciousness among Dominican-Americans and breaks down the ways in which they are instrumentalizing *afrolatinidad* as a tool of anti-racism to undermine antiblack Dominican ideologies.

### **Note on Terminology**

This study makes use of a few terms that merit discussion and clarification. Recently, people have begun to reject the use of "Hispanic" to describe people of Latin American descent because it semantically centers the colonial legacy of the Spanish. I have therefore opted to use "Latinx" to refer to people who have cultural and/or ancestral roots in Latin America. "Latino/a" is a panethnic marker of Latin-American identity, while "Latinx" is simply its gender-neutral variant. Using a neutral terminology un genders the Spanish language, moving away from the limited gender binary of feminine and masculine that it offers and allowing for fluidity of gender

identity. Similarly to the criticism of “Hispanic,” however, some have begun to problematize the term “Latinx” on the basis that it privileges European heritage and the shared experience of Spanish colonization. In an article written for *Latino Rebels*, Hugo Marín González asserts: “To be Latinx, just like Latino, Latina, or Hispanic, is to make invisible the African and the Taíno in me” (González 2017).

Throughout this thesis I frequently distinguish between Dominicans and Dominican-Americans. I define Dominicans as people Dominican descent who reside in the Dominican Republic or belong to the first generation of Dominican immigrants to the U.S. On the other hand, I define Dominican-Americans as people of Dominican descent belonging to either the 1.5 or second generation. This is mostly an arbitrary distinction, but is theoretically useful in organizing the ideas of this thesis. Generational differences should also be delimited, especially in light of the fluidity of their definitions. “First-generation” will be used to refer to foreign-born (in relation to the United States) citizens or residents who’ve chosen to immigrate to a new country of residence, while “second generation” will encompass the native-born children of immigrants. “1.5 generation” is a term that has only come into use recently. My usage of the term will rely on the description offered by Leslie Berestein Rojas in an article for the Southern California Public Radio’s website:

“The experience of 1.5 generation immigrants, a term used to describe people who arrived in the U.S. as children and adolescents, is a unique one. Unlike their first-generation parents or U.S.-born siblings, their identity is split. They are American in many ways, sometimes in most, but not entirely. Depending on how old 1.5s are upon arrival, where they grow up, which ethnic group they belong to and a host of other factors, their American/immigrant identities vary wildly, as do

the roles they play within immigrant diasporas. They can play bridge-builder and cultural interpreter, helping parents and grandparents navigate their new home. Or they can feel like outcasts, neither here nor there. Then there are complicating factors like legal status, with some undocumented 1.5s growing up side by side with U.S. citizen siblings and peers.” (Rojas 2012)

For the sake of this thesis, I have opted to use *afrolatinidad* instead of the culturally specific *afrodominicanidad* because most of the respondents saw their identities as being connected to the collective people of African descent present all across Latin America and the movements seeking to give them visibility.

## Chapter 1: What's Been Done to the Past

In understanding contemporary identity among Dominican-Americans, it's necessary to contextualize those experiences in the history of society and culture in the Dominican Republic. Without a proper understanding of that history it would be impossible to fully grasp the ways in which past life on the island and the experience of migration manifest themselves in the present and actively shape the future of the Dominican-American community. Furthermore, a strictly American racial framework would be inadequate in capturing the nuanced realities of race and color that act within the Dominican community, being that American categories fail to match the complex array of color-coded categories by which people both in the Dominican Republic and the U.S. identify themselves. Upon making the decision to journey to New York, Dominican immigrants bring with them not only their families and possessions, but also their conceptions of themselves and of the world — and the vast heritage of history, tradition, language, and identity that came with it. It is these imported imaginaries that have provided the foundation upon which Dominican identity has been formed in their collision with American notions of racial and ethnic identity.

Understandings of identity are place-bound. Oftentimes, places are defined in local terms and in connection to a wider sense of nationhood — in the case of the Dominican Republic, this is coupled with its status as a colony and an island nation. In its formation, this sense of nationhood is rooted in many assumptions about who is considered an ideal citizen. Thus, ideas of the nation become intertwined with race and identity. In the Dominican Republic, the state has historically played an important role in the creation and legitimization of race/color categories and popular constructions of *dominicanidad*. Through various nationalist projects, Dominicans'

sense of peoplehood was linked to their state and contrasted against the backdrop of the Haitian state and the identity of its people.

### **An Introductory History**

The Dominican Republic occupies the eastern part of the island of Hispaniola, the second-largest island in the Caribbean. The island was discovered by the Spanish in 1492 and colonized shortly after, establishing it initially as an exclusively Spanish colony. Prior to Spanish arrival, there were roughly 400,000 Taínos present on the island, but by 1519 the Taíno population had been reduced to 3,000, a mere fraction of the previous number. Upon realizing the decimation of the indigenous Taíno population, the Spanish need for slave labor dramatically increased the African presence in the colony as more enslaved Africans were brought to satisfy Spanish demands.

Slavery and its trajectory under the system of Spanish colonialism created the foundations of Dominican society and its racial order. The plantation economy based on slavery had a short life in the Dominican Republic, failing throughout the course of the eighteenth century. It was quickly replaced by an agrarian, cattle-ranching economy and society in which individuals of all races were mostly equalized in socio-racial and economic terms. Silvio Torres-Saillant puts it succinctly: “The decay of the plantation and the virtual destitution of whites helped to break down the social barriers between the races, stimulating interracial marital relations and giving rise to an ethnically hybrid population” (1998, 134). It was because of the lack of economic direction from the Spanish colonists and the late expansion of the sugar plantation industry that slavery had such a limited influence in Santo Domingo. The demographics of the Spanish part of the island, in turn, reflected that reality; in 1794, slaves

made up fewer than 30 percent of the population and “non-white freemen” made up another 35 percent (Hoetink 1982, 182). That said, the Dominican elite still remained composed primarily of Spanish Creoles and light-skinned *mestizos/mulatos*. Still, the failure of the plantation economy functioned as a significant circumstance in the blurring of racial categories and the development of national cohesion and identity. To this point, Torres-Saillant even argued that “Dominicans of African descent possess what one might call a deracialized social consciousness whose origins date back to the fall of the plantation economy in colonial times” (1998a, 134). This is ultimately what led to the emergence of the *mulato* as the most common Dominican type, though this does not yet fully explain the linkage between Dominican national identity and mixedness.

By the early seventeenth century, the French had also established a presence on the island, forcing the Spanish to compete with them for control of the island until, finally, the Peace of Ryswick was signed in 1697, partitioning the island between the two colonial crowns. In effect, this created two differentiated colonial spaces, the Spanish Santo Domingo in the east and the French Saint Domingue in the west, which would go on to develop unique cultures and national communities whose histories frequently overlapped. This political and spatial differentiation of the French and the Spanish came to define nationalist discourse in the Dominican Republic and the ethnoracial relationships it produced.

### ***Dominicanidad and Haiti***

The history of the Dominican Republic, and thus Dominican identity, has been intimately bound up with Haiti. In 1795, Spain ceded the eastern part of Hispaniola to the French through the Treaty of Basel. By this point in time, the French and Haitian Revolutions were in full swing, and from 1800, Haitian forces occupied the eastern part of the island but were forced to

withdraw in 1802 upon the arrival of a French army that reclaimed the eastern part of the island. In 1804, after having successfully resisted against the French colonial government, Haiti became the first free black nation in the Western Hemisphere. In 1808, the people of Santo Domingo staged a rebellion against the French government in order to return sovereignty over to Spain, only to again rebel against the Spanish and declare independence in 1821. Haiti, as a former French colony that was founded through a successful slave revolt and the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte's army, became a symbol of black African slave resistance.

On February 1822, the Haitian president Jean-Pierre Boyer crossed the border into the Dominican Republic (then known as the Republic of Spanish Haiti) with roughly 10,000 troops and the intention of unifying the island; he was met with almost no resistance. While the whites on the island resisted the idea of unifying the island — fleeing in large numbers once the Haiti saw the takeover of the government by black and mulatto peoples — with Haiti, the lower classes and black masses This unification of the island under the Haitian government signaled a break from the past in Dominican-Haitian relations. This period in Dominican history is often recalled in the collective conscious of Dominicans as a time of brutal rule. To that effect, scholar Harry Hoetink stated that “[few] Dominicans have not judged the period of Haitian domination as a black page in the history of a people that have liked to be white” (Hoetink 1970, 117). For the short period in which the island was unified under a Haitian government, aside from nationalizing Haitian authorities attempted to remove traces of culture that had a distinctly Spanish lineage or character. Additionally, in accordance with the Haitian constitutional mandate that white elites were forbidden from owning land, their properties were expropriated. Haitian officials also ended slavery during this time. As Black Haitian rule went on, white elites, having

lost administrative power, began staging revolts against the Haitian government, emphasizing Dominicans' "Hispanic" origins against the Frenchness and blackness of Haiti.

On February 27, 1844, by which time the white resistance movement had swayed many of the black masses to their cause, a group of educated white Dominican nationalists, called *La Trinitaria*, declared independence from Haiti. Only a few days following a group of ex-slaves, led by Santiago Basora, declared their opposition to the rebel cabal. This was based on the suspicion that the members of *La Trinitaria* intended to reinstitute slavery due to fears that the abolition of slavery had destabilized their position in society. Recognizing the precarity of the circumstances, however, the provisional government established by the rebels moved to reaffirm the abolition of slavery in order to solidify the foundations of an independent nation. It was in this historical moment that what we know now as the Dominican Republic was born.

Ultimately, the experiences and historical memory of this period served to both intensify relations between the two nations and strengthen the Dominican sense of imagined difference between Dominicans and Haitians. Rejecting the *négritude* of Haiti, the Dominican elites — now comprised, aside from *blancos* ("whites"), of *mulato/as* and *negros/as* who leveraged the various conflicts of the century to rise to assume a position of political power — sought to carve out an identity that was rooted in Hispanic and indigenous ancestry.

The Dominican elite deployed Anti-Haitian sentiment in the advancement of their nationalist projects for the construction of a cohesive Dominican identity. In recent history especially, Dominican nationalist discourse has rooted *dominicanidad* in a dualism that dichotomizes Haitanness and Dominicaness. The essence of Dominicaness is often defined by its not being Haitian — along with everything that Haiti has symbolically come to represent in the Dominican context. In this fiction, whereas Haiti has proximity to Africa and its ancestral,

cultural, and spiritual linkages, the Dominican Republic traces its roots to Spain and the Spanish influence on their history and cultural inheritance. Whereas Haitians are tied to blackness, Dominicans are tied to whiteness — both cultural and ancestral. However, as most Dominicans are unable to identify as *blanco/a*, notions of *dominicanidad* are often tied to racial mixedness — still a welcome distinction from the blackness of their island neighbors. Thus, in grounding being Dominican in not being Haitian, Dominicanness was made incompatible with and alien to blackness. In reference to the color categories mentioned in an earlier section, Haitianness is normally associated with possessing a darker skin tone. Kimberly Eison Simmons, in her discussion of the experiences of African American students in the Dominican Republic, describes how only the dark-skinned African-American students were (mis)identified by Dominicans as Haitian, demonstrating how such traits — along with certain hairstyles among the women, such as braids — were seen visual markers of identity (Simmons 2009).

It is important, however, that in conversations about the *antihaitianismo* and antiblackness present in modern expressions of Dominican identity one doesn't ahistoricize such trends but rather recognizes the sociopolitical processes that made them central to national identity. Ideologies regarding nationalism and *hispanidad*, or the cultural heritage of the Spanish, and the means through which they were linked by the Dominican elites — largely creole and mulatto — came about as political projects that were then applied on the ordinary people of the Dominican Republic. *Hispanicismo*, or the appreciation and elevation of Spanish colonial heritage, held a much more prominent role in the construction of *dominicanidad* in the nineteenth century and did not necessarily signify the inferiority of Haitians or animosity towards them. In his discussion of early iterations of Dominican identity, Dominican historian Frank Moya Pons notes that the rising use of the term *blancos de la tierra* (literally “whites of

the earth”) by non-creole Dominicans to describe themselves indicated that "while their skin gradually became darker, the mentality of Dominicans turned increasingly whiter" (cited in Torres-Saillant 1998a). Notions of *hispanicismo* were institutionalized not long after early confrontations between the Spanish *conquistadores* and the Taíno people of the Caribbean islands. However, as April J. Mayes notes, there is a fine distinction that must be drawn between an affinity for Spanish culture and identification with it (2014). Yet, as I will argue, much of recent Dominican history has revolved around the reification of a Spanish aesthetic, both in identity and culture.

Scholars such as David Howard (2001) and Silvio Torres-Saillant (1995; 1998a) point to the regime of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo, a dictator who ruled from about 1930 to 1961 (both as president and a military strongman), as having had a great impact on collective Dominican self-identification. During his time in power, Trujillo engaged in various nation-building projects for the purpose of solidifying *Dominicanidad*, pouring considerable public resources into promoting an image of the Dominican in the mold of the Hispanic European. These projects essentially aimed to negate and displace any trace of Dominicans’ connection to blackness or Africanness — ideologically locating its epicenter in Haiti — and defining Dominican nationality against an imagined Haitian one. Under the rule of *trujillismo*, intellectuals of the regime sought to closely align Dominican national identity with *hispanidad*. According to Moya Pons, the three key elements associated with *hispanidad* are Catholicism, white skin (or a preference for white skin), and Spanish culture (2010). Consequently, because Haiti was the antithesis of the Dominican Republic, it was aligned with “*negritude*, Africa and non-Christian beliefs” (Howard 2001, 5). It was a well-known and documented fact that the dictator used cosmetic powers to lighten his skin, embodying the aesthetic erasure of blackness in his own daily practices. In identifying

Dominicanness with *hispanidad*, Trujillo sought to eliminate the African presence and influence in the Dominican Republic through the ideological instrument of *hispanicismo*. This ideological realignment was orchestrated not only through the reimagination of popular history, but also through the forceful removal of Haitian bodies from the Dominican nation.

The most notorious and disturbing of these efforts was the Parsley Massacre of 1937 (also known as the *matanza*), which is named after a test that was supposedly conducted by the soldiers, disguised in ordinary clothes, that Trujillo sent to the Dominican-Haitian borderlands to determine who was Dominican and who was Haitian. Popular folklore and some historical records describe how residents of border communities were shown a sprig of parsley and asked to identify it, and based on their pronunciation of the word *perejil*, were either let live or beaten and killed. Estimates place the casualties between 12,000 and 30,000, marking it as the most gruesome killing of Haitians by Dominican authorities. As anthropologist Yadira Perez Hazel points out, despite recent scholars claiming that accounts of such a test have been exaggerated, the fact that people believe in the reliability of such a test “points to the existence of beliefs that rely on the senses to detect cultural markers” (2014, 82). Thus, the belief in and existence of such popular fictions index a tendency among Dominicans to believe that Haitians can be easily differentiated from Dominicans, or more specifically, that the borderlands weren’t a fluid space in which the exchange of music, religion, art, language, and other such cultural artifacts took place. In reality, the border communities were the sites for a lively hybridized culture in which the lines between Haitians and Dominicans were practically undetectable. Some scholars, such as Edward Paulino and Scherezade García even claim that many of those killed in the massacre were actually Dominican nationals.

Thus, the border has been equally a site of conflict and exchange between Dominicans and Haitians — though the former is more emphasized in popular histories. Many scholars of Dominican history such as Lauren Derby (1994) have chosen to specifically focus on the border as a site of the formation of *dominicanidad*. More a symbolic border denoting the cultural and political separation of Haitians and Dominicans, the borderlands have been a space of heavy focus in the racist mythologization of Haitian culture. Speaking on the effects of Trujillo's massacre of Haitians in the borderlands in 1937, Howard stresses the importance of the process of myth-making: "The creation of an enduring myth was a key element to establish the legitimacy of the dictatorship. ... The effect of the massacre was to heighten this conception of Haitian laborers in the Dominican Republic as the enemy within" (Howard 2001, 29). Furthermore, Howard, when talking about the Haitian experience within the Dominican Republic, described it as "one of internal colonialism as a core element of Dominican economy, yet peripheral to polity. Haitians exist as an internal colony, marginalized individuals in a society that demands their labor, but refuses to accept their presence beyond that as units of labor" (2001, 30). This statement helps explain the apparent contradiction in the fact that Trujillo rejected black Haitian bodies yet employed their labor extensively.

In terms of immigration, the *trujillato* divided migrant populations into "desired" (i.e. European) and "undesired" (i.e. Haitian/Afro-Antillean) immigrants. In various newspapers and government memos, Trujillo made clear calls for European — and particularly Spanish and Jewish — immigration as a means of pushing back against the "haitianizacion" of the Dominican Republic which he saw as threatening its Spanish cultural core with African elements. In one particular newspaper publication Trujillo specifically claimed that an influx of Spanish immigration to the country would bring "[un] elemento sano y trabajador" ("[a] healthy element

and work ethic”) that would increase “la riqueza el poder y el bienestar” (“the wealth, the power, and the well-being”) of the Dominican Republic (Simmons 2009, 123-4). Relative to other Latin American countries, however, Trujillo was not as successful in attracting European immigrants; thus, the adoption of *blanqueamiento* as immigration policy was more a symbolic change than a material one.

In the context of American imperialism, comparisons between the positions of Haiti and the Dominican Republic relative to the United States demonstrate the ways in which the perceived races embodied by the islands have operated at the level of global affairs. At various points in Dominican history, United States officials have commented on the fact of Dominicans being something other than black, humanizing its population by noting its potential for entering the pantheon of “civilized” nations — something that Haiti was always seen as unfit for as a “savage” country. As Perez Hazel notes, “Santo Domingo was conferred the use of its European ancestry, whereas Haiti was not; this gave Santo Domingo an asset over Haiti” (2014, 80). Thus, in the scheme of western networks of power, the Dominican Republic’s superiority over Haiti was reinforced by its ambiguous racial status. Ginetta Candelario claims that such perceptions and their declaration by U.S. officials should be placed within “a geopolitically framed racial project of U.S. imperialism” (2007, 14) that propped up nationalist racial project carried out by Dominican officials and intellectuals.

Today, the *antihaitianismo* of the state can be observed in its immigration and citizenship policies regarding Haitian-Dominican citizens, or Dominican citizens and residents of Haitian descent. Take, for example, the 2013 court ruling that stripped about 210,000 Haitians of their Dominican citizenship overnight, leaving them stateless. Before 2010, anyone born in the nation was eligible for citizenship, the only exceptions being the children of diplomats and those

deemed “in transit.” In 2010, the constitution expanded the scope of the “in transit” designation to include undocumented people. In 2013, that definition was extended all the way back to 1929, the year that the border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti was finalized. Despite the fact that many people of Haitian descent had generational roots in the Dominican Republic, the retroactive expansion of the designation of “in transit,” coupled with the fact that many were the descendents of undocumented immigrants, made them vulnerable to the whims of the Dominican state.

### **Color-coding the Aesthetics of a People**

At the heart of the history of *dominicanidad* is the process of colorization. In the Dominican Republic, greater emphasis is placed on color rather than race in matters of identity and self-identification. In many ways, Dominican social relations are organized according to aesthetics that map onto color. Marked by an preference for lightness, much of the prejudice present in the Dominican Republic is often articulated in terms of beauty — normally expressed through the language of desirability; this aestheticization of race can be heard in the phrase “mejorar la raza” (“bettering the race”), for instance, which is often used in reference to the romantic/sexual preference for lighter-skinned partners. This phrase in particular invokes the ambition among Dominican parents for their children to marry lighter-skinned partners as a means of lightening the skin of future generations and thus, in the Dominican imaginary, enhancing one’s bloodline and social status. The tendency to organize people according to color commonly expresses itself culturally in the diverse array of terms that Dominicans use to describe color — e.g. *moreno*, *negro*, *trigueño*, *indio*, etc. Even though *negro* literally translates to “black,” the category does not carry the weight of race consciousness that it typically does in

the United States. With *indio* in particular, there is a distinction made between *indios* who are *claro* (“light”) and those who are *oscuro* (“dark”). Ordinary Dominicans encounter and interact with these categories in their daily lives, whether through political institutions or each other.

Whereas the term “mulatto” (and its local variants) was used in many other African diasporic communities to identify children who were the product of mixture between Europeans and Africans, it was not as widely used in the Dominican Republic. Despite being of a similar ancestry, Dominicans were not categorized by the state using this term, likely because “mulatto” indexes African descent. Instead, the terms *mestizo* and *indio* were the preferred in government documentation — and *indio* in terms of casual usage. While *mestizo*<sup>5</sup> was used since the first national census of 1920 to identify the majority of the Dominican population, *indio* was used on the national identification card (*cédula*). The term *indio* was formulated in the context of a regime seeking distance from blackness and the glorification of an ideal mixed Dominican type. Thus, the category *indio* came to imply a racial location that is paradoxically a combination of black and white yet stands completely apart from both of them. In popular Dominican imaginings of themselves, they wouldn’t see blackness, but rather only Spanish and Taíno heritage (though this has changed since the times of the *trujillato*); it’s here on the level of the psychological that the burying of African ancestry found its way into the fundamental substance of Dominican culture.

Such erasures of African cultural and genetic heritage in the Dominican Republic are mostly rooted in the regime of Trujillo. Simmons discusses Trujillo’s explicit break from the

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<sup>5</sup> The term *mestizo* is used across Latin America to describe the children of mixed marriages between Spaniards and indigenous people. Unlike *mulato*, it does not imply black or African ancestry. The *Enciclopedia Dominicana*, in 1976 and 1997, described it thus:

“Mestizo—In general it is a name given to the person born of a father and mother of different castes. In America it applies to the children of the mixed marriages between Spaniards and Indians. During colonization, the period that lasted from the sixteenth century until half of the nineteenth century, mestizaje or fusion of race was a phenomenon that accompanied the entire process.”

perception of the Dominican Republic as being *de color* (literally “of color”), as it had been discussed before his rise to power both by actors within and, especially, outside of the country (2009). In order to do this Trujillo gave social and cultural currency to the word *indio* as a marker of mixed Dominican ancestry — with a focus on the Spanish heritage. *Hispanicismo* under the Trujillo regime, as mentioned in the previous section, meant the appreciation of everything Spanish and the rejection of African influences. As a central part of the nationalist agenda of the *trujillato*, the *indio* became the primary racial type seen as representative of *dominicanidad*. Even though the word *indio* literally translates as “Indian,” the term is functionally used to index both a color and an ambiguous racial position located somewhere between white and black. However, the term is not ambiguous in its dodging of blackness; the reason that the articulation of a *mulato* identity may not have become part of the nationalist agenda was an extension the fact that it was thought to imply African roots. Being that Trujillo used Haitians to represent Africa, this construction of the image of the *indio* as non-black and mixed-race was done vis-á-vis the blackness of Haitians. Even though the word *indio/a* was used casually among ordinary Dominicans prior to *el trujillato*, the policies of the regime both institutionalized the term and reaffirmed it in the collective Dominican psyche. The myth of the *indio/a* is was institutionalized by Trujillo’s government in the form of the *cédula*, or the national identification card. On the *cédula*, *indio* was the only state-sponsored category denoting an in-between race/color status; it was not until 1998 when president Leonel Fernandez reintroduced *mulato* as an official state category that this changed.

Even in the way that color is assigned on *cédulas*, the primacy of colorization manifests itself. In this process, government officials in charge of issuing *cédulas* are also in charge of assigning a color category to the person requesting one. In recounting her ethnographic

fieldwork in the Junta Central Electoral (JCE), the organization responsible for granting *cédulas*, Simmons notes the reality that many of the government officials asked to determine a person's color status are often inconsistent/arbitrary in their application of particular categories — especially *indio* — and that the assigned categories are frequently at odds with Dominicans' self-perceptions (Simmons 2009). Oftentimes, this assessment is not disputed by the person, but is accepted as part of the process of obtaining a *cédula*, regardless of how one personally feels or self-identifies. Furthermore, the fact that the majority of Dominicans are identified as *indio* on their *cédula* serves to place both *blancos* and *negros* in the periphery of Dominican national identity.

## Conclusion

The Dominican racial complex is one that in recent history has been defined by its *hispanicismo*, its anti-Haitian feeling, and its anti-blackness. It is a wide imaginary that has been constructed not only by the dynamics of colonial society but also by the reproduction of those relationships by different cultural and political agents throughout the country's long history. The racial and national identities of Dominicans have been constructed without any reference to an African past. Emphasis is instead placed on a colonial Hispanic and a romanticized indigenous past. Over the course of the twentieth century, the African past was masked by the state and Dominican elites in order to appeal to a more European notion of *dominicanidad*.

Thus, because of these factors, many Dominicans experience a kind of cognitive dissonance in which their ancestral connections to Africa and blackness are forgotten or ignored simultaneously as that African heritage shapes and lives on in the Dominican culture that is celebrated today. This contradiction frames life on the island and provided the basis upon which

a transnational culture and identity was constructed in the United States as more and more Dominicans began to accept it as their new home. Along with the social encounters that framed their lived experiences in the U.S. came challenges to their collective identity and a (re)imagination of the possibilities that *dominicanidad* embodied in a new cultural ecosystem. The next chapter will explore the process of transnational migration, the creation of Dominican-American communities, and the cultural transformations of Dominican consciousness that accompanied it all.

## Chapter 2: Dominican-Americans: Trends and New Directions

“If people can be close or remote from one another in many ways, it is the compresences of characteristics of closeness and remoteness along any of those dimension — the very dissonance embodied in the dualism — that makes the position of strangers socially problematic in all times and places. When those who should be close, in any sense of the term, are actually close, and those who should be distant are distant, everyone is ‘in his place.’ When those who should be distant are close, however, the inevitable result is a degree of tension and anxiety which necessitates some kind of special response.”

— Donald Nathan Levine, *The Flight from Ambiguity*

“Ningún norteamericano negro — ahora lo sabemos más que nunca — se cambiaría por un blanco, porque en la negritud está su raza, su cultura y la fuerza de sus raíces.”

— Aristófanés Urbáez, “Bailando con los negros” 1995

Trujillo’s regime ended with his assassination in 1961, carried out by some of his opponents who sought — but failed — to stage a *coup d’état*. In the wake of Trujillo’s death and the violence and societal instability that followed, immigration numbers from the Dominican Republic to the United states spiked. Whereas the *trujillista* regime had invited European immigration and discourage the emigration of native Dominicans, citizens now felt relatively free to travel and move outside of the island nation’s borders (Torres-Saillant & Hernandez 1998, 31). Under the leadership of President Balaguer, who had been elected in 1966, the Dominican government began to engage in a campaign of expulsion in which they encouraged political dissidents and the poor to migrate from the island — evidenced by the staggering increase in the number of passports issued by the state. In terms of race, Dominican migration was now not only accessible to the “light-skinned, well-to-do families” (T-S & Hernandez 1998, 112) with relative socioeconomic capital or political elites but was opened up to the populations of the countryside and the urban ghettos, who proceeded to far outnumber them; immigration from the Dominican Republic thus became darker — in reference to skin tone — and poorer than it had in the past.

The Dominican immigrant population of the United States, which had been at 12,000 in 1960, reached 350,000 in 1990 and 960,000 by 2012. Since 1990, with the exception of Cuba, the immigrant population of the Dominican Republic has been the largest of any Caribbean nation. Although Dominican immigrants settled in many places across the United States, they primarily flocked to New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Florida (Nwosu & Batalova 2014). Of those, 41% of Dominican Americans reside in New York City, primarily in upper Manhattan and the Bronx. According to a study published in 2014 by the Center for Latin American, Caribbean and Latino Studies at CUNY's Graduate Center, Dominicans have surpassed Puerto Ricans as the largest Latinx population. Prior to the rapid increase in immigration from the Dominican Republic after the Trujillo regime, Dominican immigrants largely consisted of the political exiles of the Trujillo regime who opposed the dictator and were now forced to do so from abroad. Coupled with the restructuring of the Dominican economy under Balaguer — a restructuring that favored the middle class — emigration to the United States became an economic survival strategy for the disempowered poor on the island. However, Dominican immigrants occupy all places along the socioeconomic continuum.

Migrants brought with them their personal and national histories and nuanced understandings of their own racial and national identities to the local context of New York City neighborhoods. In regards to immigrant experiences of people from the island nation, Ginetta Candelario wrote the following: “Dominican identity in the United States must be understood as simultaneously ethnic and racial, or ‘ethno-racial.’ By ethno-racial I mean that Dominicans are negotiating their status as racialized minorities operating in the context of histories and structures beyond their control, but they do so with varying degrees of agency and self-determination” (2007, 10). For new immigrants, this “ethnoracial” experience of Dominicans in the United

States is one in which they are both defining themselves simultaneously as they are defined by others — as well as a system alien and unknown to them. An essential element of diasporic Dominican identity is the duality of having to identify oneself and be identified according to the divergent social constructions of race from two countries — the Dominican Republic and the United States.

Coming to the United States, aside from a change in one's material reality, meant an expansion of the reality and universe of ideas in which Dominicans could imagine themselves. In the process of transnational migration, Dominicans enter into institutions that are entirely foreign to them and which have very particular ideas — and confusions — about where Dominicans should be situated in the American socioracial landscape. They come to exist in a hybrid context in which they are forced to (re)negotiate their culture, their language, their faith, and their very sense of self as a now-transnational people. This duality is captured in the claim by Torres-Saillant and Hernandez that Dominican immigrants find themselves having to “harmonize English with Spanish, snowstorms with tropical rains, and merengue with rock or rap” (Torres-Saillant & Hernandez 1998, 146). Reconciling the differences of two distinct cultural fabrics and drawing from the material of both, they are paradoxically grounded in movement and uprootedness. In trying to find a sense of rootedness both in their material and metaphysical lives, Dominican immigrants and their children weave their experiences of the island — whether direct or indirect — with their new experiences in the U.S. in order to synthesize new identities. With access to two cultures, Dominican-Americans in particular occupy a cultural space in which they can — and often do — reference both as a means of articulating new concepts of self and of collective peoplehood. Thus, immigrants do not simply internalize and negotiate the values of the receiving society with their own, but also destabilize and rearrange the existing

social order, both intentionally and not. It is in this space that they have been empowered to create alternative ways of thinking about themselves and gained access to a array of new ideas that they have used to (re)configure their ethnoracial identity. They now had to incorporate a new language, social system, political structure, and economy into their worldview and (re)imagine themselves operating within its bounds, needing to maintain and compromise aspects of themselves as necessary.

### **In Between Two Worlds: Island Culture in the Concrete Jungle**

Dominicans in the U.S. largely maintain a rootedness in the island, where they understand themselves as being truly from. Scholars have normally understood them as a binational community that preserves its cultural lineage and traditions derived from island culture, manifested in food (e.g. street carts that sell traditional Dominican food), musical production (e.g. merengue, bachata, dembow, etc.), celebration (e.g. the Dominican Day Parade, which has been celebrated since 1982) (Simmons 2009). This same cultural rootedness applies to racial identity. Being that race in the Dominican is intertwined with concepts of *latinidad* that align nationality and race — as the ideological extension of sociobiological notions about the body in relation to the nation — it was often disorienting to encounter conceptions of race that firmly separate race and nationality, leaving no room for fluidity. This dynamic is also compounded with the common American understanding of race as a binary between black and white, with other non-white, non-black peoples falling somewhere in relation. As they did in their home country, Dominicans found themselves clinging to an identity defined by its in-betweenness, neither black nor white. However, though their identity is not lost in migration, it does lose its rootedness in an established place. Whereas *dominicanidad* on the island is upheld

by a culture in which it was widely reproduced and put in practice, such stability is shaken upon arrival to the United States, an alien culture where Dominican ideas about themselves do not dominate. The difference was that they were now facing explicit challenges to the ways in which they had chosen to identify. In order to capture the phenomena of Dominican uprooting and taking root in a new context, Torres-Saillant proposes the concept of diaspora (Torres-Saillant 1995). Pointing to one of the early challenges, Simmons notes the ways in which U.S. Customs officials are confused by the use of color terms to indicate one's race, particularly the term *indio*, and proceed to questions rather than the classifications adopted in the U.S. (2009, 64). Faced with the task of learning to express their *dominicanidad* in a distinct context, Dominican-Americans begin to see the legitimacy of the classifications of the Dominican state becoming unstable.

Furthermore, shortly after their entrance into the United States, many Dominicans are confronted with the notion of *being black*. Most Dominicans are racially mixed, possessing European and African lineage, and thus, given the legacy of the "one-drop rule" in the U.S., they would be considered black within the American racial framework. Still, as many scholars have pointed out, the first generation of Dominican immigrants did not experience a radical shift in racial consciousness (Aparicio 2006; Candelario 2009; Torres-Saillant & Hernandez 1998). A study of New York Dominicans conducted by Jesse Hoffnung (2002) found that there was no radical shift in racial self-perception among them in the 1970s, and a similar, more recent survey conducted by Jose Itzigsohn and Carlos Dore-Cabral in 2000 found that Dominicans strongly identify themselves according to panethnic labels such as "Hispanic" and "Latino/a" as a means of rejecting black/white classification.

Particularly for Dominican-Americans, questions of race and nation become blurred as ethnonational loyalties and identities come to replace racial identities. Many of the respondents spoke of their own experiences — as well as those of the Dominicans around them — as being defined by a strong identification with a totalizing Dominicanness that tends to suppress the possibility of divergent racial identities. Whereas in the Dominican Republic the culture of color-coding allows them to identify as non-white without assuming a black identity, most immigrants do not have the luxury of doing so unchallenged in the United States. The racial classifications of the Dominican Republic, once an undeniable form of truth, are questioned in a new national context. Thus, external perceptions of Dominicans as black leads to the socialization of Dominicans into a black identity that oftentimes conflicts with the internalized teachings of Dominican culture.

As mentioned in the Introduction, all of the respondents of this study belonged to either the 1.5 or second generation, which was a significant factor in determining how their experiences allowed them to challenge the racism, negrophobia, and *antihaitianismo* of earlier generations. An important aspect of the acculturation of Dominican-Americans — particularly those of the aforementioned generations — is that it is not a monolithic process that results in a singular final identity, but rather a complex, multidirectional process that results in a diverse multitude of identities. As the interviewees demonstrated, their experiences in the United States in many ways allowed them to challenge the self-definitions of the older generations and refashion old conceptions of *dominicanidad*. The following sections will trace the ways in which the experiences of Dominican-Americans alter the ways in which Dominicans are relating to blackness.

**“I’m Not Black, I’m Dominican”: The Boundaries of Ethnoracial/Cultural Fluidity**

Race in the United States is often constructed on the bipolarity of black-white relations, and Dominicans typically imagine themselves as existing outside of that, occupying a liminal space in the American racial superstructure. Itzignsohn’s study about Dominican self-identification in NYC and Providence (2004) showed that when allowed to self-select their identity, Dominicans overwhelmingly chose to identify as *indio*. The interviews reflected this trend among respondents’ parents and Dominican peers, as many expressed that they had witnessed this aversion to identifying or being identified as black among their family and friends. Putting it in gross terms, Fernando in particular said that “Never ever ever would a Dominican refer to themselves as a black person,” following that by saying that “the further you are from black the better ... the closer to white the better.” Hence, Dominican racial identity in the U.S. context is defined by a differentiation from blackness and an approximation of whiteness. Still, many Dominicans, according to U.S. standards, are classified as black and explicitly (mis)identified as such.

Most of the respondents identified racially as black, with two exceptions, while none of them identified as white, suggesting a closeness of their personal identities to blackness that they do not share with whiteness. That said, most of them also stated that they had turbulent relationships to their own blackness complicated by numerous factors that prevented them from truly being able to claim the identity. A few of the respondents questioned their claims to blackness and *afrolatinidad* on account of their light skin tone. This operated in two ways: 1) reaffirmed the primacy of skin tone as a determinant of color identity in the Dominican consciousness and 2) positioned lighter skin tones as antithetical to blackness. They thought that their light skin — ranging from wheat-colored to fair-skinned — an assumed visual marker of

mixedness, either disallowed or weakened any possible claim to black identity. Thus, Dominican-Americans are positioned uniquely between the social framework of the Dominican Republic which relies on color to determine identity and an inclusive concept of blackness in the U.S. for which light skin does not exclude one from being considered black.

Another idea that limited respondents' black self-identification was the close association of blackness with African Americans. Whereas blackness in the Dominican Republic is seen as being a trait possessed by Haitians, this definition comes to expand upon entry into the United States, where it is almost exclusively ascribed to Black Americans — or simply assumed to be an American phenomenon. Gabriel, speaking on his reasons for not initially joining Brothers @ Bard, a Bard College-based mentorship program for “young men of color from underserved communities” (Bard College, n.d.), attributed his indecision to his assumption that blackness was synonymous with Black Americans: “I would associate African American with what it meant to be black.” Imagining the organization to be a space exclusively for black men (despite it not being exclusive to black men), coupled with Gabriel's exclusive ascription of blackness to African Americans, and thus not himself as a Dominican man, barred his membership to the organization and, symbolically, to blackness. Another respondent, Candela, expressed a similar sentiment: “We were very conditioned and taught to think of blackness as an African-American only exclusive thing,” claiming that in order for her to fully identify herself as a black woman, she first had to come to terms with what it meant to *be black* and who was included in the framework of blackness.

Furthermore, distinctions between Dominicans and African Americans are perpetuated through the negative views held by relatives. Most respondents, when asked about the opinions that their family members held regarding Black Americans, said that they viewed them in a

negative light and always saw themselves as completely different from them. They typically showed an aversion to black people, reproducing stereotypes that presented them as ignorant, aggressive, and violent. Fernando remembered his paternal grandfather referring to his black elementary school special-ed students as “retarded” because they were African-American. Jesus, speaking of the messages that he received about Black Americans from his mother, said “My mom is mad fucking racist, typical Dominican shit, she don’t like black people.” By calling his mother’s racism “typical Dominican shit,” he indexes the pervasiveness of a dislike for black people among Dominican immigrants, especially those of earlier generations. He then qualified his statement about his mom’s racism by saying “I don’t blame her. It’s the media. ... It’s really sad to see how the media could fuck up somebody’s mind.” Thus, he pointed to the media’s influence as the source for many of Dominicans’ negative perceptions of black people. The reality is likely more complicated, being a mix of preconceived Dominican notions about color, personal experiences, and media. Óscar expressed a similar sentiment, stating that despite the fact that his father was very clear about ethnoracial divisions between them and black people, he was sympathetic to his father’s struggles with issues of race because “that’s the way he was taught growing up.” Although there is a rejection among some Dominican-Americans of the antiblack behavior of their parents, it coexists with an understanding of the different context in which they were brought up.

For those who were born in the Dominican Republic and immigrated to the U.S. during their adolescence, their understandings of black people normally came from relatives. Having little to no understanding of life in the states, they were forced to rely on the knowledge of relatives with more experience in New York City in order to grasp how they should navigate the new society. As a recent immigrant, Domingo was told about the supposed “aggressiveness” of

African Americans by an aunt who had been living in NYC for 10 years. Similarly, Maria, who moved to the U.S. at 13 years old, also spoke about her acculturation to NYC culture, about which she said: “I was always told, and this is for everybody who come from the DR, ‘tienes que tener cuidado con los negros,’ like ‘ you have to be careful with the black’ ‘ you have to be careful with the black.’ And it’s like I internalized that idea really fast.” She then proceeded to recall an anecdote in which she was lost and had to get home, but when her cousin found out the person she had asked to bring her home was black she told her to get away from him. Aside from commenting on her own experiences, she also pointed to the commonness of such experiences, asserting that these stereotypes are learned — or at the very least heard — by most, if not all, Dominican immigrants. Through the transmission of racist beliefs via family networks, the internalization and reification of negative stereotypes about black people and the assumed Dominican-African American divide becomes part of the acculturation process for Dominican immigrants moving to New York. Thus imagined differences between Dominicans and African Americans weigh heavily in the minds of newly arrived immigrants who arrive during their adolescence and have no knowledge about society and culture in NYC. Such dynamics become amplified by the lack of English proficiency among Dominican immigrants, forcing a reliance on preexisting networks of Spanish speakers.

Another means through which the Dominican aversion to black people plays out is in the selection of romantic and sexual partners. In the first chapter I discussed the preference among Dominicans to marry lighter-skinned people. In the U.S. context, this negrophobia manifests itself as a disinclination or hostility towards choosing Black Americans as partners. Maria shared an anecdote in which she was interested in a dark-skinned black man, but when she sent the picture to her mother, who she described as being of Spanish descent, she rejected him as “too

dark” and generally unattractive. Interestingly, this also revealed a cognitive dissonance for her, as her mother called her partner undesirable despite having herself married two dark-skinned men. When she challenged her on this point, her mother responded by saying that her stepdad, who she was married to at the time, was ugly as well. Additionally, Angel recalled being told by his parents not to come home with a black girlfriend because they were too “complicated,” “sad,” and “angry.” However, these messages were coupled with the idea that he shouldn’t date white people either because of their entitlement. This aversion to black and white partners reveals a preference for intra-ethnic dating, being that they preferred that he simply date a Latina woman, again reifying the separation between Dominicans and Black Americans. In these ways, Dominican antiblackness in the U.S. intermixes aesthetic colorism with negative caricatures of African Americans and thus, positions blackness as contrary or mutually exclusive to *dominicanidad* within a new (trans)national context.

### **Interethnic Encounters and the Recognition of Difference**

In the late 1970s and 1980s, Washington Heights, previously inhabited by Jews and more recently Puerto Ricans, became a popular place for Dominicans to settle as well as a hub of Dominican culture (and a place in which Spanish predominates) — unsurprising considering that most immigrants used preexisting transnational networks of friends and family to establish themselves in the host country (Duany 2008). Washington Heights — as well as upper Manhattan in general — has become known as a space dominated by Dominican people, traditions, and values. However, in the 1980s, many Dominicans also chose to settle in the Bronx, where the population was and continues to be more ethnically diverse, intermixing with African Americans and immigrants from the Caribbean, Africa, and other parts of Latin

America. To this day, these two areas are well-known for their large Dominican populations. Most of the respondents of my study lived in either upper Manhattan (Washington Heights/Inwood) or the Bronx, with one exception — who was born and raised in Harlem.

Along with becoming the centers of Dominican immigration, the two areas became primary sites for the construction of Dominican-American identity. However, the Dominican-American experiences in the two areas diverged in important ways. Washington Heights retained a firmly Dominican ethnic profile; those who settled there often valued and sought to maintain a strong Dominican cultural identity while in the United States. On the other hand, the Bronx was home to a varied assortment of people from a number of different ethnic backgrounds, in particular many people from different parts of the African diaspora, e.g. African Americans, West Indians, and Africans (primarily from West Africa). Their presence in the Bronx is unsurprising considering that Dominicans, along with Puerto Ricans, are the most likely Latinx group to live among or alongside Black Americans. In analyzing Dominican-American identity, Candelario emphasized “the tenets of symbolic interactionism in which the self is produced through interactions with others, interactions that are mediated and structured through multiple social groups and institutions and that are enacted through multiple role identities” (2009, 7). Similarly, I would like to emphasize that it is through their interactions with the inhabitants of these places that the Dominican-Americans I interviewed learned to express their sense of themselves and their position in American culture in particular ways that were 1) grounded in the local and 2) divergent and similar to that of older generations. Such intra- and interethnic encounters become the site for the negotiations of selfhood and nationhood prevalent in the Dominican-American experience. Additionally, it is important to recognize school as another socializing space outside of these two areas also shaped the identities of the respondents. In

dissecting the differences between how and where different participants grew up and the spaces they occupied, the situationality of racial identity become apparent. Each experience of black identity was tied to an interviewee's circumstances, to the place, the borough, and the circumstances that they inhabited.

In Washington Heights behaviors of intra-ethnic loyalty and affiliation are typically learned through witnessing the ways that other people in the neighborhood treat interethnic encounters. Candela discussed an interaction in which a Puerto Rican family tried to take the parking spot that belonged to Lollipop, the grandmother of her Black American friend who lived in and was known throughout her part of Washington Heights, and an argument ensued. In response to witnessing the altercation, a Puerto Rican women said that Candela should support the Puerto Rican family because they were Latinx. Gabriel and Fernando also mentioned that their family members only spoke of *morenos*, the Spanish-language Dominican word for African Americans, in the context of conflicts and negative encounters with Dominicans from their neighborhood. Thus, the ethnic insularity of Washington Heights largely promotes intra-community Dominican loyalty, treating African Americans, even those that live in the neighborhood, as outsiders.

The Bronx, with it's more diverse ethnic profile, became the site for more frequent transformative interethnic encounters. The two respondents who lived there for a significant time painted a picture of the Bronx as home to a culturally and ethnically diverse population. Domingo, who was born in the Dominican Republic and moved to Bedford Park in the Bronx at 12 years old, represented this cultural mixture by saying: "my culture is like all mixed up 'cause I learned from so many other cultures around me." Not specifying the lessons learned from these other cultures, he stressed their centrality to his experience living in the Bronx. Óscar, a half-

Dominican, half-Puerto Rican born and raised in the South Bronx, talking about the the culture in which he grew up, described it as “a combination of a rich heritage of Latinx culture as well a rich Black American culture.” Growing up around ethnically diverse black communities “allowed [him] to go outside of [his] own social boundaries.” For him, stepping into other cultures meant significant exposure to perspectives outside of the antiblack Dominican outlook of his father and Dominican peers. Specifically, he cited his interactions with Ghanaian neighbors as significant in the development of his identity. In reflecting on his exposure to their culture, he said he had developed a familiarity with the language and the food that comforted him. Such familiarity allowed him to form his own opinions of people without needing to depend on the negative stereotypes about black people he learned from his family. In his interview, Óscar emphasized the transformative effect that these encounters had on his opinions and self-conception: “When you just go outside of that and challenge that and interact with people who people assume the worst of, you speak with them and you realize it’s a whole different story. ... I feel that if I didn’t have that, I wouldn’t have identified as black.” Thus, in these interactions the stakes included not only the belief in stereotypes but also how he imagined the boundaries of his own identity.

Existing outside of traditional Dominican-American NYC neighborhoods, Manuel, born and raised in Harlem, discussed the ways in which living in a place so “diasporic” as Harlem afforded him an experience of blackness that was distinct from more ethnically Dominican enclaves like Washington Heights. He pointed to the ethnic insularity that Washington Heights possesses as providing an environment in which Dominican negrophobia and antiblackness can go unchallenged because of the ways that its culture mirrors that of the island. In contrast, he described Harlem as a place for the meeting of “diasporic” black identities:

“We all kind of had like a uniform black identity, because growing up in Harlem, you’re aware of the melting pot that you’re in and you’re aware that everyone’s household is different, everyone cooks with different spices and whatnot, but as a whole we all kind of come together under this blanket, black diasporic identity.”

This statement recognizes the ethnic diversity present within Harlem while also defining it as a distinctly black place — especially considering the prominent role that Harlem has played in Black American history. Whereas most of the other respondents only came to identify as black later in life or once in college, Manuel identified as Afro-Latino since about ninth grade, when he first encountered the term. Prior to his discovery of the term, however, he struggled to find his identity, clinging to his Dominicaness because of the way his household had socialized him to prioritize his *dominicanidad*. Thus, exposure to blackness in diverse forms and outside of traditional Dominican spaces appears to afford Dominican-Americans with the capacity to contextualize their experiences within the framework of the African diaspora and global blackness.

School also acts an important social space in which Dominican-Americans interact with people of different and similar ethnicities. Being that the schools that the respondents attended did not always reflect the ethnic compositions of their neighborhoods, they were often faced with perceptions of their national and racial identities from non-Dominicans that contradicted how they had learned to understand themselves in culturally specific ways. Maria and Domingo, having gone to the same school for recently arrived Latin American immigrants, recalled their experiences very differently. Domingo, having been bullied in middle school for his dark skin color and lack of English knowledge, expected not to encounter bullying now that he was in a high school meant to accommodate recent immigrants who are presumed to have limited

knowledge of English. Taking this into account, the fact that the language barrier was almost universally felt by the students negated the bullying on the basis of language, but harassment for what others took as markers of his blackness - his skin tone, his tightly coiled hair, etc. - persisted. It was through this disillusionment that his assumptions about the lack of antiblackness among Latin Americans were discredited and his blackness reinforced in negative encounters. Maria, on the other hand, spoke of her relationship to one teacher in particular, a white American man, who challenged her thinking about the racial implications of everyday language. On two separate instances, he questioned her and her classmates on the use of the terms *pelo malo* (bad hair) — used negatively to refer to afro-textured hair — and *haitiano* (literally “Haitian”) — a term used pejoratively to refer to darker-skinned Dominicans. Both represent common Dominican terms used to negatively refer to black features — one hair and the other skin — and his questioning of their usage led Maria to recognize their racist associations and reconsider their place in daily language.

For Fernando, the interethnic relationships that he formed in school led to a radical shift in his self-conception. Despite having grown up in a distinctively Dominican milieu between Washington Heights and the Bronx, Fernando spoke of being made aware of his blackness relatively early on in high school. Given the denial of blackness amongst family members, he largely attributed his self-identification as black to his friend group in high school, which included nine Black American women. Having gone to Columbia Secondary School in Manhattan, he recounted a change that occurred in his transition from middle school to high school in which many white people left the school because their parents were unsure of its prospects; this led to a sharp increase in the school’s non-white population. Having only white friends in middle school, this meant a shift in his personal relationships from a predominantly

white friend group to a predominantly black friend group — and specifically black women. It was in the context of these relationships that the belief of himself as exclusively Dominican were challenged. Viewing his staunch identification as Dominican (through his repetition of the phrase “I’m not black, I’m Dominican.”) as a denial of his own blackness, he recalled various instances of them telling him to look into a mirror and acknowledge the fact that he navigated the world as a black man. The symbolic act of looking in the mirror implied a reevaluation of how he was perceived by others in the American context as black. Thus, as he himself put it, it was only “in relation to all these black women” that he was able to reevaluate his identity, rejecting a monolithic, overriding Dominican identity in favor of allowing his black racial identity to coexist with his ethno-national Dominican identity.

### **Hair Politicking**

Hair, as an alterable symbol of identity, namely ethnoracial identity, operates as a site for the aesthetic (re)construction of identity. Placed on a scale of racial acceptability, hair represents not only a product of physiology, but also a social fact. The practices in and through which hair is groomed, altered, and displayed bring hair into the realm of social value, imprinted on by the codes that govern aesthetics in a society. In Dominican communities in the U.S., such reproduction of social ideologies about hair is normally enacted through the beauty practices of Dominican women. For Dominicans, hair acts an index of race and ancestry. Simmons, for instance, speaking on the experiences of African-American students in the Dominican Republic, stated that those who wore their hair natural or in braids were the ones who were most often misidentified as Haitian (Simmons 2012, 68).

The Dominican beauty salon plays a central role in both Dominican and Dominican-American hair politics. As a cultural institution, it serves two primary roles: 1) assisting migrant women integrate into U.S. society (via employment, socialization, etc.) and 2) reinforcing Dominican values and perceptions through the manipulation of hair as an indicator of Dominicanity. Candelario emphasizes the role of hair culture in Dominican negotiations of identity. Describing the instrumental role of the salon in the socialization of Dominican girls, she states that:

The Dominican salon acts as a socializing agent. Hair care and salon use are rites of passage into Dominican women's community. At the salon, girls and women learn to transform their bodies — through hair care, waxing, manicuring, pedicuring, facials, and so forth — into socially valued, culturally specific, and race-determining displays of femininity.” (Candelario 2000, 135)

In terms of the respondents, hair talk revealed the gendered nature of Dominican racialized identity. It was striking that only the four women who I interviewed spoke at length about the importance of hair in the formation of their racial identity. The one man who mentioned hair, Gabriel, only started thinking about natural hair in relation to his sister; thus, his only reference to hair politics came largely in reference to Dominican women's struggle with it as a socially governed fact. For all of them, relaxation<sup>6</sup> of their hair was a common experience and proved the only way they could wear their hair that affirmed their *dominicanidad* in the eyes of their other Dominicans. All of the women that I interviewed also mentioned the term *pajon* as a derogatory term used by Dominicans to refer to curly and Afro-textured hair as messy and

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<sup>6</sup> Hair relaxation refers to the chemical straightening of curly or kinky hair. This phenomenon is prevalent among Dominicans and African Americans.

unkempt. Furthermore, for all but one of them, the salon was a place that they regularly frequented to have their hair straightened, becoming a central fixture in their upbringings.

Most of respondents noted the valorization of looser hair texture (*pelo bueno*) versus the debasement of tighter, kinkier textures (*pelo malo*) as the governing value in Dominican discussions of hair. Maria's mother's relationship to doing her and her sister's hair is indicative of this trend. She remembered that during her childhood, her mother would avoid doing her hair as often as she did that of her sister, who possessed a looser hair texture that her mother viewed as more manageable. Oftentimes, such notions of good and bad hair are accompanied by the idea that *pelo malo* is something to be "fixed" or "tamed" — terms used multiple times by different respondents — through the use of chemical relaxers. Arguably, such associations invoke notions of black people as wild or savage to reify a preference for whiteness. Maria recalled the joy she felt upon turning thirteen as she was then allowed to go to the hair salon to have her hair relaxed, calling it a rite of passage for all Dominican women — which is especially true considering its ritualized nature in Dominican culture. After having experiences hair relaxation for the first time, Maria said that she always felt more accepted by her mom's side of the family — which was light-skinned and Spanish — when her hair was done.

Recalling her own experience of hair relaxation, Candela described the Just for Me<sup>7</sup> box as being an essential part of the development of her identity and a staple of her childhood and adolescence. It became an object of contention when a family friend casually told her mom not to use Just for Me because she wasn't black. Candela came to fixate on this moment in the negotiation of her own blackness. As with Maria, hair was something that played a central role in her questioning of her own racial identity. It was her black friend Sabrina who ultimately encouraged her to wear her hair natural for the first time, noting the impractical lengths that

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<sup>7</sup> Just For Me is a hair care brand known for its chemical hair relaxing products.

Dominican women with tightly curled hair go to hide their kinks in the summertime — a time when elevated humidity causes curly hair to tighten. After making the decision to wear her hair out naturally, her mother blamed *mal de ojo* (“evil eye”) — a supernatural phenomenon in which an envious look causes misfortune — as the reason for the damage visible in her hair to, not recognizing that it was the relaxer that initially damaged her hair.

For Dominican women, the decision to *go natural*<sup>8</sup> often acts as a form of liberation from Dominican beauty standards and practices and a celebration of an aspect of their identity which was previously hidden and denied. Maria highlighted her relationship to her hair as the most salient part of her identity being that “it pushed so much weight into embracing the black side of me.” For her, the decision to *go natural* represented the acknowledgement of her African lineage through the reclamation of agency over her hair. However, the act of *going natural* was often met with resistance from friends and family. Maria and Paola both recalled experiencing anxiety before revealing their hair after cutting it and initially hiding it from those close to them because of the shame that they felt. Maria in particular remembers her mom referring to her as Haitian after having cut her hair. By implying that her natural hair invalidated her Dominican identity, her mother’s association of kinky hair with being Haitian was used to reinforce the incompatibility of natural hair with any concept of Dominican national identity.

Nevertheless, respondents saw *going natural* as a retaking of control over their image and body. Oftentimes hair in Dominican culture was seen as something unquestionable and subject to the imposition of Eurocentric preferences. For instance, reflecting on her ownership of her hair, Candela claimed that before she began to wear her hair naturally, “[her] hair belonged to everyone.” Paola’s decision to *go natural* was based on an abandonment of the perspectives of

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<sup>8</sup> *Going natural* is a phrase conventionally used by African-American women when they decide to grow their natural hair out unprocessed and unrelaxed. However, as the respondents proved, Dominican-American women are now adopting such terminology in discussing their own decisions to wear their hair unrelaxed.

her youth that emphasized Europeaness and prized hair that was always *done* (i.e. relaxed). For Luz, embracing her natural hair helped her to embrace an authenticity about her own identity outside of traditional *dominicanidad*. She also connected her choice to body positivity and the encouragement a positive body image. Thus, the choice to *go natural* is understood by the respondents as an act of agency.

In comparing respondents' experiences before and after deciding to *go natural*, the optics of race reveal themselves. The visual interpretation of hair through the lenses of ethnoracial identity and national belonging position it in relation to Dominicaness and categorize it accordingly. Thus, whereas relaxed hair is interpreted as unquestionably Dominican, natural hair is interpreted as contextually black — primarily either Haitian or African-American, depending on who is interpreting its significance. Maria, for example, recalled a moment, after she cut her hair and was regularly wearing it out naturally, at a friend's party in which a relative of his complimented how well she spoke Spanish. Having seen her natural hair, the relative assumed that she was an African American who spoke Spanish, rather than a Dominican with natural hair. Needing to interpret an apparent contradiction of a person with natural hair speaking fluent Dominican Spanish, the relative used the interpretative framework of traditional *dominicanidad*, which precludes the existence of Dominicans with natural hair. An otherwise innocuous compliment coupled with the assumption of non-Dominicaness further naturalized the image of the Dominican woman as one with relaxed hair.

The management of hair is one of the ways in which beauty and aesthetic preference are enacted onto the body and thus, its examination reveals the somatic reproduction of Eurocentric and antiblack beauty norms. Thus, in these ways, hair carries a gendered weight for Dominican women that it doesn't for Dominican men. Acting through the manipulation of hair, Dominicans

enact particular assumptions about Dominican femininity, both reinforcing and destabilizing established racist beauty practices.

### **College as a Racially Transformative Space**

Not much scholarly attention has been paid to the relationship between Dominican identity and access to spaces of higher education. For many of the interviewees, blackness was an identity that they chose after deliberating on its role in their lives, not necessarily one that was ascribed or imposed on them from an early age. This is likely the result of 1) the ethnic insularity and cohesion of the Dominican community in NYC and 2) that they might not have possessed the visual markers that people rely on to definitively identify people as black. With the exception of Manuel, Domingo, and Jesus, college experiences triggered a shift in most of the respondents' self-conceptions. Experiences in college widened respondents' range of experiences and afforded them the opportunity to connect with people of distinct ethnic and racial identities that challenged their assumptions about themselves. Furthermore, these experiences served as catalysts for change in racial consciousness and an abandonment of racialized Dominican terminology. The results of this negotiation of self manifested themselves in self-identification as black, recognition of *afrolatinidad*, and the heightened awareness and appreciation of African lineage.

Entrance into college provides access to an array of social and academic resources that empower Dominican-Americans to learn about their histories and renegotiate their racial and national identities. Gabriel, as a student at Bard College, discussed his experience as a member of Brothers @ Bard and the Latin American Student Organization as significant in his development. As two spaces that brought together people of various ethnoracial experiences and

encouraged open dialogue about race, gender, class, etc., they helped foster his blackness and develop a more nuanced identity beyond his Dominicaness. Moreover, he cited that certain classes about Latin American history taught him about his country's African and Taíno roots — and hence his own — which provided him with the information he needed to reinterpret the history of the Dominican Republic. When asked his racial identity, he identified as “first black, then Afro-Latino, then Dominican, whereas before it was simply Dominican.” Both students at SUNY New Paltz, Paola and Luz also regarded college as a place for the acquisition of new knowledge about their history and ancestral roots.

Spaces of higher education also function as sites for intra-ethnic exchange. Gabriel, for instance, points to Manuel, a fellow Dominican, as one of his primary influences in guiding his racial consciousness. For many, college also represented a space away from the constraints of household and neighborhood culture in which respondents could reimagine themselves without feeling sociocultural pressures. As a student at SUNY New Paltz, Luz described her experiences as one in which she could connect with people who had similar experiences to hers while still not being subjected to the overbearing influence of other people. Stepping away from the environment of Washington Heights represented a radical shift in reevaluating the perspectives of her family. Putting spatial and cultural distance between students and their communities, college thus served as an escape from the Dominican cultural networks that reproduce the racist tendencies of Dominicans and police racial and national identity in accordance with those tendencies.

College also presents a liberating space for Dominican-Americans to navigate their racial possibilities in conversation with people of different experiences. Maria depicted Bard College as a space in which she felt comfortable and free to explore her identity but also in which she

was also asked about her identity and engaged by others — particularly black women — who encouraged her reevaluation of her own heritage. It was ultimately because of the encouragement that she received from two black women that she decided to cut her hair and *go natural* after only a semester at the school and began to identify as black. Still, some resisted such external categorizations as black, instead choosing to explore their identity further. For instance, Luz stated in response to other people's imposition of blackness: "You can't tell me what I am if I still don't know what I am." Angel's recollection of his experiences at Bard echo a similar sentiment, if a different trajectory. In light of people's projection of racial assumptions onto him, he questioned his *dominicanidad* and started to identify as Afro-Latino in college as a means of being proud against a background of people who hide their black African past. However, he still chose not to identify himself as Afro-Latino during his interview, expressing an evolving relationship with the term. Thus, though respondents came to understand how blackness is linked to the Dominican experience, some chose to acknowledge that they were still coming to terms with their own racial identity while consciously acknowledging Dominicans' buried African past.

Ultimately, it is in these spaces that most of the respondents came to understand the nuances of their multiple identities, reconciling blackness with *latinidad/dominicanidad* upon being introduced to the concept of *afrolatinidad*. Various respondents noted college as the place where they first encountered the term Afro-Latinx, stating that they only recently began to identify as such because of its relative newness to them.

## **Conclusion**

The Dominican-American experience is one that straddles the imagined border between two countries: the Dominican Republic and the United States. As Dominicans have emigrated

from the Dominican Republic to the U.S., the histories, values, and identities that they've carried with them have been and continue to be questioned, reproduced, and negotiated. Once in the United States, countless Dominicans find themselves having to define themselves in ways that their historical experience did not prepare them to recognize, choosing to either cling or let go of the belief systems of the island. The experiences of the newer generations — including generation 1.5 and the second generation — have their members to at least begin to question the attitudes of those who came before them, typically their parents and relatives. For some, however, as the respondents prove, renegotiation of *dominicanidad* has led to a radical shift in identity and a recognition of the ways that blackness is tied to the Dominican experience. Both through individual and systematic encounters, Dominican-Americans are synthesizing their experiences of Dominicanness and Americanness to forge new identities and opinions with the potential to radically alter the popular narratives of *dominicanidad*.

### Chapter 3: *Afrolatinidad* and the New Dominican-American Consciousness

The arrival of Latin American immigrants to the U.S. has continually forced American society, along with its political and cultural institutions to reevaluate a system of racial categorization firmly based in a dichotomy between black and white peoples. As scholar Christina Gómez put it: “I contend that Latinos are forcing a reconceptualization of race in the United States; Latinos are transgressing the boundaries of what we have understood racial identity to be while simultaneously expanding and contracting the confines of racial spaces” (Gómez 2009). Words such as “Hispanic” and “Latino/a” came into usage in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century as a means of incorporating Latin American immigrants into American social landscape, followed by words such as “Latinx” later on. In recent history, many Latinxs have begun to question the ways in which using those words paints a monolithic picture of very diverse communities, papering over real differences, for example, between Mexicans in Southern California and Cubans in Miami. Furthermore, formulations of Latinxs, as something that was originally a U.S. concept meant to define Latin American immigrants, have historically been based on the ideal of *mestizaje* — or the word used to denote the mixing of races and its glorification across Latin America; this ultimately associated the image of the ideal Latinx with the *mestizo*: a racially ambiguous person of mixed European and indigenous descent. Partly in response to the erasure of such phenomena, the word “Afro-Latinx” has recently gained notoriety in Latinx circles as a new form of identification. The word itself is used to describe a person of African descent from Latin America or of Latin American origin. For many, its entrance into everyday use has represented a shift in the homogenization of the identities of Latin Americans and their descendents in the United States, recognizing the internal diversity of the community and drawing particular attention to people of African descent as Latinxs who are often denied

their *latinidad*. It is in this context that *afrolatinidad* does the work of redefining who is allowed to rightfully claim Latinx identity.

For Dominicans and Dominican-Americans, the existence of this term directly converges with the legacy of anti-Haitianism and negrophobia traced back to the *Trujillato*, enacting a resistance against such deep-seated beliefs. Given the dissimulation of the Dominican Republic's African past and the ways in which Dominicanness has been bound to *hispanidad*, terms such as Afro-Latinx provide an alternative view that acknowledges the hidden influence of Africanness in the country's past.

Additionally, the term must be contextualized within the intellectual heritage of historians and other scholars who've attempted to write the Dominican Republic's history as one inseparable from blackness. Scholars such as Torres-Saillant have attempted to reframe the historical experiences of the Dominican Republic through the lens of the African diaspora, even going as far as dubbing it "the cradle of blackness in the Americas" (1995, 110) because it served as the first point of entry for the enslaved Africans brought over to the Spanish colonies. Torres-Saillant undertook the project of reimagining the Dominican experience in the mold of the Black Atlantic experience as defined by Paul Gilroy. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, published in 1993, Paul Gilroy describes his idea of the Black Atlantic as a counterculture that stands as the antithesis to European modernity, which precludes the coexistence of blackness alongside whiteness. For him, the Black Atlantic was a transcultural, rhizomatic<sup>9</sup> network of cultures across the many continents that connected people of distinct black diasporic identities. In dialogue with Gilroy and other proponents of the Black Atlantic as a

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<sup>9</sup> The *rhizome*, as proposed by Paul Gilroy, is a multispatial, multi-temporal series of networks in which black people are globally linked together by the shared experiences of victimization, racism, and oppression. It also provides a framework for cultural exchange in which Africa is decentered as the primary site for the production of African cultures.

framework for understanding the African diaspora, Torres-Saillant sought to bring Dominicans into the fold of multidimensional blackness, arguing that they have historically been erased from that narrative despite embodying different facets of blackness and postcolonial identity unencountered in other places.

Such a concept is joined by the perspectives of other scholars who have analyzed the shifts in racial thought among Dominicans and Dominican-Americans. Despite their visibility in the population, the racial codes of the Dominican Republic have been naturalized to the point that African roots of Dominicans are normally denied and any affiliation to blackness severed. Dominican-Americans of the 1.5 and second generation are now questioning such things that were considered obvious to older generations of immigrants. Specifically in the case of second-generation Dominicans, Aparicio notes how the ways in which they grapple with notions of blackness are evolving:

The identity issue that most second-generation Dominicans engage with is ‘what kind’ of Black identity they embody. That is ... many people I worked with feel that other tried to pressure them to make a choice between Dominican and Latino or being Black. They do not see the two as separate but feel that Black friends would often urge them to identify themselves as Black. ... They acknowledge membership in the Black diaspora, but they infuse this with Latino or Dominican elements of identity. (Aparicio 2006, 138)

Faced with a different cultural environment, Dominican-Americans of the 1.5 and second generations are beginning to adopt the designations of identity that align themselves with *afrolatinidad*. They are beginning to invoke a blackness that is global in its scope in order to retell their experiences in a different mold.

### Why Afro-Latinx?

With the exception of Angel, all of the respondents said that they identified as Afro-Latinx but had previously identified exclusively as Dominican — their Dominicaness precluding the need and desire for racial self-identification. At some point their lives, they all consciously chose to label themselves as Afro-Latino/a/x; their reasons for doing so were diverse, as similar as they were different, revealing particular impulses among Dominican-Americans to respond to dilemmas that they face as members of a specific transnational community. At times the term was adapted to more local or nation-specific forms, as two of the respondents — both born in the Dominican Republic — said that they identified as “Afro-Dominican,” opting for a less panethnic expression of their black identity. Generally speaking, defining themselves as Afro-Latinx and Afro-Dominican represented not only a semantic shift but also a reframing of their racialized experiences.

*Bridging Two Worlds // Making Sense of the Cognitive Dissonance of being Black and Dominican*

“... that kind of black experience, just with a Latin twist on it.”

— Manuel

In Chapter 2, I discussed how for many Dominicans and Dominican-Americans, blackness in the U.S. context is seen as a distinctively African-American identity. Dominicaness in the U.S. was thus co-constructed in such a way that made it antithetical to the American notion of blackness. In contrast, for many of the respondents, *afrolatinidad* presented them with a tool for harmonizing both their *latinidad* and their blackness. This bridging of

blackness and *latinidad* allowed them to make sense of the two different systems of meaning — that of the U.S. and the Dominican Republic — that simultaneously seek to classify Dominican-Americans.

Manuel framed his experience in diasporic terms, accounting for the fact that he was caught in between Dominicaness and Americanness. Speaking on his struggle in defining himself socially, he said:

“I needed to find a diasporic identity and I feel like Afro-Latino embodied that perfectly for me. It was something that didn’t limit me to a particular nationality like Dominican. And also, obviously I’m not African American so I couldn’t identify with that either. I knew I had a sense of identity with the diaspora and that meant a lot to me because of history, my own family’s history and lineage, tracing back. And also, me tryna figure out as a young adolescent how I fit into a society and the world growing up in Harlem.”

Beyond this, he also spoke about not being considered Dominican enough by his family members who remained on the island, being that he was not raised there. Having been raised in the U.S. and being rejected as truly Dominican by his island-born family, Afro-Latino symbolized, for him, an identity that captured both his black and Latinx roots, while acknowledging that he is part of both the African and Dominican diasporas. Thus, as he could not fully claim Dominicaness, Afro-Latino captured his distinct context away from the island in New York City. Additionally, the rejection of the popular usage of Dominican and Latinx identity was also at stake in his decision; he viewed it as assuming an “antiblack position” which was used in order to reject ascriptions of Dominican blackness.

Placing his experiences in a similar light, Fernando said that before he entered college, he had identified separately as both black and Latino, claiming: “While yes I was accepting that I was black, I still wanted to know where my *latinidad* fit into that, if not as a race.” In this instance, *afrolatinidad* became a way to acknowledge his racial blackness and his cultural *latinidad*. The shift in his identity also came about as a response to people identifying him solely as black: “There are a lot of people who would just directly refer to me as a black person. And I think like, yes, that is a true statement but it also completely erases the *latinidad* of my identity and that’s really frustrating ‘cause I think I can more closely define myself to the cultural significance of being Latino than being a black man in America.” Candela asserted that for her, the term Afro-Latinx reveals a “multifaceted ethnicity,” recognizing the complexity often flattened by claims of Dominicaness: “The moment you claim this identity or the moment you see others claim this identity you see an understanding of the intersectionality that exists with race and ethnicity.” At stake, then, is the nuance of Dominican-American experiences and the ways in which *latinidad* and blackness are both entangled in them, operating in tandem as markers for race and ethnicity.

### *Reclamation of a Buried Blackness*

Claims of *afrolatinidad* also serve to challenge the subsuming of black identity under Latinx panethnicity or Dominican nationality. For some, identifying as Afro-Latinx symbolized a form of resistance against hegemonic forms of *dominicanidad* dependent on the burial of Africanness. It acted to undo the way that Africanness was hidden behind Eurocentric models that still monopolize Dominican national and racial thought. As I spoke about in Chapter 1, hegemonic representations of *dominicanidad* rely on *hispanicismo* to erase historical connections

to Africa — brought about through the transportation of African people and culture to Hispaniola through the slave trade — and replacing them with Spanish referents. Even though Dominicans are of a great number of skin tones, monolithic understandings of Dominicans as something other than black still hold the most sway. Using her dad as an example, Maria noted the dissonance among Dominicans of recognizing the blackness of one's color while not accepting that as indicative of African descent: "I did know he was black, y'know, but in the DR even if you're black it doesn't mean that you're Afro-descendent."

As the respondents have proven, however, trends have begun to crop up that seek to unbury the African past through the recognition of black identity. Gabriel, who claimed that Dominicans used Dominicaness "as a way to detach [themselves] from racial identity," said that identifying as a Afro-Dominican served to reflect the *true* reality of Dominican identity. In saying this, Gabriel contended that blackness is inseparable from the experiences of many Dominicans. Through the acceptance of the black influence in Dominican society, Afro-Latinx identity provides an alternative that changes modes of Dominicaness that preclude the possibility of identifying oneself racially as anything other than Dominican or Latinx, specifically as black.

Speaking on the appreciation of her African roots, Paola said: "I embrace who I am as a person, something I didn't do a lot when I was younger ... I would try to be in a Eurocentric mindset, when in reality that was nowhere near where I was from. ... It's more of accepting and appreciating my roots and who I am." By stating that the Eurocentric mindset was "nowhere near where [she] was from," she aligns her Dominican roots with non-Eurocentric cultural molds that draw from the African lineage of the Dominican Republic. Thus, she defined *true* appreciation of herself as inevitably meaning that she had to embrace the blackness within her culture and,

consequently, herself. Óscar likewise stated that the term Afro-Latinx allowed him to better understand himself and his ancestral origins, affirming for him that Dominicans have their “own sense of blackness.” In Óscar’s case, much like in Dariel’s, the concept of *afrolatinidad* ideologically asserted a blackness that was distinct from other forms, both recognizing Dominican blackness as distinctive and defining blackness as something with manifold expressions — in harmony with the concept of the Black Atlantic.

While Afro-Latinx serves to recognize the intersection of Black and Latinx identity, it also operates in a political and epistemological mode as an explicit reclamation of blackness within the generalizing framework of *latinidad* that often exists in opposition to blackness. Maria claimed that “when [she] was growing up [blackness] was something that was almost like taken away from me,” following that with the assertion that “It’s a little bit like revolutionary, if anything. Identifying as Afro-Latino ... gives you power, and it does justice to your ancestors.” The framing of blackness as something that was taken or stolen acknowledges an intentionality behind its denial by Dominican culture at large; Afro-Latinx identity operates in this context to empower Dominican-Americans to reclaim the black heritage present in their ancestral lineage. Expressing a similar sentiment, Manuel argued that aside from being a racial and cultural identity, “It’s also a sociopolitical statement you’re making when you identify as Afro-Latino.” Pointing to the sociopolitical potential of *afrolatinidad* thus illustrates the ways that identifying as Afro-Latinx acts as a conscious decision to represent one’s blackness in a culture that negates its existence. Furthermore, it is an example of how *afrolatinidad* is instrumentalized as a means of moving away from the idea of *latinidad* as the “antithesis to blackness.” As Manuel also remarked, the shift in self-identification can also be understood in the political context of

*decolonization*<sup>10</sup> as Dominican-Americans resist the antiblack norms which are historically grounded in racialized colonial dynamics.

Thus, the adoption of *afrolatinidad* signals an epistemic shift within the Dominican-American community that has altered the symbolic foundation of *dominicanidad*. Whereas before the center of Dominican national and racial identity was located in Spain and *hispanidad*, *afrolatinidad* places its center in closer proximity to Africa and its cultural inheritance. In the same vein of the rejection of Hispanic due to its semantic emphasis on colonial connections to the Spanish, Afro-Latinx has been adopted by Dominican-Americans as a means of *decolonizing* representations of Dominican identity.

### *Revisiting/Rewriting History*

Many different social actors have historically used the (re)construction of Dominican history to ground and justify antiblack and ideology. An analysis of Trujillo's regime, for example, quickly reveals a direct effort to actively write the African influence out of Dominican history. One of his most blunt attempts at rewriting history was when Trujillo ordered that Dominican history textbooks be edited to deny that West Africans were brought as slaves and to suggest that it was mostly North Africans — who are imagined to be more light-skinned — that were brought to the U.S. as slaves (Simmons 2009; Torres-Saillant 1995). Essentially, Trujillo sought to whiten not only the racial demography of the nation, but also the historical memory of the nation and its people. However, as Ana Aparicio pointed out in *Dominican-Americans and the Politics of Empowerment*: “Racialized into the most marginalized sectors of this society — immigrant and black — many second-generation Dominicans have begun to confront the racial

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<sup>10</sup> Although the terms is often used to refer to the political process of undoing the effects of colonialism on a society, in this case it refers to the eradication of colonialist values and the sociocultural aftereffects derived from them.

dilemmas their histories present” (Aparicio 2006: 134). This comment draws attention to the fact that second-generation Dominicans are beginning to interrogate popular Eurocentric, anti-Africanist conceptions of Dominican history. In light of racist falsifications — such as those that came out of Trujillo’s regime — *afrolatinidad* effects a retooling of black identity to develop a historical counternarrative. *Afrolatinidad* is thus a historiographical tool with which Dominican-Americans are actively rewriting popular histories and embodying the new potentialities of that history. It is through such a concept that Dominican history can be framed as a black history — or at least one in which blackness is clearly and intimately implicated.

Many of the respondents mentioned the need for those of Dominican descent to make the Africanness of Dominican history visible. Paola, for instance, contended that Dominicaness does not reference a history inclusive of Africanness: “I could say I’m easily Dominican, but then again, I don’t think it explicitly entails to some people oh you do have African roots and this where history evolved from and where we came from.” For her, placing the “Afro-” in front of Latinx was a historical act that indexed the African roots of Dominican society. Without those roots, the essence of that history, and thus Dominicaness, would be incomplete. Candela’s comments about history also unveil different dynamics at play, as she said that *afrolatinidad* is ultimately about “changing a history that has been spoon-fed to us. Disrupting white supremacy in Latino communities.” Here, the reference to the disruption of white supremacy locates the blame for such altered racist history in the hierarchical racial systems that exist as the product of colonialism. Thus, even though the Dominican population is predominantly non-white and oftentimes there are *mulatos* and *negros* in positions of authority, colonial dynamics of power still racialize the hierarchy of power, its manifestation in the Dominican Republic being more visible in pigmentocracy.

Still, for some, this rewriting of history went back to the Dominican involvement in the slave trade and the very presence of enslaved Africans on the island. For Gabriel, the decision to identify as Afro-Latinx came out of a need not only to encapsulate his experiences, but also to “legitimize that there is a history of slavery that happened [in the Dominican Republic]. That there is a mixture of culture and race that happened. And if we only say Dominican, we are erasing that.” In the same vein, Candela said that the primary function of *afrolatinidad* lied in “[its] shedding light and existence to this identity that has been alive since Spain first colonized and moved a bunch of slave across the Atlantic.” Identifying as Afro-Latinx, then, implied a commitment to retelling Dominican history in a way that retroactively reaffirmed the presence of Afro-descendent people when tracing the social and cultural heritages of the nation. Beyond that, it was also borne out of a need to historicize *afrolatinidad* in the Dominican Republic, asserting that even though the language might be relatively new, blackness on the island was not a new phenomenon.

#### *Creating Community/Positive Community Affirmations*

Positive affirmations of collective experiences also loomed heavy in the minds of the respondents. A few of them touched on the need to provide those in communities that lie on the margins of society with positive images of people whose racialized experiences they could identify with. Jesus’s *afrolatinidad* implied a commitment to “showing people from the hood that everything is possible. ... The world expects so little from you but you can do so much. We are gods. I take that with fucking pride bro because a successful Afro-Latino says more than a successful white person.” Focusing on the “hood” or a contemporary vernacular expression for the urban ghettos, he draws attention to the lack of visibility for successful Afro-Latinxs and the

mental trauma it results in, which is associated with feeling confined to poverty and marginality. Furthermore, pride in his identity and his abilities in spite of popular negative portrayals of black people was a form of encouraging other Dominicans to positively reflect on their blackness.

Pride in black identity was also of great importance in people's decisions to shift to an Afro-Latinx identity, especially living in a community of people that they saw as refusing to accept the truth about themselves as racially black. Describing her family as "very racist," Luz noted the contradiction within the Dominican community of being non-white yet looking down on other non-white people: "They look down on people of color even if they are people of color." Expressing a similar attitude, Domingo stated that "In [the Dominican] community, people don't like to admit it. ... Being Afro-Latino is hard even within your family because not everyone understands or wants to understand or accept what it is." Countering the feelings held by many others in the Dominican community, he declared: "I like being black and I enjoy it."

### **Hair and Bodily Autonomy Among Dominican Women**

"Owning your hair is to own yourself and your narrative."

— Helen

One of the social arenas in which *afrolatinidad* is being actively invoked is Dominican beauty. Carolina Contreras (better known Miss Rizos [literally "Miss Curls"]) is a Dominican-American natural hair stylist who started a natural hair salon in the Dominican Republic and has recently gained popularity among Dominicans as a prominent member of the natural hair movement in the country. Presenting an alternative to the culturally sanctioned relaxation of curly and kinky hair textures, she encourages Dominican women to wear their hair naturally — or at least is attempting to relieve the stigma around doing so. Aside from a service, the creation

of a salon on the foundation of ideals that oppose and seek to redefine the antiblack framework of *dominicanidad* is a form of advocacy for women with Afro-textured hair. In an interview with Remezcla, an online publication centered on Latinx peoples, she said:

“My hair for me represents the power of me being able to decide, of me being able to make decisions that have to do with my body. However, I don’t advocate for everyone to wear curly hair. I want people to have the right to choose without having any repercussions from society; whether it’s for them or for their children. It represents freedom from something that I was once a slave to; the relaxers and the long salon hair visits. It represents beauty.” (Leon 2015)

Described as a “modern day freedom fighter,” her work on Dominican women’s hair evidences the social resonances that hair has and the important ways in which it can serve as a vehicle for the construction of *afrolatinidad*. Her actions thus represent a movement towards positive, affirming visual representations of blackness and Africanness through Afro-textured hair. Additionally, her experiences as a Dominican-American allow her to draw inspiration from the natural hair movement in the U.S. spearheaded by Black American women. On the website for her salon, Contreras, mirroring the word “big chop” used by Black American women to describe the act of cutting off all of one’s relaxed hair to leave only new growth, coined the term “gran corte” to describe an equivalent phenomenon for Dominican women.

It is important to recognize the gendered implications that such claims carry for Dominican femininity. As was discussed in Chapter 2, hair is treated as a site for gendered policing of the Dominican feminine body. For women such as Contreras and the women respondents mentioned in the second chapter for whom wearing their hair naturally was a conscious decision they had to make, the push for natural hair symbolizes a movement for bodily

autonomy driven by individual choices that shape collective reality. It ultimately enacts a reversal of feminine submissiveness and obligation to paternalistic Eurocentric standards enforced by Dominican culture. Responding to the feeling of being excluded for having decided to *go natural*, Luz stated: “This is me. This is who I am. My hair is a part of me.” Framing hair in a similar light, Candela declared her pride in not having straight hair as an indicator of her African lineage: “My hair is not straight, I’m fucking proud of that.” Much like blackness itself was a point of pride for many of the respondents, hair was also seen as a source of pride — sometimes the location from which pride for blackness was derived.

### **“Nosotros somos los morenos”: Challenging Race and Color in the Family**

At the micro level, the context of the home and familial life becomes a fertile battleground for the contestation of false racial consciousness. As a place where many Dominican-Americans receive their first messages about who they are — or more importantly, who they are allowed to be — and their position in the world, the home can serve as a place for younger generations to challenge the beliefs of older generations, as well as those of their peers. Immigrants of the younger generations, though they are often exposed color categories through their family — both immediate and extended — typically abandon them as irrelevant in describing their experiences in the U.S., looking to other identities for self-description, normally claiming simply “Dominican,” “Hispanic,” or “Latino/a/x” to encapsulate themselves — which, as I’ve discussed previously, can take on a non-black, or even antiblack, positioning.

Through the lens of *afrolatinidad*, such patterns of antiblackness can be questioned directly, typically through confrontation. For example, Fernando recalled an instance when his stepfather, a light-skinned Dominican man, said that when his little sister began to become

darker they should get the white paint, a statement with clear racial implications. His mother, registering the colorist connotations of his statement, became infuriated and interrogated him, admonishing him for what he had said.

Another instance that merits revisiting is Maria's interaction with her mom in which she questioned Wilmary's choice of a dark-skinned black romantic interest and rejected him as unattractive. After consulting her friends who agreed with her that her chosen interest was attractive Maria chose this moment to challenge it as colorism. As was recounted in the second chapter, this instance was unsuccessful in altering her mother's perspective, but does illustrate the kinds of pointed interactions that provide opportunities to shift familial perspectives. In another case, Maria learned from her aunt that her mother had been secretly ridiculing her for her hair behind her back. Upon hearing about this, she began to cry, then confronting her mother three days later. When she faced her, having already begun to cry, she said that seeing the tears in her eyes forced her mother to recognize the harm that her words, which she described as joking, had inflicted on her daughter. Through this interaction, Wilmary, embodying the values of both Dominican and American cultures, forcibly introduced her mother to a new reality, one in which jokes about Afro-textured hair have the potential to cause real emotional damage to those that she loves. This interaction, for her, began an existential shift that challenged her antiblack thinking about hair.

This interaction, however, was brought about not as a choice on Maria's part, but by her involvement in a forced interaction. On a more intentional note, Jesus felt that he had a personal responsibility to educate his mom about racism, considering that he knew that she had been educated differently at a time when racist belief systems that upheld negrophobia and *antihaitianismo* were mostly unchallenged by Dominicans. Now living in a transnational context,

she was, through Jesus, confronted with ideas that forced her to readjust her perspective. In one instance she referred to him as a “*moreno blanco*” (“white black person”) when he was wearing a suit, implying that he was a black man that dressed “white,” ascribing properness and elegance to whiteness. This, for him, represented an opportunity that he could use to present her with an alternative mode of thinking. Family life and the home, thus, are social spaces in which racist notions can be interrogated at an intimate level, which can lead to radical shifts in behavior and understanding.

## **Conclusion**

*Afrolatinidad* is a social force that is now empowering Dominican-Americans of African descent to subvert the anti-Africanist and antiblack narratives of the past. It represents a more Afrocentric model of thought and behavior that recognizes the centrality of Africanness and its influences in Dominican culture, rejecting the previous models that were rooted in Hispanophilia. As more and more people begin to embrace Afro-Latinx identity, it is becoming something unavoidable for Dominican-Americans to contend with. For those who do decide to make the shift and identify as Afro-Latinx, it is often based on the need to find a marker of identity that most accurately reflects their lived experiences not only as Dominicans, but as people of African descent, some who view their blackness as undeniable fact. Furthermore, this shift in identity is both indicative of and itself driving a push among Dominican-Americans to challenge those in proximity to them. Ultimately, the shift towards *afrolatinidad* points to a new consciousness surrounding the implications of race and color and an attempt to situate *dominicanidad* within the context of the African diaspora.

## Conclusion: The Future of *dominicanidad*

On March 13, 2018, the children's book *Islandborn* was published. Written by Dominican-American author Junot Díaz and illustrated by Colombian-born illustrator Leo Espinosa, the book follows the daily life of a Dominican girl, Lola, who was brought to the U.S. from the Dominican Republic when she was six years old. "Every kid in Lola's school was from somewhere else," the book begins. In Lola's class, her teacher, Ms. Obi, tells everyone to draw a picture of their "first country"; Lola panics and asks "Miss, what if you don't remember where you are from? What if you left *before* you could start remembering?" However, with the help of her teacher, she eventually realizes that she can use the memories of the people of her neighborhood to fantasize and create her own vision of "La Isla," the place she left as a child.

Set in NYC, the story is centered on Lola's search to collect the missing memories of the Dominican Republic she hadn't lived in long enough to remember. As she encounters family and friends in the streets and at home, the stories they tell her about life on the island fuel her imagination. She learns of sweet coconuts and mango trees, of a people with a profound love for music and dancing, and of bats "as big as blankets." Although never mentioning him by name, her building's superintendent teaches her about the rule of Trujillo (called the "Monster"), telling her that it is the reason that people began to leave for the U.S. All throughout, her *abuela's* words echo in her mind: "Just because you don't remember a place doesn't mean it's not in you."

As an affirmation of Dominican-American life, the book represents a shift. Lola is a dark-skinned *afrodominicana* with afro-textured hair. Speaking on his decision to depict his protagonist in this mold during an interview with *HipLatina*, Díaz, who has described himself as an Afro-Latino, said: "Making the protagonist an Afro-Latina wasn't just important but

profoundly personal. That is my older sister. My sister and I we just did not have any of those images [growing up]. I always wanted to do something for her in that way and wanted to make her a character.” In writing a children’s book as a Dominican-American writer, he sought to imagine and create the reflections of himself and the people of his community that he wished to see growing up. Understanding the ways in which Dominicans had been misrepresented by visual culture, he saw his book as a form of advocacy and a means of owning the telling of Dominican-American experiences — not only for himself, but for the community as a whole.

We now live at a historical juncture when positive representations of black Dominicans are beginning to affirm Afro-Latinx identity, allowing people who have historically been invisibilized and falsified in popular media to see themselves in places where there had previously been nothing for them. Therefore, as much as individual Dominican-Americans, such as those I interviewed, coming to terms with their own sense of blackness represents an intimate and personal process, they are emblematic of a broader cultural shift taking place. Beyond responding to the cultures they are embedded in, Dominican-Americans are actively shaping and producing a counterculture that is reimagining the historical narrative of the Dominican community. Asserting a form of agency in the face of narratives from both outsiders seeking to paint Dominicans as inherently racist and from Dominicans — and Dominican-Americans — themselves seeking to disavow any association to blackness, Dominican-Americans are starting to write and nuance their own stories of embodied realities. Dominican-Americans are not only using *afrolatinidad* to carve out their own space within the fabric of American society, but also within the frame of the African diaspora, challenging the boundaries of black diasporic identity. In that same interview with *HipLatina*, Díaz explained the way that the visibility of Afro-Latinxs is disrupting conventional racial understandings:

“We [Afro-latinos] represent a category that makes a lot of folks uncomfortable. These are people who want their simplistic binary dreams. People are so much more comfortable with white and black. Then they suddenly encounter people like us and we confuse people, we trouble people, we rattle simplistic definitions, and a lot of people don’t like multiplicity.” (Ferreira 2018)

As troubling as such multiplicity can be, it is charged with the potential to be the basis for solidarity between Dominicans and the rest of the African diaspora — a network of communities defined by multiplicity.

### **Moving Forward**

One area of study that my thesis leaves largely untouched is that of Dominican participation, or lack thereof, in different aspects of African-American culture and its impact on their sense of blackness. A potential direction for further exploration is to look at how Black American political culture — abolitionism (of slavery, prisons, police, etc.), civil rights, black power, etc. — exists in conversation with Dominican-American political organizing and the Dominican-American community at large. Additionally, it became clear throughout the interviews that Dominican-Americans regularly borrow from and take part in many aspects of African-American expressive culture as well — listening to rap/hip-hop, adopting similar street fashion, using African American Vernacular English (AAVE), etc. It might be useful to consider the impact such cultural features have as a source of attraction or repulsion for Dominicans and Dominican-Americans with regards to their ideas of blackness. The work of Benjamin Bailey (2002) in his analysis of language among Dominican-American high school students in Providence, Rhode Island serves as a good point of reference in this regard.

Although it has been used by Dominicans as a major point of distinction from Haitians, religion also remains largely unaddressed in this thesis. I avoided any lengthy discussion of this topic mostly because religion did not appear to carry much weight, if any at all, in respondents' many processes of racial self-definition. Furthermore, insight into this sphere of Dominican-American life would require a much more direct and profound engagement that neither time nor the scope of this study allowed. Deeper analysis of the roles of Haitian Vodoun and Dominican Catholicism might help to expand on my analysis in the future. It is, however, important to note the presence of Afro-Caribbean religions — 21 Divisiones, Dominican Santería, and even Haitian Vodoun in the border regions — in the Dominican Republic, indicating a fluidity in Dominican and Haitian cultural practices at the border that is often erased and resisted by the Dominican state.

A third facet of the Dominican-American experience that was left largely unaddressed is the role of choice in respondents' engagement with their blackness. In examining the general trends in the respondents' trajectories of racial self-identification, it was clear that while some people's first engagement with blackness was a conscious choice, for others it was an imposition. Whereas some of the respondents only began to think about their own blackness in college, others had a firm sense of their own blackness long before they entered college. Having grown up in the Manhattanville housing projects in Harlem, for example, Manuel argued that "there are certain experiences that you go through in the neighborhood, in the projects ... that racialize you." He went on to speak about his encounters with police and how those moments reaffirmed his black identity. A few of the other respondents shared similar stories. In the future I'd like to see what factors create this spectrum of choice and imposition.

Moving forward, it'd be interesting to study the kinds of relationships and coalitions that can be and already have been formed amongst different diasporic black communities now that *afrolatinidad* among Dominicans is on the rise. Which doors are now open that were previously closed? Will Haitians and Dominicans begin to see themselves as fellow sufferers under European colonialism? Will Dominicans and Black Americans in NYC begin to organize against the issues — gentrification, police brutality, mass incarceration, undereducation, etc. — that have historically affected both communities? Are these interethnic exchanges already taking place? These are the questions that I hope will be answered in the future.

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